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DORIAN GRAY MEETS THE DIGITAL AGE

An Essay Submitted to the
Graduate School of
John Carroll University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Marianne Cicirelli
2024

The turn of the 19th century saw phenomenal cultural changes fueled by numerous new schools of thought. Birthed from the Age of Enlightenment, advancement in the fields of science, engineering, and literature flourished. Though the acceleration towards the modern technological age was fertile with discovery, the dedication to designing ethical boundaries to help society navigate this new frontier was, and continues to be, delayed.

Oscar Wilde creatively illustrates this ethical quandary in his book, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.¹ His protagonist, Dorian, is portrayed as a supernaturally beautiful man who, when first introduced in the story, is described as simple and innocent. As the story progresses, he comes to recognize his own beauty, and consequently, falls madly in love with himself. When faced with the unavoidable evolution of aging, he begs the universe to keep him young and beautiful forever. Unbeknownst to him, his wish is granted and Dorian's picture, by fantastically absorbing everything negative about him, keeps him falsely suspended in his youthful beauty. Hiding his authentic self from the world, Dorian never tarnishes nor ages, as his newly drafted painting catalogues every one of his indiscretions throughout the story.

As Dorian's tale develops, the reader quickly realizes he has a penchant for corporeal pleasures. A self-proclaimed hedonist, he is completely self-centered, putting himself and his feral desires before anyone else. Driven by his insatiable self-indulgence, he leaves collateral damage within his intimate social circle, causing his painting to grow more hideous as it preserves Dorian's pristine façade.

Though *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was written over 130 years ago, its message has never been more relevant, playing itself out in the modern age. Quantum leaps in technological advances have landed us with smartphones, smartwatches, and the dawn of the World Wide

¹ Wilde, Oscar *The Picture of Dorian Gray* New York: Penguin Books, 1983.

Web.² With the onslaught of digital media on society, the use of the internet, mobile phones, and the normalization of texting as a means of communication, the public sphere of information sharing has become a brave new world.³

Intricate information access points are activated by a simple tap of the finger. Once considered independent entities, publishing, entertainment, and visual media have developed into a handful of global conglomerates which control great market power over public consumption of information.⁴ Arguably, these developments far surpass the definition of advancement, and are congruent with the birth of a supplemental world both linking and separating us. Whole cultures once oceans apart are now intimately conjoined, while the frequency of meaningful face to face conversations are steeply waning. With the dawn of this hyper- interconnectedness emerges a new social dynamic, manifesting in digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and a plethora of dating applications.

Like Dorian, many members of these social outlets portray a curated image of themselves; broadcasting their life in a metered way to tell the story of who they want to be rather than who they are. The social profile becomes vitalized as a core and trusted highway for information sharing, though its stagecraft can be an illusion of the author. From filters to YOLO (you only live once) vacation photographs, folks now are interacting with the portraits of those behind their computers.⁵

The creation of a digital profile to depict the author in the best way possible is misrepresentative of the flesh and blood person it works to describe. Transposing the concept,

² Kathryn C. Montgomery, "Children's Media Culture in the New Millennium: Mapping the Digital Landscape," *The Future of Children* 10, no. 2 (2000): 148.

³ Patti M. Valkenburg and Jessica Taylor, "Social Media" in *Plugged In How Media Attract and Affect Youth* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 222.

⁴ Montgomery, *The Future of Children*, 147.

⁵ Nina Varsava, "Dating Markets and Love Stories: Freedom and Fairness in the Pursuit of Intimacy and Love," *Cultural Critique* 95 (2017): 165.

Wilde animates Dorian's inanimate portrait and empowers it to represent his sins as his degenerate soul fractures over the years. At this juncture, Dorian's physically static appearance becomes the living, breathing embodiment of illusion.

Contrasting this, the author's pristine digital media profile can promote a propensity for deception. It would seem in modern day Dorian's curse has been set in reverse; with people's digital portraits carrying the unblemished mystique missing from the physical person on the other side of the screen. It could be argued their social media profiles are truthful collections of their everyday lives, though, this paper will suggest this schema is discordant. Examining Dorian's fixation on beauty and his ability to manipulate his intimate relationships to prey on the weaknesses of others for his personal gain, it is eerily like the social media dance people experience today. Our obsession with beauty, our mating dance and our perception of self-worth have all been rewritten and reweighted in a non-physical digital world.

Image is driving contemporary ethos echoing what Wilde recognized in society when he constructed the character of Dorian Gray. Wilde's focus is on valuating the surface quality of beauty. Dorian's influence over his friends and acquaintances is a direct result of his appearance and no deeper quality about him is discussed or admired. Dorian disturbingly has a distorted conception of what beauty really is, valuing his perfect, painted image and not himself. When the story begins, Dorian's unconscious innocence is captured by a painter and is the quality which raises his beauty to the level of art. The title of the book is about the picture of Dorian and not the character of Dorian.⁶ Wilde bases the foundation of his story on the interplay of image and beauty within his culture, and the dangers of placing agency on superficial endowments that are inevitably fleeting.

⁶ Christopher Craft, "Come See About Me: Enchantment of the Double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," *Representations* 91, no.1 (2005): 113.

The picture's metamorphosis from a two-dimensional static item into an animated entity reveals the power appearance and image manifest in Dorian's world. The picture works as the window into the underbelly of society, separating the mannerly well-dressed persona appearing in the outside world, from the authentic narcissistic world behind closed doors. Representing the gentlemen, ladies, and artists who comprise the privileged elite, Wilde establishes the foundation of their culture is based on appearance and reputation.

The first page of Wilde's story introduces two prominent, supporting characters who act as foils to Dorian. The almost instant adoration of Dorian by the artist Basil Hallward, and his friend, Lord Henry Wotton is a statement by Wilde to emphasize their superficiality. Dorian has no immunity from this cultural current as he believes his picture is the most perfect iteration of himself. Wilde writes,

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...The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before.⁷

This is a pivotal moment for Dorian because with the self-realization of his flawless image, he begins to perceive himself as art, and in tandem, starts to lose his humanity.

Dorian believes his image is the "real" version of himself distorting the deep understanding of what beauty truly is, excising the quality of his character from his image. His simplicity is evident because Dorian does not recognize on any deep level what is necessary to nurture his own character. Honesty, generosity, and respect for others are traits which never enter his mind when considering the attributes truly making a person beautiful. He treasures his image over himself so profoundly he trades his soul for the assurance he will never age nor mar his pristine appearance. Dorian says,

⁷ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 32.

I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose? Every moment that passes takes something from me, and gives something to it. Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now!⁸

Dorian is ecstatic his portrait captures his natural beauty. He loves to look at his image and wants others to see it as well. Unfortunately, when Dorian makes his wish and it is fulfilled, he has no idea of the consequence set into motion. The picture does become the “real” Dorian, and its purpose is no longer to immortalize his beauty, rather it is to expose his degenerate soul as it catalogues every one of his missteps.

This palpable revelation disturbs Dorian, causing him to hide his picture from others and especially from himself. Placing an ornate funeral pall over his picture and locking it away from prying eyes foreshadows an ominous future, allowing Dorian to continue with his capricious lifestyle. “Out of sight, out of mind” is Dorian’s attitude as he assumes no responsibility for the devolvement of his character chronicled in his portrait. He actively denies how his actions are affecting him and his peers. If his indiscretions cannot be linked to him publicly, Dorian pretends they did not happen. The state of denial is a timeless thread resonating today and is especially present in current digital platforms.

Dorian’s fixation with beauty and his self-centered obsession would appear fantastical though it is very much present in the modern day. Social media provides the current generation with a narcissistic culture extending them the vehicle to displace their unpalatable qualities both in appearance and demeanor when communicating in a world which would otherwise be inaccessible. Beauty thus can be viewed more as a medium of exchange which provides opportunity to those unable to enter many social arenas. Social media furnishes a platform for

⁸ Ibid., 34.

beauty to become the universal currency and technology the mint, where everybody with internet access holds a key to the vault. The danger is knowing what is legal-tender and what is counterfeit. Some might say the modern generation's infatuation with beauty is something learned from interacting on social platforms, though it can be argued this ethos is a legacy from past generations.

Modern socialization has taken on a new definition, diametrically opposed when compared to how people interacted before the digital revolution. The American public experienced a fundamental metamorphosis of their self-image during the 1980's. Society saw a shift toward a feeling of well-being as a dominant focus in the culture. A great contributor to a person's sense of self depended on their productivity and feeling of accomplishment at work. Because of the turmoil of the early twentieth century with two world wars, the migration of people from rural America into the cities, and the rise of the middle class, people tried to form a cogent sense of identity as they witnessed their understanding of community dwindle and a feeling of anonymity increase.⁹ The innovations in industry and manufacturing resulted in a hyper-accelerated transition from production toward the service industries for employment. The self-image of Americans was no longer based on gaining success through hard work and self-discipline.

As society pivoted away from physical labor as the litmus test of success, it trended toward a corporate model valuing the "manager" for their ability to oversee and direct a diverse group of personalities to meet the organizational benchmarks of the company through inspirational leadership.¹⁰ Management and manipulation became the new bureaucratic

⁹ Roger G. Betsworth, *Social Ethics An Examination of American Moral Traditions* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

disposition in America. Conformity was the mainstay of a new cultural thread where people were, “more concerned with security than integrity...with conforming than performing, with imitating than creating”.¹¹ Well-being emerged as the new standard to strive for in society, and people wished to be thought of as attractive, dominant, creative and charismatic, as they projected these same attributes onto their peers, and the world around them.¹² Accomplishment and production were replaced by persona and illusion and how polished an individual could project themselves to the public.

The new paradigm of conformity and developing a desirable image was the basis of how people gauged their self-worth. This principle engrained itself into the entire generation and, whether consciously or subconsciously, has been passed down to their children.¹³ What was not foreseen was how this new motivating force would manifest and become epidemic on a global scale with the onset of digital media. Creating a public image to influence an individual’s acceptance into their cultural niche, resulted in deception, illusion and beauty becoming the pillars of Western societies’ social morés. This same narrative was recognized by Wilde when he reveals the superficial world Dorian Gray experienced.

The painter Basil Hallward’s creation of Dorian’s image is also a recreation of life. His new “art creation” is so beautiful, both Basil and Dorian fall in love with the image.¹⁴ Consistent with this pattern of worshipping superficial beauty, Dorian extends this motif when he attends a theater performance and instantly falls in love with the lead actress, Sybil Vane. Lord Henry

¹¹ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey America Since World War II* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 137.

¹² Betsworth, *Social Ethics An Examination of American Moral Traditions*, 83.

¹³ Leonard Lee, George Loewenstein, Dan Ariely, James Hong, and Jim Young, “If I’m Not Hot, Are you Hot or Not? Physical Attractiveness Evaluations and Dating Preferences as a Function of One’s Own Attractiveness,” *Psychological Science* 19, no. 7 (2008): 669.

¹⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, “‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’: Wilde’s Parable of the Fall,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (1980): 422.

shares the news with Basil and quips, “Dorian says she is beautiful: and he is not often wrong about things of that kind. Your portrait of him has quickened his appreciation of the personal appearance of other people.”¹⁵ Dorian’s awareness of his own optimal beauty attunes his senses to seek out others of equal caliber, attracting him to Sybil Vain. He is very astute at discovering beauty in others who can enhance his.

Dorian loves her voice, he thinks she is beautiful, but most of all, he loves her craft of imitation. He attends any performance she stars in because he adores her portrayal of different characters in the plays, and not to see her. Both Dorian and Sybil are star-struck with each other. Never learning anything about her personal life, she becomes a symbol of purity and innocence, qualities that he has lost. Her art provides an avenue of immortality through her roles, and Dorian is enchanted by the chimera she generates when performing. Sybil’s deception onstage mimics Dorian’s duplicitous life on the world stage, marking both as masters of illusion. She both compliments his existence and justifies it. Watching Sybil’s brilliant acting both reassures and allows Dorian to continue his dichotic existence. Dorian feeds on her art, expounds his love of her and proposes marriage.

When Lord Henry mentions Dorian’s fiancée is an actress Basil is in disbelief. Because people in theater are considered lower class, certainly beneath the social circles the three of them fraternize in, Basil reacts by saying, “But think of Dorian’s birth, and position, and wealth. It would be absurd for him to marry so much beneath him.”¹⁶ Emphasizing the class system in their society, Basil blatantly points out the disparity in social status between Dorian and Sybil. He is concerned if Sybil is good enough to have a relationship with Dorian and states, “I hope the girl is good...I don’t want to see Dorian tied to some vile creature, who might degrade his nature and

¹⁵ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 85.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

ruin his intellect.” Lord Henry assures Basil of the desirability of Sybil when he says, “Oh, she is better than good – she is beautiful”¹⁷ Wilde echoes the trope of superficiality, first with Basil’s concern that Sybil is too low-class for Dorian to marry, and with Henry’s statement valuing her beauty above all else. Sybil’s beauty will compensate for all negative qualities she may have, including her lack of membership in the elite social class they belong to. Where Basil is concerned about her lower-class status diminishing Dorian’s nature and intellect, Henry states that her social station will be overlooked because Sybil is beautiful.

Wilde provides a window into the absence of moral fabric within the privileged elite. Though they maintain proper decorum for the public, they are collectors of rare and pretty objects of no substantive value. Sybil is simply a beautiful bauble added to Dorian’s collection. Governed by superficiality, his two closest friends accept his decision to marry Sybil. Her image and art of imitation are the correct medium of exchange allowing Sybil admittance into the elite and shallow world Wilde rails against.¹⁸

Similarly, we see this superficiality playing out in modern day. All people want to display their best self, though, removing imperfections from their appearance diminishes what makes them human and unique. Every person who places a picture online implicitly filters and enhances their appearance in some manner. Beauty inclines others to be more forgiving of less desirable personal qualities and is the goal of displaying a flawless image. The public persona people craft projects how they would like the community writ large to perceive them. Whether gregarious or strong, people create a facsimile of themselves to help them engage in the digital arena.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., 85.

¹⁸ Sheldon W. Liebman, “Character Design in ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray,’” *Studies in the Novel* 31, no 3 (1999): 297.

¹⁹ Varsava, *Cultural Critique*, 165.

Social platforms necessitate constructing a personal image of oneself with the sole intention of presenting a story to the world. Often a launchpad for people to alter their image and self-aggrandize, their conceptualized personas are commonly hyperbolized. Information sharing is controlled by the author of these platforms, through purposeful selection of events and experiences to construct their social profile. The public audience is influenced in what they think of the author, as every aspect of how their profiles are perceived has been tailored to create a new digital reality of themselves. Creating a social profile is necessary to utilize all digital applications for people seeking a relationship, whether professional, romantic, or social. This personal avatar can potentially have negative psychological, emotional, and cultural consequences for the individual and the greater digital community.

Transformations of intimate relationships, dating practices, and sexual and romantic involvement evolved because of technological gains.²⁰ In the contemporary Western imagination of love, courtship, pairings, and commitment today's world has developed from the traditional manner of meeting a mate organically to an electronic format. Internet dating is understood as utilizing websites consisting of databases of potential partners, who live in reasonable proximity to each other. With the opportunity to connect with a potential partner, the dating service will facilitate face-to-face contact between the two parties. Early in their inception, web-based dating sites were greatly burdened by adverse social stigma. Those who utilized the sites were thought to be flawed or desperate. Fast forward ten years and online dating sites have become accepted and mainstream within the culture and are fast growing as the predominant way for singles to meet.²¹

²⁰ Christen Dalessandro, "Internet Intimacy," *Sociological Perspectives* 61, no.4 (2018): 626.

²¹ Jessica M. Sautter, "The Social Demography of Internet Dating in the United States," *Social Science Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2010): 555, 559.

The uptick of remote employment and education post-Covid has only exacerbated the isolation of human interaction and strengthened the use of digital media as a prominent way to relate and communicate. As singles age, complete their education, enter the workforce, and delay marriage, their chances of meeting a life partner organically diminishes.²² The opportunity for people to connect and establish relationships in the traditional manner of the user's parents or grandparents is now exchanged by the insulating effect of digital media. The digital profiles facilitate the user's difficulty in establishing authentic relationships with others. Within the widely accepted form of courtship of online dating, the conviction to find love persists. The definition of love is interpretive and fluid, and its conception as an idea, emotion and practice is influenced by time, location, and the individual's background. Its expression is revealed within culture by social morés, economics, and technology. Love is not a free choice, rather it is driven by "irrational, impersonal, physical-biological forces beyond human control and human understanding".²³ It is interpreted as a "practice or process that defies closure and depends on a give-and-take between risk and security, doubt and certainty".²⁴

Falling in love could be viewed as carrying inherent risk, prompting people to sanitize basic self-truths to align with dominant social dynamics. This is evident in subtle, though poignant ways people design their social profiles. From cryptic screennames to metered "About Me" sections, people nuance core attributes to highlight their individuality. Because the crafting of the profile is void of social norms providing visible cues, such as raised eyebrows, frowns, or eye-rolling, there lacks a mechanism to dissuade the author from untruths during its design.²⁵ The potential for a positive encounter online is certainly present, yet most online daters treat the

²² Ibid., 557.

²³ Liebman, *Studies in the Novel*, 299.

²⁴ Varsava, *Cultural Critique*, 162.

²⁵ Robert Epstein, "The Truth About Online Dating," *Scientific American Mind* 18, no.1 (2007): 31.

profiles they read with suspicion. Many daters believe meeting someone offline is more genuine.

One millennial young adult named Madeline said,

One of my friends just characterized it perfectly...(online dating is) like ordering a boyfriend, It was like, he should have these traits, he should have this color hair, this job. And you know, he'll just show up on my doorstep. It just felt like ordering something on Amazon or eBay. You know, and then you're like "oh, it's not quite what I ordered." [laughs] Shocker that people put things on their profile that maybe aren't entirely accurate.²⁶

Crafting an engaging dating profile is paramount to piquing the curiosity of potential partners.

This first cut in the process is essential for drawing the most interest to themselves. With the potential to be viewed by thousands of prospects, the profile can cast a much wider net and garner more prospective partners than offline dating. The opportunity to make a notable first impression on the person searching the dating site results in people self-aggrandizing and inflating their assets to various degrees.

Most people seek success, and even the most ethical people will present themselves in the best possible way. Dressing up, wearing lipstick, and holding in our stomachs are techniques used in the art of attracting a partner and have been practiced for centuries.²⁷ Wilde writes, "Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion."²⁸ Wilde incorporates this ideal in his story when Basil reveals his success in capturing Dorian's ethereal beauty on canvas. The portrait he painted mirrored not only Dorian's likeness but his own passion for his art and his muse. Basil's inner-feelings are exposed in the tangible portrait. The artistry of the painting highlights the talent of the artist and his ability to create beauty. Artistic flourishing is common in a dater's profile, depending on the social, emotional, and psychological state of the profile author it is the degree of credibility

²⁶ Dalessandro, *Sociological Perspectives*, 633, 635.

²⁷ Epstein, *Scientific American Mind*, 30.

²⁸ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 11.

which varies.²⁹ In tandem with the opportunity to share profiles with many viewers, digital platforms use algorithms to drive and disseminate the information, presenting its own challenges and limitations.

Most social media users understand there is no guarantee of truthfulness and reliability in the information they seek, yet social media platforms are consistently accessed for information. Because there are too few limitations or restrictions on both news media and social media platforms, the users are directly affected by the algorithms powering the digital content generators. Algorithms serve as gatekeepers and are used by digital media companies to produce material and track demand by how often the audience clicks on a link, responds with a like, shares a post, or tags a picture. These data are analyzed, and the platform places the audience into a group which reflects their previous responses to posts.³⁰ Applying a filter to each user, the algorithm directs them toward like-minded users who share the same interests. This practice is problematic because, though the internet connects people around the globe allowing interaction with others as never before possible, the algorithm winnows out a vast number of individuals because it is directed by the filter. This results in a large community of viewers who essentially are blocked from seeing opposing perspectives of news items, opinions and events. They are matched with people who bolster their opinions, creating an echo chamber of support. The process is dangerous when misinformation is caught in this cycle, and users and their peers are now disseminating inflammatory and dishonest information. This practice is reinforced within the grouping the filter places them in, and results in user bias.³¹

²⁹ Oates, *Critical Inquiry*, 422.

³⁰ Vivian Roese, "You Won't Believe How Co-dependent They Are Or: Media Hype and the Interaction of News Media, Social Media, and the User," in *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm* ed. Peter Vasterman (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 322, 323.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 326.

Dating site algorithms are also challenging to those utilizing web-based dating services because of how the profile questions are constructed. Dating sites have secularized the search for love by supplanting more traditional ways couples meet, such as at work, through friends' groups, attending church services, or introductions by family, and has influenced the early steps in relationship building by removing human contact.³² The initial creation of the dater's profile for the website answers predetermined questions in categories about physical attributes, demographic information regarding race, education, and personal preferences and habits, such as smoking. They are also asked their priorities for a partner such as their gender preferences, age, location, and the type of relationship they seek, friendship, long-term, or casual sex. Laying bare the choices for the user's mate selection makes them measurable and predictable by articulating them so conspicuously. The choices promote self-evaluation by the user and reveals their beliefs and desires in a covert arena. Though, these preferences are established in the users' psyche, they may have been indiscernible and/or overridden in an offline setting when meeting someone in person.

When setting the parameters for the type of partner a person seeks out, there are no blurred lines in how the algorithm separates out those who meet the benchmarks and those who do not. These markers eliminate all people who may be a suitable match for the profile author because they are a bit too short, or have not completed their Ph D, but are ABD, or for having the wrong eye color.³³ The profile author is never aware of the perfect partner within the dating pool who happens to have hazel eyes and not blue, or is 5 ft 11 inches and not 6 feet tall. These

³² Sautter, *Social Science Quarterly*, 558.

³³ Epstein, *Scientific American Mind*, 35.

arbitrary indicators not only shrink the dating pool, but they also support the secularization of the mating/dating dance when there is no hope of charm or chemistry to override technology.³⁴

The drive to entice a partner is evident throughout nature, from male peacocks fanning their beautiful tails to attract a hen, to insects performing intricate mating dances. These are all signals to the females they are alpha and prime specimens to breed. Human beings are no different, though we believe we are more evolved. The inborn natural response of humans to a partner occurs unconsciously and is a primal urge as the body reacts to a healthy, dominant mate.³⁵ The organic, intangible engagement which often happens randomly during a conversation or accidental meeting never has a chance to come to fruition online. As the algorithm seeks out trends and predictability by amalgamating data from the dating sites, love becomes commodified. The user's preferences for a mate are laid out in black and white as is their image, as daters are encouraged to upload picture of themselves.

Posting a picture of oneself again promotes self-evaluation of the user's attractiveness in addition to any partner bias their questionnaire may reveal. Feeling more conscious about their physical appearance, their picture choice becomes a snapshot in time which objectifies their looks, placing them on the public stage for evaluation and reviews.³⁶ All is riding on the response to their profile picture. The picture chosen contributes to the attention the dating profile will garner, serving as the symbol of the user to tell their story in a glance.

This stratagem is illustrated by Wilde, as the important use of representation is paramount to maintain Dorian's social station and allow him to traverse seamlessly within the class system. When all his imperfections, insincerities, and insensibilities are distilled away from his pristine

³⁴ Varsava, *Cultural Critique*, 168.

³⁵ https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/library/01/6/1_016_08.html

³⁶ Varsava, *Cultural Critique*, 168.

persona, he continues to navigate within his culture for years with absolute freedom. Like Dorian, the uploaded picture must both sell and maintain the image that the profile represents to entice prospective daters who navigate the dating site.

Once the profile is complete all daters on the site are free to view other profiles and contact them. By eliminating face-to-face interactions with a potential date through an online request, the fear of rejection is lessened because of the anonymity provided by the social platform. If a person does not receive a response in return, there is no stigma because the dater maintains their privacy.³⁷ This anonymity reduces social, emotional, and psychological risks offline daters encounter if the person they are interested in does not reciprocate interest.

Anonymity also introduces the question of authenticity in the social matchups. The search for intimacy with others requires legitimacy which is reciprocal in the relationship. Digital media is only as accurate as the author of the script, whether it is a post on Instagram, Facebook, X, or a social profile on a dating app. Unfortunately, the insular construct of the dating apps has been described by young adults as “bringing out the worst in people”, not only in dating prospects, but themselves.³⁸ Being treated rudely, disrespected, and ignored is a two-way street. Users report they have experienced this behavior and acknowledge they are more comfortable treating others poorly online as opposed to an offline encounter.

Wilde presents a perfect example of what happens in a relationship that is disingenuous. The mistreatment of romantic partners in the realm of courting could not be better illustrated than the ill-fated romance of Dorian Gray and Sybil Vane. Sybil’s personality reflects Dorian at the beginning of the story because she is innocent and naïve until their entanglement evolves.

³⁷ Derek A. Kreager, “Where Have All the Good Men Gone?,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 76, no.2 (2014): 388.

³⁸ Dalessandro, *Sociological Perspectives*, 633.

Accepting his marriage proposal without even knowing his name, and referring to Dorian as “Prince Charming,” places a lens on the superficiality of their relationship.³⁹ Sybil elevates Dorian to hero status when naming him after the character who saves her during her stage performances. She places him in an alternate reality, expecting him to save her from her difficult, low-class existence. Accepting him at face value, never delving beyond his pretty face and expensive clothes, Sybil is marrying his image and social station. Her beauty and guilelessness facilitate her art on stage which holds Dorian in rapture of her but does not serve her well in life.

Sybil’s portrayal of different characters champions her art of imitation which Dorian covets. Her ability to sell lies by concealing herself behind a mask and costuming mesmerize the audience and Dorian into believe she is the character she plays during the performance. Sybil’s abilities grant her anonymity because of her prowess to shape-shift into different roles so believably. Dorian craves her acumen to costume and emulate new persona, and he is in love with her talents and not her. When describing her to Henry and Basil he says,

When she came in her boy’s clothes she was perfectly wonderful. She wore a moss-coloured velvet jerkin with cinnamon sleeves, slim brown cross-gartered hose, a dainty little green cap with a hawk’s feather caught in a jewel, and a hooded cloak lined with dull red. She had never seemed to me more exquisite.⁴⁰

Her acting is the living breathing embodiment of masquerade, which is what draws Dorian to Sybil and is what he cannot resist. It is peculiar how detailed Dorian describes Sybil on stage, dissecting layer upon layer of her costume, which hides the real Sybil and transforms her into someone else. When Sybil’s love for Dorian intrudes on her desire to act, she decides to give up her craft to marry him. Sybil’s choice to leave the stage destroys the very thing attracting Dorian

³⁹ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

to her, her art of imitation. When Dorian must face the authentic Sybil, who is no longer a facsimile of someone else, her desirability is extinguished in his eyes.

With the relationship having no emotional, psychological, or spiritual foundation Dorian breaks off the engagement, finding Sybil a tremendous disappointment and empty shell without her personifying art. He tells her,

You are nothing to me now. I will never see you again. I will never think of you. I will never mention your name. You don't know what you were to me, once. Why...Oh, I can't bear to think of it! I wish I had never laid eyes upon you! You have spoiled the romance of my life. How little you can know of love, if you say it mars your art! Without your art you are nothing.⁴¹

Sybil is devastated by his savage spurning and ends her life. Illuminated by Dorian's cruelty and rejection of her as a person, she realizes in Dorian's eyes, she is less real than her acting roles, and her reality is emptiness. Dorian reacts to her death with indifference and attends the opera with Lord Henry, treating Sybil's suicide as if it were another stage performance. Henry speaks of Sybil's death by telling Dorian, "The girl never really lived, so she never really died...Don't waste your tears over Sybil Vane. She was less real than they are."⁴² To Dorian, Sybil is unreal in death as she was in life and on stage. She is nothing more than a specter to him. His emotional absence transforms him more and more into an inanimate object as his portrait continues to curate his actions and sins onto itself.

Dorian is disconnected from the tragedy of Sybil's death and his leverage with her decision. His indifference toward her and his unfeeling behavior after she commits suicide is reflected today with the absence of accountability within a person's self-image. Distancing oneself from hardship and tragedy removes the capacity to relate to the suffering person, and results in emotional detachment. Much like Dorian, who is devoid of emotion, this same attitude

⁴¹ Ibid., 100.

⁴² Ibid., 117.

has evolved within the dating profile culture and is noted to bring out uncaring and indifference in how users treat others on the platform.

Emotional detachment is a prevailing phenomenon which often transfers into the search for a match on a dating site. The purpose of dating platforms to cast a wide net and draw in a vast number of potential partners also provides too many choices for the dating app user. Online profiles are digital applications, not people. When users separate the profile from the person behind the screen, they treat the profiler as an inanimate object and deny the owner any human qualities. Ignoring that the profile is only a representation of a living, feeling person, users are oblivious to how they mistreat others.

The barrier facilitates the lack of personal interaction at this point in the process, producing a sterile environment for the shoppers. Because of the vast availability of potential matches the users have developed a shopper's mentality when reviewing the social profiles. If there is the least bit of dissonance with what the user is looking for in the profile, they simply can, and do, click to the next one.⁴³ As the profilers' value is reduced by these rejections their self-image erodes. Because the shoppers know there are essentially an unlimited pool of prospects, they pass up more available partners than if they had fewer options. The user may not be self-aware enough to recognize their own attitude when they click onto the next profile at the least provocation. Many users lament there is too much choice on the dating sites, as they search for perfection. The heart is more open-minded when it has fewer people to choose from.⁴⁴

The removal of personal engagement provides a psychological wall between those reaching out and the author of the profile. This segregated effect encourages lying, cheating and

⁴³ Arthur Aron, "Commentary: Online Dating: The Current Status—and Beyond," *Psychological Science and in the Public Interest* 13, no. 1 (2012): 1.

⁴⁴ Van Der Linden, "Shopping for Love," *Scientific American Mind* 23, no. 1 (2012): 18.

rudeness, as it also facilitates hiding truth about the individuals and their relationships. Daters shared they experienced these negative behaviors and found themselves in turn treating others poorly while online, when they would never act out in the same manner toward anyone in person.⁴⁵ A by-product of the social detachment is the anonymity afforded the users of the sites.

It is much easier to lash out at someone when you do not have to look them in the eye and witness their emotions and reactions to what you expressed. Much like Dorian enjoys a lack of accountability for his behavior and treatment of others, digital media users experience similar protection as their social profile assures there is a barrier between their (mis)behavior and the profile author. The removal of ownership for individuals has developed a power shift within Western culture. The agency of mass media broadcasting is now competing with individual social media influence within communities. The powerful connective tissue which binds communities together links likeminded individuals with their peers and has provided the freedom to decide what information is newsworthy. As information is disseminated without following any journalistic standards that have historically been adhered to, the epidemic spread of news can weaken established organizations and reduce the integrity of long-established forms of mass media communication.⁴⁶

Traditional news sharing via television and radio now must compete with TikTok, X, and streaming channels. The opportunity to network via social media has provided a voice to underrepresented stakeholders. Finding likeminded peers empowers the user to be a gatekeeper of information sharing and feel supported in doing so. A herd mentality becomes energized as support within the group promotes emotional contagion.⁴⁷ This new method of communication

⁴⁵ Dalessandro, *Sociological Perspectives*, 635.

⁴⁶ Roese, *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm*, 315.

⁴⁷ Daniel Miller, "Does Social Media Make People Happier" in *How the World Changed Social Media* (UCL Press, 2016), 195.

has seen a rise in selective engagement within communities. When personal accountability is absent, and the power to spread information is exponential, problems establish themselves. Notably, organizations have witnessed an increase of division within, as sub-groups have formed and caused splintering within the established archetype.⁴⁸ Digital media's ability to expand the reach of connectivity has shuffled and reorganized group dynamics in the Western culture.

The influential social media tool has allowed all people the agency to not only utilize the scope and unprecedented speed for information sharing, but to reinvent themselves as the media. The double-edged sword of this opportunity has witnessed the spread of both gossip and misinformation, often with destructive results.⁴⁹ Criticisms, sarcasm, and insensitive comments have increased in digital media interchange within peer groups, influencing both social structures and social learning. These behaviors are an antecedent to the resulting new phenomenon of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is fueled by aggressive behavior and capitalizes on an imbalance of power between users.⁵⁰ Bullying exists in society as certain individuals resort to offensive, hostile, and at times physical aggression toward others to establish and maintain domination within their peer group. Bullying has existed since the start of civilization. It is significant that cyberbullying is not limited to children and adolescence. It is well established within adult social and employment environments, crossing age, sociodemographic, and gender lines. A consistent trend suggests bullying is more likely to occur online than offline, because digital media has afforded ease to execute the aggression and an unlimited pool of victims in our global contact list. Empowered

⁴⁸ Christian Fieseler and Matthes Fleck, "The Pursuit of Empowerment Through Social Media: Structural Social Capital Dynamics in CSR-Blogging," *Springer* 118, no.4 (2013): 759, 760.

⁴⁹ Roese, *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm*, 315.

⁵⁰ Paul Benjamin Lowry, Jun Zhang, Chung Wang and Mikko Siponen, "Why Do Adults Engage in Cyberbullying on Social Media? An Integration of Online Disinhibition and Deindividuation Effects With the Social Structure and Social Learning," *Information Systems Research* 27, no. 4 (2016): 964.

and protected by the ability to disparage another person whom they do not have to face, the bullies are successful in intimidating and denigrating others.

The digital platform ensures a protected environment for the bully. It provides him/her agency to publicize disparaging and slanderous posts with the assurance their identities will not be revealed. The cyberbullies also rely on the ability to publish their messages online without any witnesses to their aggressive behavior.⁵¹ The fear their reputation will be tarnished with their meanspirited, disrespectful or dishonest treatment of the victim is lessened or nonexistent. They are removed from others in their peer group or random people to witness the exchange. This has encouraged individuals to act inappropriately without consequence. Their responsibility for their destructive behavior is diffused because of their unclear identification within the online group. This cushion of anonymity contributes to the bully's skewed social learning, disallowing their ability to stop their behavior before "crossing the line".⁵²

The psychological and emotional damage caused to the victim of cyber bullying is pervasive because of the far reach digital media provides and the speed with which the insult or disparaging statement spreads. It is almost incalculable to gauge the number of witnesses, scale, and scope of the incident. An offline exchange will end, whereas an online exchange can be viewed repeatedly, shared, and liked by an untold number of online readers into perpetuity. Every time someone in the audience clicks on, or likes the post, the victim is attacked again, and the bully is validated.⁵³ The victims carefully crafted digital image is now discredited, and their authenticity is undermined. The anonymity afforded by digital media suggests a distorted social learning process for both the bully and the victim. Because the bully receives no negative

⁵¹ Ibid., 970.

⁵² Ibid., 963.

⁵³ Roese, *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm*, 315.

consequence for their inappropriate behavior, there is no deterrent. As the victim's image is presented to the public through the lens of the bully's injurious post, they have feelings of hopelessness and injustice due to the overwhelming reach of the internet, and their inability to correct the misrepresentation of themselves.⁵⁴ The insular field of digital media provides anonymity to both the bully and all online actors who capitalize on the mechanism of image crafting in their social profile. Not getting caught is a thrilling motivator and diminishes the compassion a person extends to another which monitors and modifies aggression.

The ability to maintain anonymity is what emancipates Dorian to continue his hedonistic lifestyle. After Sybil's death, Dorian spends years living a sexually promiscuous life, visiting opium dens, and generally scandalizing his peer group, culminating in the murder of his friend Basil.⁵⁵ Dorian is not only empowered to live a degenerate life but thrives on the fact that his picture's animation keeps his looks spotless. Wilde writes,

He would never again tempt by a prayer any terrible power. If the picture was to alter, it was to alter...For there would be a real pleasure in watching it. He would be able to follow his mind into its secret places. This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul...What did it matter what happened to the coloured image on the canvas? He would be safe. That was everything.⁵⁶

The stability of Dorian's physical appearance affords him anonymity in the world at large. Hiding behind the safety of his duplicitous existence is the keystone of his lifestyle. The people within his social group who collude with his sins are the victims of the power disparity between them. Though Dorian leads a despicable life, his portrait provides his cover story for the public.

⁵⁴ Lowry, *Information Systems Research*, 963.

⁵⁵ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 206.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

His friends and peers do not enjoy the same advantage. Dorian knows he can dominate them with the threat of disclosing their corruption within their social circle.

One unfortunate victim of this power differential is Alan Campbell. Campbell is a chemist by trade and Dorian coerces him to use chemistry to dispose of Basil's body decomposing in his old school room next to his hideous portrait. Campbell refuses to get involved until Dorian forces him to comply by threatening to divulge past indiscretions. Wilde does not share any details about what they did, though it is implied Dorian has homosexual tendencies. Campbell's secrets are not revealed, and his fear they will be made public gives Dorian the leverage to bully Campbell into using his scientific skills to cover-up the crime. Dorian extorts cooperation from Campbell and forces him to comply against his wishes. After Campbell destroys Basil's corpse, he then commits suicide... this makes two.⁵⁷

The complicity of Dorian in the deaths of Sybil Vain and Alan Campbell are a trope Wilde explores. Though these two died by their own hand, Dorian's treatment of them drove both to such depths of desperation, he may have physically killed them himself. When Dorian broke the engagement with Sybil, he killed her by leaving her. He left her open to profound embarrassment inside their social circle and the public writ large. Sybil was humiliated among the elite society she expected to become a part of by marrying Dorian. As a celebrity within the theater circle, losing a catch like Dorian would trigger rumors and speculation about her. This situation is exasperated because Sybil quit acting to become Mrs. Gray. When Dorian broke off their relationship, Sybil was left with no husband, no job, and no self-worth.

Dorian is equally responsible for the suicide of Alan Campbell. He uses their past indiscretions as his linchpin to exert power over him. Discretion and loyalty are an assumed bond

⁵⁷ Ibid., 234.

within a friendship, and Dorian displays neither toward Campbell. Rather, Dorian exploits their relationship and pressures him to eliminate the evidence from the murder he committed.

Campbell experiences overwhelming psychological stress. He cannot live with the memory of destroying Basil corpse, nor is he willing live with Dorian dominating him the rest of his life by threatening to reveal his secrets. Destroying the evidence of Dorian's crime only adds to the arsenal of secrets he weaponizes against Campbell. Refusing to risk his reputation, he takes back his power from Dorian the only way he can.

The ability of Dorian's picture to mask his despicable lifestyle choices enables him to continue more and more sinful behaviors as he watches his soul devolve through the lens of the canvas. The picture no longer reveals what Dorian looks like, but what Dorian has become. The psychological shift in Dorian is evident as his life spirals out of control. When his picture first begins to display his sins, Dorian hides it behind a funeral pall and moves it into the deepest recesses of his house. This is his homage to the death of his soul as he ritually buries the picture.

With time, he no longer fears witnessing the destruction of his soul. He becomes fascinated with his power to do so and relishes watching the picture grow increasingly grotesque and obscene. The uglier the picture becomes the more it thrills Dorian. This is a pivotal moment in the story as Dorian has now emotionally dissected himself from his soul. His ability to function without reprisals allows him the greatest form of hubris. Dorian is so self-centered he feels immune to any accountability. The power over others which Dorian exploits is intoxicating, and today we see this power fully insinuated within the social platforms most people use in their everyday lives.

Some people abuse the anonymity provided by social media to mistreat and dominate others. Most people self-aggrandize and over inflate their assets when creating their social

profile. The creation of a self-image is a combination of face-value elements enveloped in veils. The design of an image is not a new concept of twentieth century America nor of Western culture. The importance of image transcends time. It is prevalent and fully insinuated within today's culture as it was the basis of Oscar Wilde's multi-layered story about how manipulative a person's image can be. In 2010 photographer Rineke Dijkstra shares his observation,

It has only been five years or so that I have noticed that people, and young people in particular, seem to have two faces: a private face that reveals how they really feel, and a public face, which they use to present themselves to the outside world and bring to perfection on YouTube and Facebook. Only it seems like this public face is becoming increasingly important, as if putting it on has become an instinct; almost like an evolutionary development that enables people to survive in today's society.⁵⁸

What influences the foundation of a person's self-worth is almost unrecognizable from the cultural architect which constructed our parents and grandparent's characters. Face to face conversations, spending physical time together, religious worship, entertainment events, and community work created the collective footing for how we socially interacted, our mating rituals and our conception of beauty. Personal interactions, learning manners and social poise bolstered a person's self-image by nurturing confidence they could navigate gracefully within their culture. Society shifted from the cultural paradigm whose tenet was responsibility for one's actions, and working for the greater good of all, to a feeling of well-being in the 1980's. In tandem we experienced unprecedented technological changes which altered interactions between people and our environment creating a non-physical digital world.

A herd mentality has developed regarding the use of digital media to form and maintain relationships. Social media posts showing well dressed people enjoying incredible scenic vacations encourages friends and followers to attain the same material items, experiences, and

⁵⁸ Valkenburg, *Plugged In How Media Attract and Affect Youth*, 218.

social attention. A negative by-product of these posts can cause self-disdain as followers judge themselves when there is a shortfall in acquiring the same creature comforts advertised on social media. Tremendous pressure to keep up within your peer group leads to competition and the stress to never fall behind within your social and economic sphere.

Some followers feel this same pressure to stay in step with their peer groups, not for acquiring superficial items, but for parity in their emotional and social aspect of their lives. Postings of graduations, perfect family photographs, memes of newly married couples, and announcements of newborn babies, add tremendous pressure on the people who have not reached their personal goals set on the timeline they have created. Viewing a curated snapshot of the happiest event on a person's social media platform directs the viewer to what, and how they should regard the author, contrasting the post with their own achievements. If the user is not equal to, or greater than the person in the post, the user's self-image can deflate causing disappointment and envy. Perspective on the posts varies and is relative to the user's ability to understand that the post is crafted specifically for public consumption. Like Sybil Vain's stage performances, the posts are a modern form of theater.

Contemporary cultural trends appear to have fractured from our past paradigms of right and wrong, honesty and falsehood, sincerity and disingenuousness. All people are multi-faceted and adhere to social etiquette at various degrees when revealing their feelings to public view. With the introduction of digital media into our lives there is an unmistakable dividing line in our culture as we redefine our lives in a non-physical world.

These technological gains have brought tremendous resources into the workplace, social life, and the home. Global access, information retrieval, and quick communication are some examples of the positive outcomes digital media has produced in our lives. Newton states, "For

every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction”.⁵⁹ As emails and texts have insinuated themselves as a dominant way to communicate, many youths contend that technology has “corrupted” intimate bonds. They often lament the predominance of the digital platforms as the expected means to communicate. Many youths wish their culture was more organic like their parents and grandparents who met in person and worked toward compromise to make the relationship last. The more digital media has insinuated itself in their lives the more personal, face to face conversations have become increasingly uncomfortable, making people feel “weird”. The result is manifested in conformity, where most folks now communicate on some digital platform despite their preference not to. Inter-personal communication is stunted and has been reinvented within the insular world of digital media. The art of conversation is vanishing before our eyes.⁶⁰

The commodification of feelings and the objectifying of people has developed as social profiles have evolved. Online dating is discordant with the notion of love and vulnerability. Dating sites have taken control of the concept, using algorithms and filters to steer the encounters, turning love and romance into a multi-billion-dollar industry. With user’s believing their perfect mate is just one click away, online daters continue to view social profiles with a shopper’s mentality, reflecting the Western capitalist ethos of attaining more and better. As user’s click to the next profile, they dissect the image on the screen from the living, breathing, feeling person who authored it, with dehumanizing results.

As isolation increases within our culture, anonymity has been embraced as an unspoken by-product of digital media. It has contributed to a shift in the Western cultural paradigm, removing the users from any responsibility for their choices and actions. It can serve as a balm

⁵⁹ <https://www.physicsclassroom.com/class/newtlaws/Lesson-4/Newton-s-Third-Law>

⁶⁰ Dalessandro, *Sociological Perspectives*, 635

for users with a bruised ego, providing a shield to protect them by masking their feelings of rejection. By not owning responsibility for their behavior, anonymity is also the mechanism which empowers folks to be aggressive, hurtful, and disingenuous. Bad behaviors and treatment of others in offensive and disrespectful ways has sadly insinuated itself in our cultural narrative. Digital media users admit they often engage in mistreating other online users when they would never act out the same way in a face-to-face encounter.

Some of these exchanges are the perfect crime. There is no fear of getting caught or experiencing any reprisals. Anonymity empowers a person's self-image, supporting what Betsworth and Chafe explained as the growth of conformity and well-being. People channel their time and resources to benefit themselves and not the community at large. Digital media has allowed folks to refine their image at any cost, even at the cost of others as collateral damage.

The profile reveals much about the artist behind its creation. The events and information chosen for the social profile divulges the authors self-awareness and directs how they want the world to perceive them. There is art in the creation of the profile to achieve the best outcome. This is the goal that drives tailoring a social profile to receive positive feedback. The choice of pictures and events published are a means to an end. Contributing to self-image, folks now must objectify and commodify themselves to create a profile to engage on any digital platform. Their "image" is a facsimile of the author behind the screen, whose emotions, dreams, and feelings can only be captured within a typed script and a snapshot of themselves. They are removed and insulated by the screen of their anonymity.

Wilde based his story on this perception, and it has transcended time to the present day. Acquiring superficial qualities like beauty has now become the medium of exchange as a cultural paradigm. Its pursuit justifies dishonesty and a misguided idea of what affords a person's value.

The preservation of Dorian's image became his obsession as the corruption of his portrait becomes his addiction. Digital media has become an addiction as well. Is this addiction fueled by our cultural fear of aging? Has society evolved past Dorian's need to stay young forever or are we addicted to the power digital media affords us with the scope to reach individuals globally? What cultural tensions have manifested in our intimate life because of the rapid technological changes? The power to disseminate news as an individual allows us now to usurp the power from the megaliths of information sharing society has always relied on. This has brought tremendous agency to the individual, but has it brought restraint and ethics with it, and developed a principal code to govern it? The reflection of Dorian's perfect beauty in his picture also becomes a reflection of his soul and serves as his symbolic mirror. The image of Dorian and its purpose to reflect his image contrasts his enduring physical beauty and reveals his progressive destruction and devolvement to ugliness.⁶¹ Social media has animated what Oscar Wilde imagined over 130 years ago. Beware of all the Dorian Grays who walk among us.

⁶¹ Craft, *Representations*, 109.

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