



## An Interpretation of Freud's Pleasure Principle and Reality Principle in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the three major characters in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray based on Freud's Pleasure Principle and Reality Principle. The pleasure principle stimulates human beings to satisfy their instinctual desires. On the contrary, the reality principle motivates human beings to conform to the social conventions, instead of chasing instinctual desires. In this novel, the three major characters, Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton clearly reveal the paradoxical nature during the process of making a choice between pleasure principle and the reality principle. Based on the detailed analysis, this thesis is going to provide readers with a relatively comprehensive understanding of The Picture of Dorian Gray, and hopefully it will be conducive to make a further study of Oscar Wilde's other works.

**Key Words:** Pleasure Principle, Reality Principle, Paradox

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## **Introduction**

Oscar Wilde, born in 1854, was an Irish playwright, poet and fiction writer. He is considered as one of the most versatile writers in English literature history. As a leading figure in the advocacy of the aesthetical movement, Oscar Wilde insists on the idea of "Art for Art's Sake". In Wilde's opinion, beauty is more important than morality. Besides, Wilde also advocated the freedom of arts and emphasizes that "art never expresses anything but itself" (Ruby 87). Later, Wilde is renowned for his aesthetic advocacy across the world.

As a successful writer in the literary area, Oscar Wilde has released a series of poets and playwrights during this lifetime. In 1888, his first collection of *Fairy Tales* was published, in which *The Nightingale* and *The rose* were most well-known among people. In 1890, the first and only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was released. This novel becomes one of his most representative works. From 1892 to 1895, Oscar Wilde wrote many plays, such as *Salome*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*. Wilde's playwrights are highly acclaimed by both readers and critics.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is Oscar Wilde's only published novel and has long been considered as one of his most well-written works. Wilde has once stated that "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" (Wilde 352). This novel describes a man named Dorian Gray who intends to use his soul to exchange eternal youth. Dorian Gray is an innocent man in the first place. Unfortunately, the other two important characters Basil Hallward and Lord Henry are enthralled by Gray's appearance. In order to seduce Gray to trade his soul for youth, Lord Henry seeks all means to convince Gray of pleasure brought by eternal beauty. Gray is not able to resist the temptation of eternal beauty and pursues pleasure and enjoyment ceaselessly through trading his soul. Even though Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry have enjoyed the pleasure after they fulfill their instinctual desire, they are still frightened by being posed to the public. They suffer from making a choice between conscience and instinctual desires. In the end, overwhelmed by the pressure, Dorian Gray ruins his portrait and dies tragically. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* explicitly demonstrates the paradoxical nature of desire, and it vividly shows the paradox when human beings have to make a choice between their

instinctual demands and the social restriction.

Unlike the other contemporary works, the provocative plot and the major theme in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has challenged the morals in Victorian period. In the late of 19<sup>th</sup> century, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was seen as a flawed work without any readability. Liebman (Liebman 31) holds that “to some critics, it is simply badly written. To others, it was hopelessly confused, reflecting Wilde’s uncertainty and irresolution”. For quite a long time, the book was seldom mentioned. But, with the time passing by, the well-written plots and the impressive themes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have gradually attracted some readers’ interest. Oscar Wilde’s creativity has been fully showed in the provocative plot, abnormal characters and complicated theme. Even though Oscar Wilde lived in a conservative society, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been claimed to be one of Wilde’s representative works.

### Literature Review

In terms of the study made by Zhang Jieming, over 1500 publications about Oscar Wilde has been released during the first half of the 20 century and there were even more publications in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Zhang Jieming 26). Oscar Wilde and his works have been widely studied by scholars since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1920 to 1940, foreign scholars focused on biographical criticism such as Henry Justin Smith’s *Oscar Wilde Discovers American* (qtd. in Shao, 3). Later, the attention has been shifted to “the psychological, symbolic, and literary aspects of Wilde as a writer”. The work that could represent this researching period is Hesketh Person’s *Life* (Shao Juan 3).

Compared with the studies made by foreign scholars, the researches made by Chinese scholars are relatively late and less specific. Since the 1980s, some Chinese scholars, including Jin Fu, Chen Ting and Ge Baoquan, focused on revealing Wilde’s personal life. Little effort was placed on introducing the plot of Wilde’s works (张介明 79). Wang Xiong proposes the aesthetic ideas and the features in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (王琼 35). Xu Zhengfang suggests a relatively comprehensive understanding of the psychological characteristics of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (徐正芳 103). In 2007, Li Ruixue and Sang Longyang analyzed the major characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* based on Freud’s Personality theories (李瑞雪, 桑龙扬 82). In 2011, Qin Honglin made an analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

based on Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory (秦红丽 25). More specific researches about Oscar Wilde and his work have been conducted and until now many scholars still show their interests in studying Oscar Wilde. In the past few decades, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been learned from the perspectives of aesthetics, image, Freud's psychoanalysis and Lacan's Mirror State Theory. However, few researchers have analyzed the reason of the three characters' corruption in details.

### **The Structure of the Paper**

This paper will make an analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from the perspective of Freud's pleasure principle and reality principle. The first chapter will make a brief introduction of the novel and illustrate the structure of the whole paper. After that, the second chapter will elaborate the definition of pleasure principle and then indicate the pleasure principle shown in three characters. Subsequently, the third chapter will define the reality principle and study the manifestations of the reality principle in the major characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. On the ground of the analysis on the pleasure principle and reality principle, the fourth chapter analyzes the paradoxical nature of the characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* so as to show the psychological conflict in their mind. The last chapter will summarize the major findings and end with a brief conclusion.

### **Discussion: the Pleasure Principle Shown in *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

#### **The Pleasure Principle**

Freud (Freud 45) suggests that "the pleasure principle will decrease the external tension to create more pleasure when people are faced with decreasing external tension". In other words, humans will make some adjustment on the external tension to ensure the achievement of pleasure when they are threatened. The decrease in the external tension could actually be seen as the surrender to instinctual impulses. The pursuit of fulfilling the instinctual impulses may eventually lead to hedonism which evaluates the pursuit of pleasure as the highest good. The worshipping of the sensual enjoyment may greatly threaten the morality in the society. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the three major characters abandon their moral beliefs and surrender to the fulfillment of instinctual desires. The behavior they conduct to fulfill their sexual desire or instinctual impulse is sinful and contemptible. In this chapter, the author will make a detailed analysis of the

behavior of the three major characters, Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton, with the aid of texts. The analysis of pleasure principle shown in the three characters aims to find out how they give in to pleasure principle and ignore the restriction of reality.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud has proposed that “pleasure” and “displeasure” may be intimately connected with the excitation quantity. Excitation can be defined as the state of being emotionally aroused and worked up. Pleasure is equivalent to the decrease in the excitation quantity and displeasure means an increase in the excitation quantity (Freud 46). Normally, human beings will be emotionally aroused due to the intervention of external tension. However, internal drives actually play a more important role over the external tension. In fact, human beings show a ceaseless pursuit of pleasure and have a tendency to shun displeasure or to create pleasure (Freud 45).

The pleasure principle belongs to the primary level of mental activity. Although human beings could gain pleasure from sexual impulse and some violent behavior, most of them will make a rational decision. Influenced by the social customs, human beings are informed of the fact that sexual and violent behaviors are inappropriate expressions of human desire. As it is suggested by Freud (Freud 47), pleasure principle is a strong tendency within human beings’ psychology, while it fights against some forces and conditions. In this regard, the forces or conditions that fight against the pleasure and facilitate humans to make a rational choice is the reality.

### **The Pleasure Principle Shown in Dorian Gray**

Dorian Gray is innocent in the first place. He does not have much social experience or knowledge. However, influenced by Lord Henry who tells him that the only thing that could last in one’s life is youth and beauty, Dorian Gray soon changes from the innocent young man to an evil person who is in ceaseless pursuit of pleasure, and Gray is controlled by the pleasure principle. On the one hand, Gray is excited about his beauty and youth. On the other hand, he could live in a double life. Out of the pursuit of beauty and a double life, Dorian Gray could not control his instinctual impulses any more.

In *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, Wilde (Wilde 23) holds that Gray is surprised when he sees his portrait created by Basil Hallward. It seems that he finally

knows his appearance for the first time. Dorian Gray gains great pleasure from recognizing his unique beauty. The increase in internal excitement results in the decrease in external tension. In the novel, Wilde (Wilde 23) says "He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but nothing catch the meaning of his words". In terms of Oscar Wilde's description of Gray, it is apparent to find out that Gray is extremely excited about this portrait. Under this context, the pleasure achieved through recognizing the beauty is in charge of Dorian Gray's mind and any external forces like social morality could not hinder him from pursuing the fulfillment of instinctual pleasure. The great pleasure achieved through recognizing the beauty and youth can be considered as the starting point that Gray wants to trade his soul for more pleasure.

Out of the intention to keep his beauty, Dorian Gray is worried about aging like common people. As it is described by Wilde (Wilde 24), it seems that there is an unbearable pain that hits him as a blow when the idea of withering of his beauty occurs to him. On the one hand, Dorian Gray is extremely excited about his beauty. On the other hand, he suffers from realizing the fact that his beauty and youth will wither like a flower one day. The excitement and fear lead to the increase in external tension. Gray's pleasure is largely decreased because he is frightened due to the losing of his youth and beauty. Under this condition, Gray tries to decrease the external tension and makes effort to regain the pleasure he has. Out of the intention to refind the pleasure, Gray is in desperate pursuit of eternal youth and beauty. Gray's irrational behavior provides Lord Henry with some chance to seduce him. Lord Henry constantly reminds Dorian Gray of the losing of youth (Wilde 21). Lord Henry adopts all means to seduce Gray to believe that it is rational to trade the soul for the eternal youth. Due to the desperate desire to be eternally young and beautiful, Lord Henry's temptation becomes much more irresistible. Finally, Dorian yields to the fulfillment of his pleasure and instinctual impulses. He officially falls into Lord Henry's trap.

In the process of pursuing pleasure, the first step is the achievement of pleasure through recognizing the outstanding appearance. In order to create more pleasure, Gray takes the second step of pursuing eternal youth and beauty. Restricted by the social norms, Gray actually lives in a double



life. All his sinful behavior and evil thought are reflected in his portrait rather than in this appearance. "His own beauty might be untarnished, and the face on the canvas bear the burden of his passions and his sins; that the painted image might be seared with the lines of suffering and thought, and that he might keep all the delicate bloom and loveliness of his then just conscious boyhood", Wilde writes in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (Wilde 88).

After Dorian Gray sells his soul, he does not need to be worried about losing his fantastic appearance and youth. Since Dorian Gray enjoys his double lives, he tries hard to meet all his instinctual desires. In the novel, Wilde (Wilde 125) describes the condition that "the more he knew, the more he desires to know. He had mad hungers that grew more ravenous as he fed them". It is easy to predict that Dorian Gray does not try to control his instinctual impulses when he is given the opportunities to pursue pleasure without being punished. As Dorian Gray has been increasingly satisfied with the pleasure brought by the double lives, he is actually lured to destruction. Sealed in the portrait, Dorian Gray's soul represents his gradual destruction. The damaged portrait does not prevent Gray from conducting new sins because Gray is pleased by the contrast of his matchless beauty and the damaged portrait (Wilde 124). Dorian Gray changes from the contemptible person who pursues to satisfy instinctual impulses to the evil who likes to see the sharp comparison between his double lives. "He grew more and more enamored of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul" (Wilde 124). Gray enjoys the new pleasure achieved through double lives. Without considering the social norms, Dorian does not control his instinctual desires any more. However, Gray does not anticipate that humans will not be satisfied with the same amount of excitement and pleasure. Just as it is said by Lord Henry in the novel, any interesting things will be tedious if people do it too often (Wilde 213).

### **The Pleasure Principle Shown in Basil Hallward**

Basil Hallward is the person who makes a portrait of Dorian Gray. He worships Dorian. He describes meeting him for the first time:

When our eyes met I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone

whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. [...] I have always been my own master; had at least always been so, till I met Dorian Gray. (Wilde 9)

The portrait he makes for Gray is actually the reflection of his infatuation with his artistic ideal. Controlled by the infatuation with the artistic ideal, Basil Hallward achieves great pleasure. Basil admits that he "couldn't be happy if I didn't see him every day. He is absolutely necessary to me" (Wilde 11). Basil Hallward indulges himself in admiring his ideal and imposing some ideas on his work purposefully. In order to pursue pleasure, Basil Hallward is not in charge of his instinctual impulses. Through artful using of the work of portrait as his cover, he applies his sensual impulses into his work.

During the process of making the portrait for Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward's homosexual orientation is manifested. However, he is not worried about the contempt and condemnation from the society. The work of portrait is one of his best covers. Under this context, Hallward achieved huge pleasure while he creates the portrait for Dorian Gray. During this process, his sexual imagination is fully satisfied without being noticed by other people. In *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, Hallward confesses that he imposes too much of his own ideas into the work he creates (Wilde 2). In fact, the process of portraying for Dorian Gray is the process in which Hallward satisfies his own instinctual desires and enjoy the pleasure. Wilde describes Hallward "as the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skillfully mirrored in his art, a smile of pleasure passed across his face, and seemed about to linger here" (Wilde 2). Basil Hallward is in pursuit of the pleasure because of his perfect cover.

After a long time, Basil Hallward is not satisfied with the mere infatuation with his artistic ideal. Instead, he is enthralled by the beauty of Dorian Gray. Even though Basil Hallward clearly knows that his homosexual desire is inappropriate and unacceptable, he still indulges himself in the fulfillment of his desire. Basil Hallward proposes that "a curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art of itself. I did not want any external influences" (Wilde 6). Deeply enthralled by Gray's beauty,



Basil Hallward finally yields to his instinctual desires and tries to satisfy his internal drives without considering the restriction of social conventions and norms. The ignorance of the external forces and the fulfillment of internal drives lead Basil Hallward to be controlled by the pleasure principle.

### **The Pleasure Principle Shown in Lord Henry**

Unlike Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward, Lord Henry gives in to pleasure all throughout the novel. He deliberately reminds Dorian Gray of the withering of beauty and seduces Dorian Gray to see pleasure as the most important thing in life. He seeks to shape Dorian and stimulates him to search for new sensations. He simply considers making him into “a titan or a toy” (Wilde 32). He suggests that “talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow” (Wilde 31).

Lord Henry makes use of the pleasure and sensual enjoyment to seduce the others to trade their soul for pleasure. It demonstrates that he has already yield himself to the fulfillment of instinctual impulses. Lord Henry has proposed that “the body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of the temptation is to yield to it” (Wilde 17).

Without feeling guilty, Lord Henry spreads his theories of fulfilling desires and feels excited when the other people pursue pleasure. Meanwhile, his curiosity is also satisfied when he observes the other people’s reaction and leads them to be convinced by the contemptible theories. As the pleasure that Lord Henry gains from his theories is on the rise, other people who are influenced by him are on the way of destruction. Artfully, Lord Henry uses the other humans’ internal drives to influence them so as to satisfy his own impulses. “He played with the idea, and grew willful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox” (Wilde 40). Wilde describes Lord Henry’s action in a detailed way. The detailed description facilitates readers in seeing the effort Lord Henry makes to influence the common people. When Lord Henry finds out that Dorian Gray is a similar but young version of him, he starts to find a new way to achieve pleasure. In Lord Henry’s view, Dorian Gray is innocent and is easy to be treated as an experimental

tool. Lord Henry fulfills himself while he sees Gray's transformation from innocent young man to an evil person who is in desperate pursuit of instinctual pleasure.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, all the three characters have manifested their pursuit of fulfilling their instinctual impulses. Their evil behavior is opposite to social conventions and norms. Without considering the external conditions, the instinctual desires play dominant roles in their mind, which makes the only thing they want is instinctual pleasure.

### **Discussion: The Reality Principle Shown in *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

#### **The Reality Principle**

In contrast with the pleasure principle, the reality principle plays an indispensable role in reminding humans of the difference between right and wrong. The reality principle complements and modifies pleasure principle to prevent humans from ceaselessly pursuing the fulfillment of instinct desires. In terms of the outcome of Freud's study, the reality principle represent ego (Freud 48). It is subject to the external forces and conditions. Restricted by the social norms, the reality principle hinders the pleasure principle in human beings' mind.

On the ground of Freud's researches on reality principle, Peters (Peters 5) makes a further research and states that the instinctual impulses may change in terms of the environment, knowledge and the advancement of language. Besides, Peters also states that "restraint of motor discharge is affected by thought, which is imaginative experimentation, and the uncertain pleasures of the moment are renounced in favor of assured satisfaction later" (Peters 5). In this regarding, instinctual desire could not play the predominant role with the development of humans' mental activity. In other words, the reality principle makes use of external forces to hinder the instinctual desires. Compared with the pleasure principle that stimulates humans to pursue instinctual impulses, the fundamental nature of the reality principle is inclined to cater to the external conditions. It is apparent that reality principle complements pleasure principle to facilitate humans in achieving a balance.

The reality principle has usually been considered as the restriction from the external forces which prevent the excessive generation of pleasure. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the three major characters yield to the fulfillment of

their instinctual desire and totally give in to the sensual enjoyments. In the end, the three characters do not take the social norms into consideration, which means that the reality principle could not restrict them from pursuing the satisfaction of their instinctual desire. Even though the reality principle has generated tension in humans' mind and motivated them to be responsible for their own behavior, the desire and impulses are sometimes too strong to control.

### **The Reality Principle Shown in Dorian Gray**

In *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, Gray changes from an innocent young man to an evil person who conducts contemptible behavior. Unlike Lord Henry, Dorian Gray is restricted by the reality principle in the first place. When Sibyl Vane is cruelly dumped by Dorian Gray, the portrait has changed a little bit to reveal Gray's misconduct. In this novel, all Dorian Gray's misconduct will be reflected in his own portrait. The portrait can be considered as the invisible symbol of Gray's conscience (Wilde 89). Owing to his misconduct, the smile in the portrait is strange and terrifying. Dorian Gray notices the changes of the portrait and feels scared that he will be exposed to the public. The scare of being punished by the social norms and conventions has explicitly demonstrated that his conscience has functioned. Dorian Gray is ashamed of his misconduct and tries to correct his behavior at first. In the novel, Dorian Gray feels an infinite regret which hangs over him all the time (Wilde 88). That means the regret in his mind represents the restriction of the external forces.

Due to the fear of being exposed to the public, Dorian Gray does not pursue his instinctual desire according to his willingness. Gray clearly knows his misconduct through the damages in the portrait. As it is stated by Oates (Oates 421), Gray's "moral disintegration allows his insight". The damaged portrait forces Dorian Gray to confront the reality and prevent him from further degradation. The reality principle also tries to prevent Dorian Gray from conducting any more inappropriate behavior. In this way, the willingness to pursue pleasure is indirectly curbed and the reality principle is in the dominant role.

The reality principle is also manifested when Dorian Gray tries to resist Lord Henry's temptations. In order to get rid of the regret hanging over him, Dorian Gray tries to fight against the temptation. In the novel, Gray has

made up his mind not to see Lord Henry or listen his theories any more (Wilde 93). At first, the resistance is effective. Then, gradually Gray finds out that his degradation is affected by Lord Henry's evil theories, so he stops the connection with him. As Wilde describes in the novel, Dorian Gray needs to "explain to him (Henry) the new life he was going to lead, to quarrel with him if it became necessary to quarrel, to part if parting was inevitable" (Wilde 93). At the cost of curbing the pleasure, reality principle functions and to some extent hinders Gray from being further tempted by Lord Henry's theories.

### **The Reality Principle Shown in Basil Hallward**

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Basil Hallward artfully makes use of the portrait as his perfect cover to conduct sinful behavior. However, similar to Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward is restricted by social conventions. As Basil Hallward pays attention to the other people's views, he does not fully yield his conscience to sensual enjoyment. The reality principle hinders Basil Hallward from pursuing his instinctual desires. The reality principle can be seen in the first encounter between Basil Hallward and Dorian. "Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis of my life. I had a strange feeling that Fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. I grew afraid, and turned to quit the room. It was not conscience that made me do so; it was a sort of cowardice" (Wilde 6). Basil Hallward is in serious struggle and his psychological activity is highly complex.

Basil Hallward notices his instinctual homosexual impulses in the first encounter with Dorian Gray. However, he is scared that his instinctual impulses will be condemned by the public. As it is confessed by Basil, his cowardice takes away the pleasure that he can achieve due to the infatuation with Dorian Gray. Nevertheless, his cowardice also helps him not to be punished by the social norms. In the process of struggling with the instinctual impulses, Basil Hallward tries not to meet Dorian Gray personally. He still has infatuation with Dorian Gray, while he uses his conscience to control his instinctual impulses.

### **The Reality Principle Shown in Lord Henry**

Lord Henry is the most hypocritical person in the whole novel. He always pretends to be a decent gentleman in the upper class society, while he is actually a mean person who has completely indulged himself in the

fulfillment of sensual desire and instinctual impulses. Basil Hallward describes Lord Henry as a person who “never says a moral thing, and never does a wrong thing” (Wilde 4).

Lord Henry is a crafty and lying character who enjoys plotting against the others. Even though he constantly spreads his theories and enjoys the other people’s gradual degradation, he cares about his reputation. The importance attached to his reputation has demonstrated the reality principle shown in Lord Henry. Out of the danger of ruining his status in the upper class, Lord Henry sometimes flinches and controls his instinctual desires. As Lord Henry is hindered from enjoying the sensual enjoyment without any limits or boundaries, he takes Dorian Gray as his replacement and achieves pleasure by observing Dorian Gray’s degradations.

The reality principle is also manifested when Henry tells Gray not to be involved in Sibyl Vane’s suicide. Without being able to process the pain, Sibyl Vane commits suicide after being dumped by Dorian Gray. After being informed of the news, Gray is in great panic. At that time, Henry reminds Gray of not being involved in this case because the society in London will not accept his kind of scandal (Wilde 95). In this regard, it is easy to find out that Lord Henry values the reputation. Even though he enjoys seeing Gray’s destruction, he helps him to get rid of the trap. Besides, Lord Henry also tries to avoid anything that could pose threat to this reputation. Even though Sibyl Vane’s suicide is conducted by him, he has some responsibilities. Therefore, out of the concern over his reputation, Lord Henry yields to the reality principle instead of the pleasure principle.

From the analysis that has been elaborated above, it is clear to see that the external forces have to some extent hindered these main characters from ceaselessly pursuing the pleasure. All of the three characters understand that their sinful behavior will be condemned by the society. Therefore, out of the fear of being exposed, they yield to the reality principle and control their pursuit of the satisfaction of instinctual desires temporarily.

### **The Paradoxical Nature of the Characters**

#### **The Definition of Paradox**

Paradox is commonly adopted as a rhetorical device in writing, while it does not represent a rhetorical device in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the three major characters

in this novel, it is highly important to understand the definition of paradox.

It is widely accepted to define paradox as a rhetorical device. During the past 150 years, a lot of philosophers and logicians try to define paradox from the psychological perspective (Breuer 226). Although there are a large number of definitions of paradox, none of them are universally accepted. Sigmund Freud is one of the most remarkable scholars who offer an important basis for defining paradox. In terms of Freud's study on the humans' mental activity, the paradox means a state in which the pleasure principle (e.g. internal drives) contradicts with the reality principle (e.g. external stimuli). It is essential to understand the contradictory relation between the pleasure principle and the reality principle.

In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud has studied the nature of pleasure principle. "The pleasure principle remains for a long period of time the vehicle of much less 'educable' sexual drives, and there are countless occasions-be it on the basis of these latter drives, be it within the ego itself-where the pleasure principle overwhelms the reality principle, to the detriment of the entire organism" (Freud 48). The reality principle is committed to being in charge of the pursuit of pleasure, while there are still some exceptions that the instinctual desire is too strong to control. On behalf of the instinctual impulses, the pleasure principle always opposes to the reality principle which is on behalf of the external stimuli. The contradiction between the pleasure principle and the reality principle leads to humans' paradoxical nature. Meanwhile, they also complement each other to facilitate humans in making a balance. The constant choice between the pleasure principle and the reality principle finally leads to the paradoxical entity. Human psychic process operates on the ground of the two principles. On the basis of the information mentioned above, paradox can be summarized as a psychic state in which the pleasure principle and the reality principle both impact human beings. In other words, humans are affected by the internal drives and external stimuli at the same time.

The introduction of pleasure principle and reality principle facilitates humans in understanding the basic definition of paradoxical nature. The studies on the basic definition of paradox pave the way for a more precise explanation of paradox. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the paradoxical nature has been demonstrated in Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton. They struggle and suffer from making a choice between internal



drives and external stimuli. Even though they choose to yield to the fulfillment of instinctual impulses, they are still large tortured by the paradoxical nature in their mind. Even though the internal drives stimulate them to be in ceaseless pursuit of the sensual enjoyment, the concern about the social conventions and reputation prevent them from pursuing sinful pleasure. Under this context, they focus on achieving pleasure, while they cannot ignore the reality.

### **The Paradoxical Nature Shown in Dorian Gray**

Dorian Gray's paradoxical nature is mainly manifested when he is in love with Sibyl Vane. Dorian Gray is extremely excited in the first encounter with Sibyl Vane. At that time, he believes that he has already found the "the loveliest thing" in his life (Wilde 49). The pleasure principle starts to take up the major role in Gray's consciousness. In Dorian Gray's eyes, Sibyl Vane's matchless beauty is a visible pleasure. Due to the deep infatuation with Sibyl Vane, Dorian Gray even neglects the social discrimination against the actress. He has confessed to Lord Henry that "When you see Sibyl Vane you will feel that the man who could wrong her would be a beast, a beast without a heart" (Wilde 74). However, Dorian Gray does not ignore all the external condition out of his love and infatuation with Sibyl Vane.

When Dorian Gray invites his friends to Vane's performance, he pays great attention to his friends' praise. His vanity has been fulfilled when Sibyl Vane's beauty and genius has surprised a lot of visitors. However, Gray's vanity is soon ruined because Sibyl Vane's horrible performance leads Gray to be embarrassed in front of his friends. The attention to the other people's reaction has made Gray's passionate love for Vane disappear. Instead of losing interest in Sibyl Vane, Gray makes an acrimonious comment on Sibyl Vane's performance that "She was entirely altered. Last night she was a great artist, while this evening she is merely a commonplace, mediocre actress" (Wilde 82). Gray's ideal is ruined due to his concerns about the other people's reaction. Dorian Gray's paradoxical nature is demonstrated when Gray need to make a choice between his instinctual desire for Sibyl and the external reaction.

In addition, Gray tries to stop the connection with Lord Henry and resist of the temptation is also a sign of paradoxical nature of the character. Influenced by Lord Henry, he concerns about his beauty and youth. He is

largely tempted to trade his soul for eternal youth. Scared by being exposed to the public, Gray could not totally ignore the restriction of social conventions. Therefore, during the process of facing the pleasure principle and the reality principle at the same time, Gray suffers a lot from pursuing pleasure and being restricted by social norms. His paradoxical nature is clearly shown when there is a need to make a choice between the two principles.

### **The Paradoxical Nature Shown in Basil Hallward**

Basil's paradoxical nature is shown in his struggle between his infatuation with Dorian Gray and the concern about the social conventions. During the process in which Basil Hallward makes the portrait for Dorian Gray, he applies a lot of his own ideas into the work. He has strong feelings for Dorian Gray, which reminds him of his hidden homosexual impulses. Through making use of the work of portrait as his perfect cover, Basil follows the social conventions and secretly pursues the pleasure in the process of portraying the work of art. The strong infatuation with Dorian Gray does not enable him to ignore the restriction of social convention. In order to gain more pleasure, Basil Hallward tries to make another new portrait for Dorian Gray so as to achieve some time to be with Dorian Gray. It is an excellent way for Basil to satisfy his homosexual desires by observing Dorian Gray. However, to Basil's surprise, Dorian Gray rejects the offer. The rejection makes Basil Hallward fall apart. Throughout the whole novel, Basil Hallward does not make any actual move to meet his own desires. His paradoxical nature is mainly shown in his indulgence in the worship of his artistic ideal. Instead of finding a person to meet his desires, he applies all the sensual impulses and desires into the work he creates. Due to the fear for being exposed to the public, Basil could just secretly use art as a cover for him to meet some of his sinful instinctual desires.

### **The Paradoxical Nature Shown in Lord Henry**

In The Portrait of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry has been tortured by the paradoxical nature in his mind. He deliberately disseminates his theories on the eternal youth and beauty, while he also concerns about his reputation in the upper-class society. Before the first encounter with Dorian Gray, Lord Henry mocks him as a brainless human with good physical appearance, whereas he is impressed by Gray's youth and beauty in the

first encounter. Gray's youth and matchless beauty leads Lord Henry to make a contradictory comment that "beauty is a form of genius - is higher, indeed, than Genius" (Wilde 20). Out of the infatuation with Gray's beauty, Lord Henry believes that Gray is a young version of himself. Due to the restriction of the social norms, Lord Henry is restricted from greedily pursuing the pleasure. Under this context, he wants to see Gray's gradual degradation. Owing to the emphasis on the reputation in the upper-class society, Lord Henry's instinctual impulses are curbed. In the process of trying to achieve pleasure, there are huge psychological conflicts in his mind.

The three characters, Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry, have suffered a lot in the process of making a choice between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. They are all in desperate pursuit of the pleasure, while at the same time they are scared of being exposed to the public. The process in which they try to gain a balance in their psychological conflicts reveals their paradoxical nature.

### Discussion and Conclusion

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is an excellent work which vividly describes the paradoxical nature of the three major characters. This novel has provided the other writers with a perfect example to compose an appealing and provocative novel. The provocative plots, abnormal character and complex themes have its great influences in the literary area. As a leading figure in the advocacy of the aesthetical movement, Oscar Wilde insists on the idea of "Art for Art's Sake". In this novel, Wilde has still insisted on his aesthetic idea and described Dorian Gray as an extraordinarily beautiful male. Meanwhile, this novel has also shown Wilde's sophistication in arranging the plots, characters, and themes. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the three major characters, Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton have surrendered to the fulfillment of their instinctual impulses. The choice between the pursuit of pleasure and the concern about the social norms finally leads to the paradoxical nature of three characters. The novel shows the pleasure principle they pursue when they are chasing happiness, the reality principle they have to follow when they are facing the society, the inner paradoxical conflicts when they are confronting the two principles at the same time.

This novel aims to provide readers with a relatively comprehensive understanding of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Based on Freud's pleasure principle and reality principle, the detailed analysis of the three characters' mental activity may help readers to further understand human's paradoxical nature. Meanwhile, readers could have a further understanding of Oscar Wilde's writing characteristics and his works. However, this paper does not comprehensively review findings of the previous work and the novel has not been thoroughly read. Some important details may be neglected. Further researches could be conveyed from the perspective of image analysis, personalities and hedonism.

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