Lying as a Sign of Individual Evil in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
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Abstract
Prior to M. Scott Peck’s *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (1983), the diagnosis of evil had never entered the psychiatric lexicon. In this volume, the then practicing psychiatrist proposes the radical notion that, despite their disparate natures, science and theology could inform one another, could both illuminate the same question. To allow for this designation within the medical sphere, Dr. Peck’s case histories illustrate the salient characteristics of individual and group evil, though he stops short of naming them. Based upon his clinical findings and corroborated by copious ancillary materials, I identify the signs of both phenomena. For the purposes of this inquiry, only the eight cardinal aspects of individual evil require referencing: victimization of body and/or spirit, failure to recognize the separateness of others, depersonalization of others, unmitigated narcissism, the unsubordinated use of power, scapegoating, lying, and the total inability to tolerate legitimate criticism.

Though not every evil person necessarily exhibits all eight of these characteristics, all such individuals lie. Without exception. Dr. Peck could not have chosen a more appropriate title for his treatise. These individuals, either in word or deed or both, attempt to hide something. They willfully dissemble and repeatedly so. While analyzing Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), this essay will elucidate Dorian’s incessant efforts to deceive others about the state of his soul in the hopes of maintaining a positive self-image vis-à-vis society. When viewing his lies as a continuum, a triple-faceted and striking progression (or more accurately regression) reveals itself. 1. At critical junctures, the young nobleman makes the decision to continue along this path of deception. Dorian doesn’t fall into evil without his cooperation. No one ever does. Over and over again he elects not to mend his ways. 2. As the lies accumulate so does the gravity of their consequences, until these can no longer be reversed. 3. Simultaneously Dorian’s mental state deteriorates; he begins with suspicion and progresses to fear and then terror, then madness, until the self splits and even he realizes that he leads a double life. Yet he considers himself powerless to reverse or cease his fall from grace. Initially he wishes to exercise absolute control over his own fate, in other words, to be free at all costs. Gradually and inexorably he becomes driven. The supposed master evolves into the slave. Therein lies one of the paradoxes of evil.

Introduction
Prior to M. Scott Peck’s *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (1983), the diagnosis of evil had never entered the psychiatric lexicon. In his volume, the then practicing psychiatrist proposes the radical notion that, despite their disparate natures, science and theology could complement each other while illuminating the same question. To allow for this designation

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within the medical sphere, Dr. Peck’s case histories illustrate the salient characteristics of individual as well as group evil, though he stops short of defining either phenomenon. For the purposes of this essay, our focus concerns only the signs of individual evil. Drawing upon his clinical findings and corroborated by copious amounts of multi-disciplinary materials, in my book-length study from which this excerpt is taken, I identify the eight signs of individual evil: victimization of body and/or spirit, failure to recognize the separateness of others, their depersonalization, unmitigated narcissism, the unsubordinated use of power, scapegoating, lying, and the total inability to tolerate legitimate criticism.

Lying, the seventh of the eight characteristics, as exemplified in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) now captures our attention.

At the risk of trying the patience of those only too familiar with the narrative, suffice it so say that Wilde tells the story of an English nobleman accorded the tandem privileges of wealth and good looks. Upon the completion of his resplendent full-length portrait, Dorian utters a fateful wish. It is granted. While the canvas records not only the ravages of time, but also those of his increasingly serious transgressions, he continues to appear young as well as unsullied.

Before delving into the inquiry proper, we should note that though the evil individuals encountered in our every-day lives do not necessarily manifest all eight characteristics, all of them lie. There are no exceptions. Dr. Peck chose the title of his treatise well: *People of the Lie*. All of them will attempt to hide their proclivities not only from others, but also and primarily from themselves. Dorian Gray proves a grand master of deception. His lies are so numerous and so diverse that without exaggeration one can speak of an ever so skillfully woven tapestry of lies.

When viewing the nobleman’s lies as a continuum, a triple-faceted and striking progression (or more accurately regression) reveals itself. 1. At critical junctures, Dorian Gray makes the decision to continue along this path of deception. He doesn’t fall into evil without his cooperation. No one ever does. Over and over again he elects not to mend his ways. 2. As the lies accumulate so does the gravity of their consequences, until these can no longer be reversed. 3. Simultaneously Dorian’s mental state deteriorates; he begins with suspicion and progresses to fear and then terror, then madness, until the self splits and even he acknowledges that he leads a double life. Yet he considers himself powerless to reverse or cease his fall from grace. Initially he wishes to exercise absolute control over his own fate, in other words, to be free at all costs. Gradually, inexorably he becomes driven. The supposed sovereign evolves into the slave. Therein lies one of the paradoxes of evil.

Let me begin with the most obvious type of prevarication. Dorian verbalizes something in order to deceive the listener. After Sybil’s suicide, Basil visits Dorian with the intent of sharing, in what the artist presumes will be, his friend’s grief following his fiancée’s death. Instead, the young dandy harbors no lasting regrets. But he does notice the change in the canvas and pulls a screen in front of it. When Basil voices his justifiable outrage and stunned disbelief at such an insult to his exceptional artistic skills, Dorian explains his motivation: “The light was too strong...”

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on the portrait.’” (88) Dorian knows unequivocally that the screen’s primary function serves to hide the alteration of the picture. Consequently, this facile statement conforms perfectly to Sissela Bok’s definition of lying. “When we undertake to deceive others, we communicate messages meant to mislead them, to make them believe what we ourselves do not believe.”

A short time later, Dorian calls for Mr. Hubbard, a renowned London frame-maker, to move the portrait from the library to Dorian’s former play-and subsequent schoolroom at the top of his residence. During this transaction, he lies twice. Hubbard assures the nobleman that he and his assistant will eagerly perform any service requested of them. In response, Dorian inquires in the most polite of tones, if the inordinately heavy object could be carried upstairs without removing its elaborate covering. He justifies his request with what appears a rather reasonable explanation, even if it is a lie: “I don’t want it to get scratched going upstairs.” (94) The arduous task accomplished at last, Hubbard naturally enough requests to see the picture. Given the efforts he expended, he would seem to have earned a glimpse. Dorian’s answer proves as deft as it is misleading: “It would not interest you, Mr. Hubbard.” (96) Of course, the subject of the painting would interest the accommodating tradesman; he had just asked to look at it.

Basil plans to leave for Paris on the midnight train and intends to visit with his long-time friend before departing. The two men have known each other for almost two decades; on the morrow Dorian will celebrate his 38th birthday. In early November around eleven at night, London’s weather confirms its reputation; damp and cold, thick fog hampers visibility. Nevertheless, Dorian does acknowledge, at least to himself, that he recognizes Basil as the artist leaves the nobleman’s home after waiting there for several hours. Hallward also recognizes his friend, turns and follows him. Basil’s detailed explanation, concerning his lengthy wait and his immediate travel plans, culminate in a single question: “Didn’t you recognize me?” (115) Dorian does not wish to converse with Basil, and lies permeate virtually every line of his nuanced reply. “In this fog, my dear Basil? Why, I can’t even recognize Grosvenor Square. I believe my house is somewhere about here, but I don’t feel at all certain about it. I am sorry you are going away, as I have not seen you for ages.” (115)

With the exception of the final clause, all of Dorian’s statements qualify as lies. Basil takes his friend’s assurances literally, however, and asks for a brief word. As Dorian does not have the slightest inclination to speak to Basil, he says just the opposite of what he means and, in addition, feigns concern for the artist’s situation: “I shall be charmed. But won’t you miss your train?” (115)

During their rather one-sided discourse, amidst all the queries as well as the accusations Basil levels against Dorian, yet another type of lie comes to the fore. Basil wonders, whether the rumors could possibly be true that his friend has been seen “slinking in disguise into the foulest dens in London.” (118) The verbal lie gains dimension, as it were, and graduates into a situational one. Disguising himself constitutes the first time he reaches for the situational lie. It will only prove the first of many.

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Later that same evening, Dorian murders Basil. In the midst of devising a strategy to dispose of Basil’s remains and thereby create the illusion that the painter is still alive (161), Dorian fosters yet a second duplicitous situation. Both are meant to serve as an alibi for murder. Only too aware of the legal consequences of his act, he understandably fears for his life. “Every year—every month, almost—men were strangled in England for what he had done.” (124) Dressed for the inclement weather, he exits his residence after midnight and promptly summons his valet to the door with the pretext that he neglected to take his key the previous evening. He initiates the exchange with the valet in once again pretending to commiserate: “‘I am sorry to have had to wake you up, Francis,’ he said stepping in; ‘but I had forgotten my latch-key.’” (125) Should the authorities ever be motivated to ask—Dorian notices the policeman patrolling the neighborhood—, he asks his drowsy servant to verify the hour, when he allegedly returns home. He layers lie upon lie; he also queries Francis, if there had been any visitors in the course of the evening. Then he expresses his dismay that he did not have the opportunity to visit with Basil. As a final insult to his valet’s acquiescent nature, Dorian asks if Basil perhaps left a message. Francis dutifully replies: “‘No, sir, except that he would write to you from Paris, if he did not find you in the club.’” (125) No doubt, those words do constitute Basil’s promise. All else qualifies as lies. Dorian continues weaving his tapestry of deceit ever so skillfully and includes the devoted Francis in his schemes. The incisive words of P.D. James ring true and as a master of detective fiction, she ought to know: “murder is a contaminating crime which changes all those who come into touch with it…”

But even these elaborate measures would not seem to be enough to cover Dorian’s murderous tracks. At a dinner on the day after Basil’s murder, Lord Henry chides Dorian for leaving the festivities too early the previous evening. (He left at eleven.) When asked outright, if he then proceeded to the club, Dorian first affirms, then denies doing so. To defend himself in view of Henry’s incessant questioning he finally relates all of the details of the contrived situation with Francis. His somewhat incoherent explanation culminates in an offer, reminiscent of someone testifying on a witness stand: “‘If you want any corroborative evidence on the subject you can ask him.’” (140) Verbal deceit reinforces situational deceit. Though Wilde’s novel furnishes additional examples of Dorian’s lies, only one more bears mentioning.

James Vane believes he knows the identity of his sister’s former suitor and pursues Dorian, finally cornering him in a darkened archway. Revolver in hand, the sailor intends to kill the man he holds responsible for Sybil’s death. “‘Her death is at your door. I swore I would kill you in return....Make your peace with God, for to-night you are going to die.’” (146) Crazed with fear, Dorian first lies in the conventional manner. He promulgates a falsehood and blurts out: “‘I never knew her,’ he stammered. ‘I never heard of her.’” (147) That lame tactic fails to pacify the enraged James Vane. Though visibly terrified, Dorian suddenly devises an escape route and yet again moves ever so rapidly from the verbal to the realm of the situational lie. His youthful face will speak for him, will lie for him. Dorian asks James how many years ago, his sister committed suicide. The sailor answers the question and Dorian replies with a

condescending laugh, while issuing a challenge to James Vane as well as an order: “‘Eighteen years! Set me under the lamp and look at my face!’” (147) Paradoxically light, which normally illuminates and/or clarifies, will in this case obscure the truth.

“Dim and wavering as was the windblown light, yet it served to show him the hideous error, as it seemed, into which he had fallen, for the face of the man he had sought to kill had all the bloom of boyhood, all the unstained purity of youth. He seemed little more than a lad of twenty summers, hardly older, if older indeed at all, than his sister had been when they had parted so many years ago.” (147)

In view of the facts, as presented to him, James can only arrive at a single conclusion. Obviously this man had not ruined his sister’s life. (147) Deeply shaken, he staggers away extending an apology and regretting the irreversible mistake he might have made.

Returning for a moment to the topic of light, once again it may be wise to recall one of Scott Peck’s reflections. To escape death at the hands of Sybil’s brother, Dorian chooses a methodology evil individuals usually avoid precisely because they wish to protect themselves. “The evil hate the light—the light of goodness that shows them up, the light of scrutiny that exposes them, the light of truth that penetrates their deception.” 5 But the light from the streetlamp cannot fulfill its usual function, cannot expose Dorian for who he is, for his face has evolved into a lie. It is only the face on the canvas, which reveals the truth about the state of his soul, the truth about his contribution to Sybil’s suicide and all of his subsequent transgressions. It is also Basil’s depiction of Dorian’s face and its undeniable message, which now concern us.

Before continuing these inquiries, it should be noted that all the lies either verbal or situational Dorian conceives, refer either to Basil Hallward’s artistic rendering of Dorian or to the man himself, either to the face on the canvas or Dorian’s face. But in either case, all lies serve but a single purpose: to hide the Englishman’s deteriorating morals, to preserve his pristine image vis-à-vis himself as well as others, to save the self, to save the self from reproach. Or in Scott Peck’s words: “Utterly dedicated to preserving their self-image of perfection, they [the evil] are unceasingly engaged in the effort to maintain the appearance of moral purity.” 6 And once more, the then practicing psychiatrist emphasizes the relentless energy of those he considers evil. “They are not pain avoiders or lazy people in general. To the contrary, they are likely to exert themselves more than most in the continuing effort to obtain and maintain an image of high respectability.” 7 The following examples should confirm the accuracy of these clinical observations.

Only a month has passed since the portrait’s completion and the utterance of Dorian’s wish. But the canvas already shows the first sign of aberrant behavior documenting his precipitous and crushing rejection of Sybil Vane: “the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth.” (72) The moment he arises from the chair, in which he has been pondering the realization that his wish might indeed have been fulfilled, Dorian attempts to shield the picture

5. Peck, p. 77.
6. Ibid., p. 75.
7. Ibid., p. 77.
from view. He “drew a large screen right in front of the portrait…. ” (74) As he is alone in his
library, he can only be hiding the evidence of his demeaning insight from himself. Nevertheless, Dorian does so quickly and decisively. Yet another of Peck’s incisive comments seems pertinent: “the lie is designed not so much to deceive others as to deceive themselves. They [evil individuals] cannot or will not tolerate the pain of self-reproach…. Some rudimentary form of conscience must precede the act of lying. There is no need to hide unless we first feel that something needs to be hidden.”\(^8\)

Dorian now knows that something needs to be hidden. The portrait bears witness to his sins and that undeniable fact must be concealed not only from himself, but also from others. He wonders what might happen, if someone else were to see the changed portrait. His response is straightforward. He locks both library doors. (76) In order to study the portrait at close range, Dorian removes the screen temporarily (76), only to replace it, (77) when he realizes that he must allow Lord Henry to enter. The elder man knocks furiously for some moments. After his solitary reflections as well as his exchanges with Henry Wotton, which include some half-hearted regrets, some promises to change for the better, some weighing of his options, Dorian makes a second major decision; he reinforces the wish made only a month earlier.

“And, yet, who, that knew anything about Life, would surrender the chance of remaining always young, however fantastic that chance might be, or with what fateful consequences it might be fraught? Besides, was it really under his control? Had it indeed been prayer that had produced the substitution? … But the reason was of no importance…. If the picture was to alter, it was to alter. That was all.” (84)

In the next breath, he verbalizes for the first time the fusion of two central concepts: the continual desecration of the portrait, which automatically presumes it must be hidden, and his self-preservation. “What did it matter what happened to the coloured image on the canvas? He would be safe. That was everything.” (84) To underscore the force of his double-pronged intention: “He drew the screen back into its former place in front of the picture…” (84)

The next morning, the morning after Sybil’s death, Basil Hallward pays his friend a visit and not unexpectedly inquires as to why a screen obscures his acknowledged masterpiece. “‘Where is it? Why have you pulled the screen in front of it? Let me look at it.’” (87) When Basil asks once more to see his creation, Dorian again refuses. “A cry of terror broke from Dorian Gray’s lips, and he rushed between the painter and screen.” (88) Though he cannot fathom his friend’s negative response to this simple request, Basil harbors no doubt that Dorian’s anger exceeds all reasonable limits. “The lad was actually pallid with rage. His hands were clenched, and the pupils of his eyes were like disks of blue fire. He was trembling all over.” (88) When the artist blithely assumes (contrary to a decision, he had made earlier) that this particular portrait would be included in an upcoming exhibit in Paris, Dorian begins to formulate a countermove to his feeling of terror. “Was the world going to be shown his secret? Were people to gape at the mystery of his life? That was impossible. Something—he did not know what—had to be done at once.” (88) Through some subversive mental maneuvers, Basil, rather than Dorian,
confesses the motivation behind his fascination with the portrait, and gradually Dorian’s fear subsides. “The colour came back to his cheeks, and a smile played about his lips. The peril was over. He was safe for the time.” (90)

Nevertheless, the two visits of Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward, following so closely upon one another, necessitate practical steps to ensure that the danger not only be mitigated, but obliterated. “The portrait must be hidden away at all costs. He could not run such a risk of discovery again. It had been mad of him to have allowed the thing to remain, even for an hour, in a room to which any of his friends had access.” (91) Dorian formulates a concrete plan: as already indicated much earlier in these pages, the picture will be transported from the library to his former play-and schoolroom. The housekeeper produces the key and Dorian places it into his pocket. (92) Given Dorian’s escalating degree of apprehension, it is inconceivable that he will ever return it to Mrs. Leaf. An embroidered coverlet of purple satin—in days gone by it probably functioned as a pall for the deceased—will now cover the portrait as the screen did before. (92)

“Now it was to hide something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself—something that would breed horrors and yet would never die. What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty, and eat away its grace. They would defile it, and make it shameful.” (92-93)

For a moment Dorian regrets not telling Basil the motivation for hiding his masterpiece, but that would have meant that he would have acknowledged his sins. The nobleman realizes fully that Basil has his best interests at heart; not only would the artist have encouraged him to resist Henry’s deleterious suggestions, but also “the still more poisonous influences that came from his own temperament.” (93) And yet Dorian would not or could not resist these destructive promptings. He says so himself: “it was too late now.” (93) His decision is made. “There were passions in him that would find their terrible outlet, dreams that would make the shadow of their evil real.” (93) He reiterates his decision to continue his moral decline and its inevitable consequences multiple times. Repeatedly he arrives at the same conclusion. “The picture had to be concealed.” (95) Again the accuracy of one of Peck’s observations seems to be verified. “The wickedness of the evil is not committed directly, but indirectly as a part of this cover-up process.”

It may be recalled that Mr. Hubbard requests to see the portrait, while relocating it to the old schoolroom; needless to say, the frame-maker’s natural curiosity yet again arouses Dorian’s rabid fear of disclosure. “He felt ready to leap upon him and fling him to the ground if he dared to lift the gorgeous hanging that concealed the secret of his life.” (96) Nevertheless, as soon as the frame-maker and his assistant leave the premises, he regains his composure. “When the sound of their footsteps had died away, Dorian locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.” (96) He concludes the threatening encounter (at least in his eyes it qualifies as such) with a familiar observation: “He felt safe now.” (96)

Shortly after the inquest into Sybil Vane’s death, Henry presents Dorian with a novel, he presumes would fascinate the younger man. “It was the strangest book that he had ever read. It
seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sounds of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him.” (97) Though he declares it a “poisonous book” (98), for the ensuing years, Dorian does not escape its negative effects. “Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it.” (98) On the contrary, he orders nine more copies. These repeated choices, these incessant forays into the realms of evil take their toll upon his emotional and mental equilibrium. More and more often he finds himself at the mercy “of a nature over which he seemed, at times, to have almost entirely lost control.” (98) Can these decisions, therefore, be classified as choices? The degree of freedom seems to be visibly diminishing.

What has not lessened or in any way been affected, however, is the beauty of his face. Those who would speak ill of him “became silent when Dorian Gray entered the room. There was something in the purity of his face that rebuked them.” (99) But, of course, the painting imprisoned in the schoolroom has deteriorated markedly and long ago laid waste both its comeliness and look of innocence. Again and again he returns to the abandoned room and unlocks the door “with the key that never left him now. . . .” (99) Previously it might have been kept elsewhere, perhaps in his private quarters. Now the key feels secure only on his person. That additional protective measure tells us that Dorian’s fear of discovery continues to increase, as the loveliness of face in the portrait continues to deteriorate. And yet another element enters the equation. His fascination grows not only with his own beauty, but also with the ugliness of his soul, as depicted on the canvas. Comparing the two disparate images aids and abets “his sense of pleasure.” (99) That same sense of pleasure drives him on. “The more he knew, the more he desired to know. He had mad hungers that grew more ravenous as he fed them.” (100) He stands on the threshold of addiction. The more profound the addiction, the less the will is able to discern good judgment from bad.

In other words, our ability to make choices, our freedom, varies from one decision to another. We would prefer to think otherwise; we would prefer to regard ourselves as always equally free to do as we might at any given moment. That qualifies as myth, however, for the facts do not support this theory, this assumption, this delusion. Erich Fromm elucidates this process so beautifully, so clearly.

“Each step in life which increases my self-confidence, my integrity, my courage, my conviction also increases my capacity to choose the desirable alternative, until eventually it becomes more difficult for me to choose the undesirable rather the desirable action. On the other hand, each act of surrender and cowardice weakens me, opens the path for more acts of surrender, and eventually freedom is lost. Between the extreme when I can no longer do a wrong act and the other extreme when I have lost my freedom to right action, there are innumerable degrees of freedom of choice. In the practice of life the degree of freedom to choose is different at any given moment.”

The years pass and despite the vast array of treasures in his possession—Dorian collects everything from the profane to the sacred, everything from jewels and embroideries to

ecclesiastical vestments—they do not help him “escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne.” (109) He no longer allows himself to travel abroad, be it to France or northern Africa; rather he elects to remain in England and close to the portrait. He must be able to access it at a moment’s notice. Fear places its paralyzing hand upon him once more. What would happen, if someone else might see the shameful and reprehensible portrait? (110) Simple key entry seems insufficient now to the disheveled schoolroom that encloses his horrible secrets. Bars, placed there at Dorian’s request, protect its entrance. (110) Sometimes while entertaining at his country estate, acute apprehension dictates his behavior and in defiance of all social convention, the nobleman abandons his illustrious guests precipitously. Dorian returns to London “to see that the door had not been tampered with, and that the picture was still there.” Just visualizing what might happen were the canvas to be stolen fills him with palpable horror. (110)

Gradually, inexorably, he seems to be losing more and more control. Unbidden another of Scott Peck’s insights come to mind. Though the psychiatrist agrees that evil persons are to be feared, he also steadfastly maintains something we may never have considered; “they are also to be pitied. Forever fleeing the light of self-exposure and the voice of their own conscience, they are the most frightened of human beings. They live their lives in sheer terror.”11 To punish evil individuals, we may wish to banish them to hell; nevertheless Dr. Peck counsels us not to bother. “They need not be consigned to any hell; they are already in it.”12

Except for those calculated measures enacted to ensure Dorian’s personal safety, extreme anxiety blots out reason the evening Dorian murders Basil. Even before the two old friends greet each other not far from Dorian’s residence, a “strange sense of fear, for which he could not account, came over him.” (115) Upon concluding the lengthy accounting of Dorian’s supposed misdeeds, that Basil finds so thoroughly difficult to believe, he asks himself several questions. Does he know his friend’s character after all? Could Dorian possibly bear the responsibility for the serious transgressions of which he has heard so often? Only seeing his friend’s soul would lend Basil the assurance he so desperately needs. Realizing what Basil’s request presumes, Dorian turns “almost white from fear.” (119)

Though the artist’s justifiable outrage at seeing the desecrated and hideous picture moves Dorian to tears, he does not heed Basil’s repeated pleas to repent. When he is exhorted to look at the results of his consistent dissipation, Dorian forfeits the last vestiges of control over his emotions. “Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips.” (123) The next lines confirm his utter loss of self-control. “The mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him….” (123) Not surprisingly some moments later, Dorian stabs Basil to death. (123) Dorian can now be designated a murderer. The hunter becomes the hunted. Man turns into beast. The handsome

12. Ibid., pp. 67, 125.
sovereign, whose every wish equaled everyone else’s command as Hallward once noted (19), evolves into the rabid slave.

This act, this irreversible act, serves as a turning point. Or as P. D. James concludes: “Murder is the unique crime, the only one for which we can never make reparation to the victim.”13 She continues: “It forces us to confront what we are and what we are capable of being.”14 Indeed, it does. Though he may well desire to be an exception to this, and every other, rule, Dorian Gray is not. From this moment onward, in addition to his unrelenting concern about his safety, three interwoven elements dominate Dorian’s psychic downward spiral. 1. His fear escalates into terror. 2. Addicted to his immoral ways, he feels as though he might be going mad. 3. He senses repeatedly that his freedom is being curtailed; he feels as though rather than being the pursuer, he is being pursued.

Before summoning Alan Campbell the morning after the murder, Dorian remains ever vigilant about his appearance. (126) Despite these feeble diversionary tactics so characteristic of the evil, Dorian cannot help recalling the “blood-stained” (125) events of the previous night. “He felt that if he brooded on what he had gone through he would sicken or grow mad.” (126) While awaiting the gifted chemist’s arrival “a horrible fit of terror came over him. What if Alan Campbell should be out of England?” (128) As Dorian finds himself cornered and the minutes seem to drag on interminably, the tension rises within him. He paces back and forth within his room “looking like a beautiful caged thing.” (129) In sensing his paralysis, he epitomizes one of Scott Peck’s observations: “We do not become partners to evil by accident. As adults we are not forced by fate to become trapped by an evil power; we set the trap ourselves.”15 Dorian need only look to himself for the source of his current difficulties; he does indeed set the trap himself.

The greater the tension, the greater the stress, the more likely his mind will play tricks on him. “The brain had its own food on which it battened, and the imagination, made grotesque by terror, twisted and distorted as a living thing by pain, danced like some foul puppet on a stand. . . .” (129) In his extreme agitation, he visualizes a certain and disastrous end and becomes ever more immobile. “Its very horror made him stone.” (129) The greater the tension, the greater the stress, the more likely not only Dorian, but all of us incline toward evil. Peck continues his reflections on the relationship between stress and evil, stress and goodness.

“He who behaves nobly in easy times—a fair weather friend so to speak—may not be so noble when the chips are down. Stress is the test for goodness. The truly good are they who in times of stress do not desert their integrity, their maturity, their sensitivity. Nobility might be defined as the capacity not to regress in response to degradation, not to become blunted in the face of pain, to tolerate the agonizing and remain intact.”16

What exacerbates the nobleman’s dilemma even further is readily apparent; he creates his own stress. Appropriate guilt produces pressure, which serves a redemptive function, if and when it

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13. James, p. 119.
14. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p. 222.
engenders a change of heart. Obviously the willingness to alter his behavior for the better does not and has never characterized Dorian’s response to stress. Despite his heightened state of anxiety, Dorian nevertheless experiences an occasional moment of lucidity, when he seems calmer. “He felt that he was himself again. His mood of cowardice had passed away.” (130) Once the valet apprises him of Campbell’s arrival, he feels more in control of his responses. Seconds thereafter and before advising Alan of his wishes, Dorian admits, even if only to himself, that he can still reason, can still distinguish right from wrong. “He knew that what he was going to do was dreadful.” (130)

Nevertheless the crisis averted, he again deliberately sets those rudimentary moral considerations aside. The skilled chemist does as requested and obliterates the forensic evidence incriminating his former friend. Consequently that same day Dorian resumes the luxuriant lifestyle of the consummate dandy. But, despite the most concerted efforts, he can no longer avoid facing the disparity between his polished, public appearance and the depravity of his soul. “He himself could not help wondering at the calm of his demeanor, and for a moment felt keenly the terrible pleasure of a double life.” (135) The oxymoronic “terrible pleasure” already foreshadows the duality Dorian confirms moments later. In order to sustain his cultivated performance, to function on some acceptable level, he must thrust aside, must repress what he wishes so vehemently to ignore. He must defend himself from the repeated assaults of his ever-present conscience and consequently elects to separate and isolate the opposing forces within. Erich Neumann reflects upon this radical response to both internal and external pressures.

“The exclusion becomes even more radical, the dichotomy between the values which the conscious mind espouses and the anti-ethical ones of the subconscious becomes even greater…the more his or her conscience makes itself felt.”

This failure to heed his conscience, to assume an appropriate degree of responsibility for his actions, this defensive splitting—some consider it a primitive maneuver—could place Dorian into that rather amorphous spectrum of individuals beset by personality disorders. “How intense must the disturbance be to warrant calling it a disorder?” Among a host of others, that question must be answered before definitive progress can be made in this ever evolving field of inquiry. Does Dorian suffer from ambulatory schizophrenia, as Dr. Peck tentatively suggests,
or from borderline personality disorder or a third variant of some psychiatric pathology? At the risk of painting with the proverbial broad brush, it may be wise to remember that it is precisely the difficulties encountered in defining these salient terms, which motivate studies such as this one. Unless we can name a disease, how can we possibly begin to heal the afflicted or help their victims?²²

But beyond the speculation, beyond the well-intentioned and exhaustive research, we must not lose sight of a simple truth. To Basil Hallward or Alan Campbell—these are just his most recent victims—the relevant, the exact diagnosis of Dorian’s psychic condition doesn’t matter. They can ill afford to speculate how strained his nerves may have become. They only know of their own pain and that he caused it. Once again Scott Peck clarifies the central issue. Who can say for certain, if and how the evil suffer? But one fact remains: “They cause suffering.”²³

Another perspective may also shed some light on these issues. Viktor E. Frankl (1905—1997) discusses the parameters of a human being’s essential nature in his Ärztliche Seelsorge.²⁴ His American contemporary, Abraham H. Maslow (1908—1970), notes the characteristics of self-actualized individuals. Both psychoanalysts maintain that despite their imperfections (for none of them are perfect),²⁵ healthy, contributing, responsible individuals can just as easily be termed integrated. They manage to resolve dichotomies the less secure, the less discerning, the less mature find so vexing or simply repress.

“In these people, the id, the ego and the superego are collaborative and synergic; they do not war with each other nor are their interests in basic disagreement as they are in neurotic people. So also do the cognitive, the impulsive and the emotional coalesce into an organismic unity…The higher and the lower are not in opposition but in agreement…”²⁶

In helping to coordinate their inner and outer worlds, self-actualized persons diffuse conflicts particularly those within themselves; they integrate without shortchanging. They benefit others, while benefiting themselves. In brief, they are what they claim to be. Duplicity does not become them. Keeping Dorian Gray in mind, another of Maslow’s conclusions might shed additional light.

“The civil war within the average person between the forces of the inner depths and the forces of defense and control seems to have been resolved in my subjects and they are less split. As a consequence, more of themselves is available for use, for enjoyment, and for creative purposes. They waste less of their time and energy protecting themselves against themselves.”²⁷

The last cannot be said of the English aristocrat. He wastes years, perhaps, his entire adulthood protecting himself against himself. No matter the cost to others or to himself (and it is

²². Ibid., p. 86.
²³. Ibid., p. 124.
²⁶. Ibid., p. 179.
always both), his shadow must not be allowed to interfere with the image of perfection he not only strives to convey, but succeeds in conveying. One of Peck’s pivotal insights bears repeating.

“The words ‘image,’ ‘appearance,’ and ‘outwardly’ are crucial to understanding the morality of the evil. While they seem to lack any motivation to be good, they intensely desire to appear good. Their ‘goodness’ is all on a level of pretense. It is, in effect, a lie. This is why they are the ‘people of the lie.’”

Dorian manages to project an image commensurate with his station, but only to a point. During the evening the day after Basil’s murder, Henry Wotton comments repeatedly and rather bluntly upon the younger man’s frayed nerves. The following remarks should be considered a random sampling: “You seemed rather out of sorts at dinner.” And: “You are not yourself to-night.”

(140) When Dorian leaves Lady Narborough’s soirée prematurely without offering a cogent explanation, he cannot, as he had done so many times before, regain his composure. “As he drove back to his own house he was conscious that the sense of terror he thought he had strangled had come back to him. Lord Henry’s casual questioning had made him lose his nerves for the moment, and he wanted his nerve still.” (141) Dorian does not remain at home. Or more accurately, he cannot remain there. He is determined to strike from his mind the murder just committed. “There were opium dens, where one could buy oblivion, dens of horror where the memory of old sins could be destroyed by the madness of sins that were new.” (142) Though already en route to an ill-reputed section of the harbor, where his “mad craving” will, at least momentarily, be satiated, still Dorian’s fears are not allayed. Perhaps someone sees where is going; more than once he checks to ascertain whether he is being followed. (144)

“There are moments, psychologists tell us, when the passion for sin, or what the world calls sin, so dominates a nature, that every fiber of the body, as every cell of the brain, seems to be instinct with fearful impulses. Men and women at such moments lose the freedom of their will. They move to their terrible end as automatons move. Choice is taken from them, and conscience is either killed, or, if it lives at all, lives but to give rebellion its fascination, and disobedience its charm. For all sins, as theologians weary not of reminding us, are sins of disobedience. When the high spirit, that morning-star of evil, fell from heaven, it was as a rebel that he fell.”

It is as if the literary genius and the psychoanalyst had collaborated with each other. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) dies the year Erich Fromm (1900-1980) is born and yet Wilde’s observations could easily function as the palimpsest to Fromm’s conclusions.

“In the practice of life the degree of freedom to choose is different at any given moment. If the degree of freedom to choose the good is great, it needs less effort to choose the good. If it is small, it takes great effort, help from others, and favorable circumstances.”

Basil’s murder seriously compromises Dorian’s psychic equilibrium; he is not only addicted to his sybaritic lifestyle, but also to drugs. Given his present frame of mind, therefore, his ability to choose qualifies as virtually nil. In view of his habitual responses under stress, any efforts he might make to realize the good would seem totally foreign to him, totally illogical. In a fit of

rage, Dorian kills the only individual who tries beyond all odds to help him. Would these be deemed favorable circumstances? Does the question even need to be asked?

Earlier Dorian wondered whether someone might be following him. The imagined threat becomes reality. James Vane learns Dorian’s identity, pursues and attacks him. Sybil’s former fiancé reacts as expected. He is consumed by fear, immobilized with terror. (147) Nevertheless Dorian escapes certain death, because his ever-youthful face lies for him.

But he cannot flee from the appropriate punishment forever. A short week subsequent, James Vane locates Dorian at his country estate, while the latter entertains a coterie of guests in his customary lavish style. Dorian becomes so frightened that he promptly losess consciousness and falls to the floor. Though clearly on his own property, upon recovering, his question resumes the theme of his personal security yet again: “Am I safe here, Harry?” (152) Despite all manner of assurances, Dorian does not shake his feeling of vulnerability. He cannot bear to be alone and, though Lord Henry advises against doing so, he rejoins the party.

“There was a wild recklessness of gaiety in his manner as he sat at the table, but now and then a thrill of terror ran through him when he remembered that, pressed against the window of the conservatory, like a white handkerchief, he had seen the face of James Vane watching him.” (152-153)

The following day he does not leave his London home. A “wild terror” suffuses his being. “The consciousness of being hunted, snared, tracked down, had begun to dominate him.” (153) Whether he opens or closes his eyes, whether it be his surroundings—natural or man-made—or his thoughts, everything reminds him of lost opportunities, reminds him of James Vane and the debt he is owed: “horror seemed once more to lay its hand upon his heart.” (153) In his addled state, his delusions concerning James Vane’s whereabouts—for they are nothing less—threaten to blot out reality. Despite the fact that he saw him, Dorian wants to believe that he has nothing to fear from the sailor, so he champions that conclusion; he must champion it in order the retain some small measure of mental stability. “Yes: it had been merely fancy. Sibyl Vane’s brother had not come back to kill him. He had sailed away in his ship to founder in some winter sea. From him, at any rate, he was safe.” (153) Suffering from militant ignorance, that strategy doesn’t work well for illusions in a feverish brain take on a life of their own. He cannot banish the memory of Basil to a ship on a wintry sea and as he contemplates his murder in grotesque detail, he grows “pale with terror.” (153) Finally Dorian breaks down and sobs, only to convince himself that he has been justified all along in doing what he did. He does not create victims. Rather he is one himself: “he had been the victim of an terror-stricken imagination and looked back now on his fears with something of pity and not a little of contempt.” (154)

This example of Dorian’s total inability to reason effectively, to grasp reality for what it is, to overemphasize tangential issues at the expense of vital ones, to forfeit all objectivity and all sense of responsibility, this type of circuitous and consequently fallacious thinking typifies a common response when we are asked to assimilate truths we would rather disavow. When Dr. Peck shares with one of his patients a number of possibly disconcerting and targeted insights concerning her marital relationship, her instantaneous reaction resembles Dorian’s. Sarah initiates a nonsensical diatribe filled with quasi-rebuttals, designed to protect her sick self. The
psychoanalyst’s assessment of the session speaks volumes not only about his patient’s issues, but also confirms what we have already surmised about Dorian’s extremely fragile state of mind. “I became frightened that I had made a mistake in confronting Sarah as I listened to her lose control. . . . She probably felt cornered. I had better give her plenty of exit space so that she might pull herself together again.”

After a hiatus of three days Dorian does pull himself together again and finally allows himself to leave his residence. This effort signifies a ressurection, even if temporary, for Dorian, as he regains at least a fragment of his former psychic equilibrium. Nevertheless, the respite from his conscience, from himself, does not, cannot last. In mid-morning he joins a shooting-party. (153-154) Just after the accidental death of James Vane—though Dorian does not yet know the victim’s name—he begins to hallucinate and mistakes the gardener for someone pursuing him. In replying to Henry’s assurances that all will be well, he admits: “It is the coming of Death that terrifies me. Its monstrous wings seem to wheel in the leaden air around me. Good heavens! don’t you see a man moving behind the trees there, watching me, waiting for me?” (156) Soon he becomes exasperated with all and everyone within his purview and that includes himself. He still feels threatened. How could he escape? He cannot seem to extricate himself from his obsession regarding the safekeeping of his person. Perhaps security can be found on the water, away from any place where one can be reached too easily? “On a yacht one is safe.” (156) When the elder man speculates how fascinating it might be to make the acquaintance of a murderer, Henry assails some last remnant of psychic stability Dorian still commands. He almost faints and admits that his “nerves are dreadfully out of order.” (157) As he had done before, he leaves his guests without warning, but fails to find tranquility in his quarters either; “. . . Dorian Gray was lying on a sofa, with terror in every tingling fibre of his body.” (158) He cannot abide remaining in the countryside another moment and makes immediate preparations to leave Selby Royal for London. When he realizes that Sir Geoffrey had indeed shot James Vane, only then does Dorian’s tension lessen noticeably, only then does he dare to loosen his stranglehold on vigilance. “He stood there for some minutes looking at the dead body. As he rode home, his eyes were full of tears, for he knew he was safe.” (159) Perhaps Dorian’s fear has finally been reduced to more manageable proportions.

Basil Hallward has been murdered; James Vane has been shot; Alan Campbell commits suicide. (161, 168) Only one reminder, only one witness, deafening in its muteness, remains to cast aspersions against Dorian Gray. It is the portrait. Were it to be obliterated, it could no longer terrorize him, no longer drive him from place to place both physically and metaphorically and no longer function “like conscience to him. Yes, it had been conscience.” His resolve is clear. “He would destroy it.” (169) With whatever shred of freedom left to him, he chooses what seems the easier way to regain even a tenuous foothold in a less tormented life. Sarah’s husband, Hartley, also chose the easier way.

“Dimly aware that he was caught in a dreadful trap, he obsessed back and forth between the two easiest ways to extricate himself: to kill Sarah or to kill himself.

But he was too lazy to even consider the one legitimate escape route open to him: the obvious, the more difficult path of psychological independence.”

To confess would have been the more obvious, the more difficult path for Dorian. When judged by a single standard, i.e., how assiduously he guards the portrait, he represents the diametric opposite of a lazy individual. In fact these relentless maneuvers virtually consume the entire novel. They commence in chapter seven (74) and end only with Dorian’s death on the penultimate page of the novel’s final chapter: chapter twenty. (169) Evil persons “are not pain avoiders or lazy people in general. To the contrary, they are likely to exert themselves more than most in their continuing effort to obtain and maintain an image of high respectability. . . . It is only one particular kind of pain they cannot tolerate: the pain of their own conscience, the pain of the realization of their own sinfulness and imperfection.” He cannot give his conscience its due; never has he done so and he cannot do so now. He cannot give his shadow its due.

“The shadow is a moral problem, which challenges every dimension of the ego, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without a significant degree of moral decisiveness. For in acknowledging the shadow, the dark aspects of the personality must be perceived as real. This act is the indispensable bedrock for every sort of self-recognition and consequently considerable resistance is usually encountered. Should self-recognition be used as a psychotherapeutic tool, then that would generally assume some tedious work, encompassing long periods of time.”

Conclusion
How can Dorian possibly undertake such a labor-intensive and protracted endeavor? He has evolved into an “uncorrectable” grab bag of sin; to reverse course would cost way too much. At the very least, he would have to acknowledge that he “wasted energy and time.” Instead, he asks himself those haunting questions meant to help him evade his just punishment. “But this murder—was it to dog him all his life? Was he always to be burdened by his past? Was he really to confess?” (169) His answer is straightforward, commensurate with what we expect, absolutely logical within its context. “Never.” (169) His decision is final for he makes it not once but many, many times. In destroying his conscience, he will destroy himself. Though not lacking in intelligence, that connection he does not understand, let alone acknowledge; the evil generally do not. The oft quoted, but perhaps frequently misunderstood, Biblical admonition assumes new meaning. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” In the unforgettable, the final, lines of his only novel, Oscar Wilde summarizes that insight more concretely. “Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they

31. Ibid., p. 118.
32. Ibid., p. 77.
34. Peck, p. 72.
examined the rings that they recognized who it was.” (170) In other words, he, who would destroy others, destroys himself. That ancient wisdom, that ancient law indelibly written on our hearts, even Dorian Gray could only ignore at his peril. Though he attempted to take the law into his own hands,⁷ he does not prove the exception. Whatever its stripe or type, live by the lie, you die by the lie. It is as simple as that.

References


---, Peck, p. 79.


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