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## CRITICAL APPROACHES

## CHARACTERISATION

The earlier Victorians were preoccupied with the idea of ‘character’, the unique, unchanging essence of the person. To ‘possess character’ was to have integrity. However, with science continually revealing how much humans shared with the rest of the animal world, it became harder to hold on to this idea of a single, unchanging human essence as opposed to the idea of a nature formed by a constant process of adaptation to environment, circumstances and will. As the century wore on, the word ‘personality’ came into common use. The word derives from the Latin *persona*, meaning an actor’s mask. Psychologists and literary practitioners alike were interested in the idea that someone could have more than one personality, and that these might be in conflict or even concealed from one another.

All the characters in the novel, consciously or unconsciously, assume more than one role or identity. For some, like Sibyl and her mother, it is a profession, but each has a different relationship to the roles that he or she plays. For the aristocrats, the mask of manners is a device to preserve the ordered surface of superiority from which their social group derives much of its power. Individuals use it to conceal private desires from some people while expressing them to others. But there is also a collective mask hiding ugly realities. Dorian’s ‘mask’ of an innocent face is a symbol of the ability of his class to get away with murder. Society ensures that Lord Kelso’s crime is hidden from the world. He is punished for murder only by temporary social exclusion: he ate ‘his chop alone at the club for some time afterwards’ (p. 29).

Dorian wants to become ‘a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations’ (p. 113), entering imaginatively into other lives, and adopting a variety of costumes, disguises and mind-altering drugs, but this is also true of most of the characters. The continual interplay of masks and identities makes it difficult to state of anyone in the novel (as one can with, say, a character in Jane Austen) ‘this is what this person is like’. We need to look at how each mask is used,

how each role is played, how the performance affects others and what possibilities are opened or closed for the player. You may find it hard to reach a conclusion about the characters, or that you judge them quite differently from other readers. This is one of the reasons *Dorian Gray* continues to be read and re-read.

## BASIL HALLWARD

Nobody actually uses the phrase ‘Good old Basil’, but they constantly seem about to. Dorian tells him that ‘if I were in trouble ... I would sooner go to you’ (p. 94), although he never really realises that he *is* in trouble until Basil is dead. This fits his friend’s self-effacing nature: only in Basil’s absence can his moral strictures begin to be heard. At the close of the novel Lord Henry dismisses Basil as a ‘bore’ and his work as ‘that curious mixture of bad painting and good intentions that always entitles a man to be called a representative British artist’ (p. 169). ‘Bore’ is a cruel description, but if Basil’s art does decline it is a measure of the sacrifices he has made.

Basil is the only central character with a sense of right and wrong. For a long time he refuses to believe that his friends can commit an evil action, and while he cheerfully warns Dorian about Lord Henry’s bad influence, he also assumes that Lord Henry’s cynicism is ‘simply a pose’ (p. 7). When he can no longer ignore the rumours about Dorian, he willingly turns himself into an ‘amateur curate’ (p. 120) and struggles with a vocabulary of sin and redemption not altogether natural to him. If this makes him a ‘bore’ it is because he has consciously taken the role of Good Angel, never as exciting as that of tempter.

Most of the roles Basil chooses diminish rather than enhance his ego. He enters the houses of the upper classes as a necessary evil – ‘With an evening coat, and a white tie ... anybody, even a stockbroker, can gain a reputation for being civilised’ (pp. 8–9) – but has no illusions about their world. ‘English society is all wrong’ (p. 120), he tells Dorian, but he will not accept this as an excuse for personal immorality. Although his studio, where he receives other people, is exotically furnished, he does not dress to advertise his status. Dorian teases him for his modest luggage – ‘What a way for a

## CONTEXT

The story of Pygmalion, the sculptor who falls in love with the statue he has created that is then brought to life by the goddess Aphrodite, was the subject of a series of paintings by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones in 1878. Entitled *The Heart Desires*, *The Hand Refrains*, *The Godhead Fires* and *The Soul Attains*, they show the progress of the statue from conception, through divine awakening, to life as a real woman.

## QUESTION

Among the items that appeared in *Lippincott’s Magazine* alongside the original *Dorian Gray* were an article on palmistry, a serial thriller and a feature called ‘The Indissolubility of Marriage’. If you were including the novel in a collection today, what fiction or non-fiction would you choose to go with it?

World events

- 1854** Founding of University College Dublin
- 1855** David Livingstone discovers Victoria Falls
- 1856** Louis Pasteur discovers bacteria
- 1857** Opium war with China re-opened
- 1858** Fenian (Irish Republican) Brotherhood founded
- 1859** Bishop Colenso denies authenticity of the Pentateuch
- 1860** Lord Elgin takes Beijing
- 1861** American Civil War begins
- 1862** Giuseppe Garibaldi attempts unification of Italy
- 1863** Abraham Lincoln signs Emancipation Proclamation
- 1864** Pius IX writes *Syllabus of Errors* attacking socialism, rationalism, divorce, etc.
- 1865** Prison Act imposes rules of silence
- 1866** Transatlantic telegraph cable laid
- 1867** Second Reform Act

Oscar Wilde's life

- 1854** Wilde born in Dublin
- 1867** Death of Wilde's sister Isola, aged eight

Literary/artistic events

- 1854** Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*
- 1855** Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*
- 1856** Death of Robert Schumann
- 1857** Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*
- 1858** Reuter's gets its first newspaper client, the London *Morning Advertiser*
- 1859** Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*; death of Thomas De Quincey
- 1860** George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*
- 1861** Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*
- 1862** Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*
- 1863** Baudelaire's last poems
- 1864** Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'
- 1865** John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*
- 1866** A. C. Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*
- 1867** Paris Exhibition

World events

- 1868** Last public execution in England
- 1869** Girton College founded
- 1870** First Married Women's Property Act
- 1871** Paris Commune suppressed
- 1872** Ballot Act makes voting secret
- 1873** Custody of Infants Act
- 1874** Benjamin Disraeli wins major election victory and leads Conservative reforming government for next six years
- 1875** Disraeli organises purchase of Suez Canal shares
- 1876** Cesare Lombroso writes first study of criminology
- 1877** Thomas Edison invents phonograph
- 1878** Salvation Army formed
- 1879** Irish National Land League
- 1880** C. S. Parnell demands Home Rule for Ireland

Oscar Wilde's life

- 1871** Wins scholarship to Trinity College, Dublin
- 1874** Wins Gold Medal for Greek at Trinity, and goes to Oxford
- 1875** Visits Italy
- 1876** Death of father; Wilde takes a first in Classical Moderations
- 1877** Visits Greece
- 1878** Graduates with First in *Litterae Humaniores* and wins Newdigate Prize for Poetry
- 1879** Settles in London

Literary/artistic events

- 1868** Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*
- 1869** Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*
- 1870** Death of Dickens
- 1871** Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*
- 1872** Jules Verne, *Around the World in 80 Days*
- 1873** Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*
- 1874** First Impressionist Exhibition in Paris
- 1875** Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*
- 1876** Mark Twain, *Tom Sawyer*
- 1877** August Rodin exhibits statues considered scandalously realistic
- 1878** J. M. Whistler sues Ruskin
- 1879** Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*
- 1880** Émile Zola, *Nana*