



**Impact of Interpersonal Relationships on Protagonists' Life Choices in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Stranger***

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*'No such thing as truths' (Wilde 93)*

## Introduction

Albert Camus originally published *The Stranger* in 1946 in French, which has four prominent English translations, the latest of which, attributed to Matthew Ward, is my reference. Arguably, the novel acts as a beacon to Camus's associations with absurdism. Meursault, the protagonist, maintains the absurdist attitude throughout the novel, reinforcing his conviction through the statement 'nothing really matters'; though many readers and critics have perceived such tendencies to represent an apathetic, unassuming character, I concede in arguing otherwise (Camus 121). Notwithstanding the unsophisticated language permeating the text, there is enough silence and rift between different events in the narrative to warrant a deeper inspection of the underlying mental forces at hand. An inchoate psychoanalysis is sufficient to eschew the 'indifferent' label attached by many to Meursault, evincing the puissant influence his mother's death and their shared relationship had on his life choices – encompassing, but not limited to, his lifestyle and treatment of other relations (Wagner 34).

Likewise, Oscar Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was published in 1890 in English, and brims with substance on how under the overpowering influence of Lord Henry, his alleged 'mentor' as some critics have discerned, the protagonist Dorian underwent such insidious character development that almost all his life choices were supposedly inspired by the relationship between him and Henry (Liebman 298). Wilde imbibed the Faustian bargain to admonish poetic justice to Dorian in the end, unintentionally creating a didactic message. However, despite its moral grounding the book remains rife with material on relationship structures; the reader can barely isolate any development in Dorian's character and life choices from his present relationships with other characters.

Most interestingly, however, both protagonists in these texts, albeit belonging to different time periods, different social classes – noticing the fact that Camus' work deals with

proletariats while Wilde ascribes all his characters to the gentry – are met with different sets of upheavals, are portrayed through different levels of linguistic sophistication, and yet still both end up committing murder in the end for relative reasons. This essay, therefore, aims to uncover the influence of interpersonal relationships on these protagonists' life choices, and in turn the degree of influence sustained by each relationship thereof. In particular, I shall analyse how these relationships might have affected the protagonists' lifestyles, and attitudes towards other characters and relationships, as well as how, despite such profuse contrasts in most aspects of their life, both Meursault and Dorian commit murder. To that end, I will use the reader-response theory alongside the psychoanalytical framework to examine the texts.

### **Impact on The Protagonists' Lifestyles and Attitudes Towards Life**

Dorian is a man-child born into a desperation for convenience; Lord Henry simply exploits this fact to 'dominate' him (Wilde 34). Lord Henry liberates him from the stigmatised ordeals of adulthood by creating a simulation that dispenses with binaries. His simulation rests on three interdependent principles: the pleasure-principle, which is communicated through leitwortstil; fearing nothing because everything is admissible, affirmed by a juxtaposition between Dorian and his portrait; and the preservation of youth, which is prescribed as the life-instinct. Dorian acquiesces to the simulation as the only way to live. In contrast, Meursault's absurdist conviction, although equally communicated through leitwortstil, is not subscribed to as a mode of living. However, Meursault's life still remains a desperation to be free from Maman's absence and his collateral guilt for the most part.

Dorian's attitude towards life is underpinned by Lord Henry's simulation and his portrait's service as a mediator between the simulation and reality. Wilde uses the epigram, 'to cure the soul by means of the senses' and vice-versa, which represents the pleasure-principle as a leitwortstil to show how Lord Henry's principal lesson as mentor

permeates Dorian's temperament throughout his life (Wilde 28). Moreover, Henry sells the simulation as the only means to 'live... the wonderful life' accessible to him alone and thereby represents it as the life-instinct to ensure that he does not escape his influence (Liebman 299). The simulation also dispenses with binaries – life's secrets are discovered only in the 'visible', influences can only be 'immoral', the pleasure-principle is the only way to live 'really, perfectly, and fully', there is 'no such thing as truths' albeit the simulation is the only truth – to liberate Dorian from Basil's headlong attachment with a cosmic order, which in itself practises a dual-view of the world in terms of good and evil (Wilde 25, 30, 93). Instead, Dorian is offered the chance to distinguish himself by chasing pleasure all his life while negating anything that conflicts with this principle. As such, Dorian inherits a 'half-blind' spectatorism from his mentor that conditions him to only retain images admissible in their simulation and not process the full picture for convenience's sake. Since this form of spectatorism strictly focuses on converting 'life into art', it nourishes his aptitude for sustaining the simulation (Liebman 299). Hence, Dorian's attitude towards life is subordinated to the simulation created by Henry. To that end, the portrait plays an interventionist role in supporting the simulation's existence against reality by 'condoning' Dorian's sins through subsuming the aftermath due to him, thereby representing the 'unreality' of the book (Peters 3).

Wilde exploits juxtaposition beyond its conventional literary utility to demonstrate how 'the very sharpness of the contrast' between Dorian and his portrait allowed him to master the pleasure-principle and 'recreate life' by always celebrating a decadent lifestyle (Wilde 148, 151). By juxtaposing the portrait's sightless, decaying aspects which are a product of Basil's murder, with his reality where Dorian simply 'forgets' the murder through indulging in opium, Wilde instantiates how the portrait arranges for Dorian's lifestyle to dovetail in realising the pleasure-principle (Wilde 213). The portrait's service in subsuming

the aftermath of the murder is consoling because it promotes his search for pleasure to limitless ends, where even murder is justified provided it creates pleasure, thus hollowing out the meaning of his life to this particular goal. His action of 'buying oblivion' through opium after the murder demonstrates the impact of his portrait's service in perpetuating a decadent lifestyle because it reflects his response to guilt and fear to be nothing beyond pleasure (Ibid.). Since both these emotions are organically powerful and could bar his conscience from pleasurable activities, the fact that the portrait removes the need to register them by clearing Dorian from incrimination allows the reader to discern how the portrait succeeds in creating all the preconditions for him to maintain his hedonism. Furthermore, there is an exhaustive account of his unabating predilection for material profligacies even before the murder which shows that the portrait's impact on Dorian's lifestyle has remained consistent with time. Thus, Dorian's portrait plays an important role in perpetuating his decadent lifestyle.

Meursault's lifestyle was not just a product of spectatorism but also saw some notable changes after his mother's death: he became more social, he worked extra hours on some days, he emptied a room otherwise reserved for his mother. Meursault's treatment of his apartment where he allows space for 'saggy chairs' in his personal room alongside a 'yellowing mirror' after his mother's death shows that she subjugates his whole temperament, thus finding embodiment in ill-maintained, decaying objects that appear futile in the grand scheme against death which is inevitable and absolute (Camus 21). He discards all her furniture because her material associations perturb him, and he pines to be free from her absence. However, a double entendre suspends the reader in a doubtful limbo. Whether in claiming that he was 'going back' after Maman's burial because 'nothing had changed', Meursault implies a regression in the mental ladder apropos reconciling his guilt, or it implies a return to normalcy, cannot be wholly ascertained (Camus 24). What is apparent, however, is the dire difficulty in accepting the latter by presupposing that everything remained the same

(Otten 106). As proven earlier, this cannot be true, and therefore his id is really just condensing all his frustrations into a single phrase here to avoid further scrutiny. This shows how Maman's absence led to significant changes in Meursault's lifestyle despite his denials and desperation to restore normalcy.

Likewise, Meursault's social activities magnified due to Maman's death. Chapter IV is the perfect instantiation for this because it cements his need for constant occupation as a distraction from his mother's departure, so much so that he testifies for Raymond even though he 'didn't like cops' (Camus 37). Moreover, Meursault agreed to write a letter addressed to Raymond's mistress in the previous chapter because he had 'no reason not to please him' (Camus 33). The litotes buried in the 'not' is characteristic of his reticence, but Meursault's desire to help him and thereby become a 'pal' represents his repressed desire to progress towards change: a change involving a more active social life, which comes out in a sublimated form where he creates the illusion that he could equally as much have declined the request in the reader's mind through the negative 'not' (Camus 33). However, the use of the adverb 'really' by Meursault in wanting to accept Raymond's invitation to a beach house in Chapter V shows that he was admittedly excited because his register in their relationship scarcely features such adverbs (Camus 40). Thus, it can be construed that Meursault genuinely sought Raymond for augmenting his social activities, thereby acquiring another coping mechanism to deal with his mother's death. According to Wagner, the motivation here is not to socialise but to actually punish the mistress because Meursault identifies with this treatment apropos his unfulfilled desire to punish Maman for her behaviour (Wagner 34). However, this psychoanalysis is corroborated by his individual examination of Camus's personal diaries. Whereas the scarcity of information on Meursault's past necessitates a holistic approach to the text, Wagner's limiting framework raises difficulty in generalising the impact his mother's relationship had on Meursault; on the contrary, using the reader-response

theory in conjunction with a psychoanalytic framework justifies a broader, more inclusive treatment.

Camus uses Meursault's existentialist statement that 'nothing really matters' as a leitwortstil to show that he crafted it as a provisional truth reached after experience, which represents his attitude towards life (Camus 121). Even as its origin can be imputed to Maman's death, he internalises it as a pure product of individual spectatorism. As such, there is no life-instinct involved in its realisation. His spectatorism enables him to determine whether his conviction will hold, but it does not participate in creating any simulations. However, unlike Dorian, Meursault does not consult a higher force, a mediator or a mentor to clarify doubts or learn the true nature of life. The leitwortstil thus establishes that Meursault's goal in life is a far-cry from the pleasure-principle. Moreover, noticing that Meursault is able to vindicate his existentialist conviction at every juncture in his life, it is this consistency that can be paralleled with the pervasiveness of his guilt apropos his relationship with Maman. This parallel informs a correlation between the two, suggesting that, although their relationship is not as impactful on his commitment to this conviction, it might still retain the potential to contribute to it (Wagner 34). Even so, Meursault's only viable claim of happiness in the narrative springs from a shared understanding between him and the whole universe 'like a brother' apropos his existentialism as opposed to any particular characters (Camus 123). Therefore, Meursault's attitude towards life is largely formed through individual spectatorism rather than the influence of his interpersonal relationships. In contrast, Dorian is characterised as a protagonist whose life depends upon another character's validation, namely Lord Henry.

While Wilde depicts Dorian as somebody who 'celebrates' the ways in which his relationship with Henry contributes to reshaping his lifestyle, Meursault's reception and recognition of his late mother's influence on him poignantly disturbs him. However, in both

cases the leitwortstil used by the authors illuminates the protagonists' deep-seated convictions.

### **Impact on Treatment of Romantic Relationships**

Meursault's guilt apropos Maman's death and their relationship occupies a subliminal role in influencing his romantic relationships throughout the narrative. He recognises the guilt, but chooses to repress it, seeking Marie as a distraction. However, he projects his long-repressed need to be with his mother through striving to maintain his bond with Marie. Lord Henry, on the other hand, uses the pleasure-principle to subdue Dorian which is impactful because it leads him to abandon both his love interests, Sibyl and Hetty.

Meursault is trapped in guilt from the beginning, but this remains subliminal until he encounters Marie at a public beach. Through a subtle juxtaposition between this beach setting and the vigil, Camus unravels not only how Marie enables Meursault to move on from his mother's death by 'forgetting all about it' but also blows an invasive light on his psyche to clinch the existence of his guilt in both the reader and Meursault's active mind (Camus 20). As the hero was trapped amidst strangers attending Maman's vigil, he had a 'ridiculous feeling' that their intention was to 'judge' him; and his exhaustion escalated to vexation due to a crying woman whose sobs fixated him on his sentiments (Camus 10). By contrast, he is at ease around his love interest Marie – partly because the beach participates in creating a jovial atmosphere where Marie was 'laughing the whole time' – but mostly because she neither judges him nor mentions his past (Camus 20). Marie is the sole character who achieves an admission of guilt from him albeit unregistered. However, she does not pursue the subject but instead moves on from it, signalling to Meursault that their relationship will always be past his past. Hence, Meursault strives to maintain their bond for the sole reason that Marie is seemingly the most detached from Maman. Though Marie's very presence

attests that, as Terry Otten discerns, ‘subconsciously, he is never free of his mother or her funeral’ (Otten 106). All his efforts into their relationship originate from a permanent need to reconcile his guilt. And while Otten soundly observes that Meursault ‘typically ignores the implications of thought’, he fails to duly recognise that Marie’s role in the hero’s life is chiefly to perpetuate the illusion that he still *can*; that he depends on her to ignore the implications of his thoughts, while oblivious to their relationship as the greatest implication there is.

As opposed to guilt, Wilde uses focalisation to demonstrate how Dorian’s subservience to Henry chiefly determines his treatment of romantic relationships. Even as Dorian was just ‘putting his aphorisms into practise’, insinuating that it was he who *chose* to do so, he could not realise that the inspiring thought itself was corrupted with influence (Wilde 53). For all his insistence on Sibyl Vane’s beauty, he believes that she represents ‘everything’ to him (Wilde 62); but he is insensitive to the idea that his meaning of this cliché was reconstituted due to Henry; that an incipient spectatorism already paved his eyes to only appreciate that which was or could be converted to art (Liebman 299). This is proven when he ironically reflects that she regarded him ‘merely as a person in a play’, whereas he himself merely responded to her role as an actress in order to create the impetus for abandoning her (Manganiello 29). The fact that ‘without [her] art she is nothing’ is not something that Dorian consciously recognised until his mentor intervened by reducing her acting to that of a ‘wooden doll’, shows how Henry’s intervention is necessary for Dorian to process the ‘half-blind’ spectatorism he inherited from him that prioritises art over everything because his words seem to corroborate his indignation and make him realise what is truly important to him (Wilde 102, 99). Even in the case of Hetty, Dorian’s attempt to be ‘good’ is challenged by Henry as a ‘poor beginning’ because his dominance over him already forebodes that all his love interests will share the same fate as Sibyl Vane, who acted as a prototype to represent

Dorian's heartless treatment of love interests (Wilde 240, 241). This proves that Henry's framework had already subjugated Dorian beyond the tipping point for him to restore his rectitude, even though he admittedly restricted his senseless quest for pleasure in order to do so.

Crucially, it can be observed that both protagonists are subdued by the influence of one particular character; and this remains an unchanging fact despite the vicissitudes that swell in their respective lives. As such, their very delusion of breaking free from these influencers by means of associating themselves with new people is paradoxically manufactured by the same influencers. Where Maman inspires Meursault's allegiance to Marie, Henry conspires in making Dorian abandon both his romantic interests.

### **Impetus for Murder**

Dorian murders Basil because he imputes him as the 'origin of his shame' to implicate him for his own degradation and cannot stand criticism against his portrait as it embodies his 'soul' (Wilde 156). However, the murder in itself is not planned; neither does it grant him any pleasure. He simply loses self-control after nonchalantly 'shrugging his shoulders' to all of Basil's accusations because his pride interferes with reason (Wilde 173). Wilde repeats the same imperative statement 'You shall see [his soul]!' thrice so as to represent Dorian's wild excitement in finally revealing his portrait to Basil in an incomparable condition with his original (Wilde 176). This reflects his pride associated with the portrait, but it also foreshadows the murder because the instantaneous shift in his tone from languid to almost hysterically demanding showcases a shift in his sensibility as well. Thus, when Basil trivialises the importance of the portrait by objectifying it to an inanimate 'thing [...] leering at them', and creates illusory distance between Dorian and the portrait through the adjective 'leering', Dorian's vanity is unable to withstand the insult, especially coming from the artist

due to whom the portrait exists and thereby governs his life, and murders Basil in a retorting swoon (Wilde 182).

Meursault's chief impetus for murdering the Arab has always, and perhaps will continue to remain, contestable amongst critics (Ohayon 189). At first impression the reader is persuaded to believe that his murder was simply a response to solar radiation. However, a careful scan of the associated material reveals that Maman's influence in this matter cannot be understated. Meursault's 'trigger gave' to release himself from the memories of his mother's death even if it meant sacrificing his happiness because the former was too overbearing and gravely arrested his psyche (Camus 59). He does not realise this through the first shot, but only after 'knocking four times into the door of unhappiness' Meursault guarantees himself a solid escape from his memories (Camus 59). Camus forces him to process this setting as a reincarnation of the dread he possibly felt during the funeral through the sun's omniscience. His desperation to grow free from it only abounds with time. As such, his reticence gives way and makes confessions to the reader; first, that he longed to escape the 'woman's tears' from the vigil because there was nobody else between him and Arab at the beach to qualify for this description; and second, that the sun's behaviour now was identical to how it was 'the day [he] buried Maman', which implies that it was almost life-threatening, a warning he received during the funeral (Camus 57, 58). Hence, Meursault's 'longing for an [unattainable] maternal unity', manifested in his painful recollections of his mother's funeral, drives him to murder the Arab (Wagner 33).

Wilde's terse depiction of the murder shows that it lacks artistic importance for Dorian in the narrative, whose dependence on the portrait for continuing his mode of living had already been established earlier in the narrative and therefore signified his attachment to it. In contrast, Camus's ambiguous account of the Arab's murder encourages the reader to discover meaning in his murder even as he himself refuses to provide us with a clear reason.

Meursault's actions have been deliberately shrouded in confusion to show the covert influence Maman had on them throughout his life.

### **Conclusion**

Compared to Dorian Gray, whose predictability is an artistic choice made to culminate his spell of influences in finesse, the reader forms an opposite impression for Meursault who always hovers in endless possibilities depending on what material from the text is granted greater importance. Both are proven to be highly susceptible to external influences, and yet neither refrains from wanting to assert his individualism, however spurious it may be. Also, the cleft between the mundane realism of one text and the romantic surrealism of the other allows for an astonishing assessment comparing characterisation and representation between the texts. Whereas Dorian is shown as somebody who thrives on the unreality of his portrait and Henry's simulation at all scores, Meursault is represented as a protagonist who remains 'vitality in touch with reality' (Wagner 30). My essay was not able to accommodate this distinction with the importance it deserves because there was a juggle between using the psychoanalytic framework and the reader-response theory in examining the protagonists' interpersonal relationships. Wilde's use of defamiliarization in the narrative through both his style and plot is something that can be critically explored to further unpack the influences on Dorian's life choices. Similarly, Camus's use of internal focalisation might be scrutinised for its biases and omissions to investigate the extent to which his perception of reality had the potential to actually capture his life's upheavals, and how the reader is made to interpret his actions thereof. At length, however, it can be inferred from the comparative study that the co-existence of mutual and counteracting social forces generally tends towards chaos rather than balance.

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