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ENG 457- Pyle

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## *A Curious Crucible of Pain and Pleasure*

*Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.*  
(“Preface to the Picture of Dorian Grey,” vii)

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### *Preface*

Walter Pater’s “The School of Giorgione” appealed to me because it addressed a concern I had with previous aesthetic texts. Most texts largely ignore the sensory training it requires to behold an aesthetic experience. I refuse to believe that art can attack just the senses alone. This theory would necessarily mean that each person is as capable of experiencing extraordinary aesthetics as the next. While this idea- utilitarian in concept- is appealing, I believe it takes some previous ability to apprehend notions of Beauty. I was struck by this realization while walking away from class a few days ago. It came after we had discussed Pater’s essay, specifically the notion that all art aspires towards musical qualities. While walking and listening to *Beethoven: Piano Concerto #1*, I began to view objects as if music were emanating from them. Not only did I view plants and buildings this way, but human interaction as well. It was this synesthesia, this mixing of the aural and visual that prompted goose bumps in me. What could possibly be wrong with such unexpected, tingling joy?

Upon writing my third paper, I argued that the world would be a better place if humanity could simply view the musicality of its surroundings. It is similar to Basil Hallward’s definition of living in the sound of music in *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, “I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream- I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy” (13). Nothing seems more ideal than the electrifying joy Hallward identifies. While I had believed that this total immersion into the musical quality of life fostered more morality in humankind, I have since come to question this notion.

## Chapter 1: Revel in that sneer, Dorian Gray

Since opening the cover of *Dorian Gray*, I have absorbed the gruesome consequences, though fictitious, of relentlessly drinking in the aesthetic spark of life. We witness a man living solely for the moment, crazily devoting his life to the cause of Beauty. Every human has flaws, with the most archaic of those faults being hubris. Dorian is emblematic of pride and vanity, rejecting all moral principles to retain his youthful visage. Wilde is creating one of the most relatable characters possible in literature by providing Gray with essentially *all* of the moral flaws we are accustomed to in tragic heroes. As readers are enveloped in the oversaturation of the senses, they are constantly bombarded by the tantalizing appeal of sin; like Dorian himself, behind every Beautiful entity, there lies something dangerous.

The interweaving of Joy and Sorrow is a key element throughout *Dorian Gray*. In most cases, the threat of something terrible lurking in the shadows enhances the pleasurable experience, "... Fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows" (Wilde 5). Every good deed needs its evil counterpart to make it meaningful, just as every Othello needs his Iago to paint him as the tragic hero. As my opening Wilde quote depicts, "Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope" ("Preface to the Picture of Dorian Gray" vii). Dorian Gray is a redeemable character because he sacrifices himself for the preservation of art, becoming a martyr for Beauty. He is a redeemable character- despite treading the boundaries of monstrosity. After futilely attempting to replicate the wonder of his portrait, Gray realizes reality can never reproduce the ideality of art.

The fascinating case study of Dorian Gray is, in essence, a lesson in negative capability, coined by John Keats: when someone is "capable of being in uncertainties without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" ("Letter to George and Tom Keats"). He becomes so engrossed in satisfying his sinful ways that he loses any moralistic guidance he had previously. It is something we have witnessed countless times in aesthetic texts: the beholder of the Beautiful subconsciously becomes reckless, losing part or all of their constitutions in this disorienting process. Whether it is Keats projecting his desires onto a Grecian urn or Laura indulging in the sensual gluttony of Goblin Market, the trope of the fallen beholder is ever-present in this term's writings. Consequentially, Dorian Gray, the once innocent and naïve fawn of Beauty, obsesses over the "life of the senses" (Wilde 92) he reads about in Lord Henry's book. The act of reading it totally strips him of his wits; he loses track of time and space. Once again, this scene is reminiscent of a Keatsian experience: burning through *King Lear*, "It was with an almost cruel joy- and perhaps in nearly every joy, as certainly in every pleasure, cruelty has its place- that he used to read the latter part of the book" (Wilde 93). The cruel joy cited here is synonymous with negative capability. Even if it causes pain, the experience eventually transforms the beholder in pleasurable ways.

As a figurehead of the Aesthetic Movement (also called New Hedonism) Dorian Gray craved to cross the divide between beholder and artwork; he wanted to be the living incarnation of Beauty, both in personality and appearance. He reached for something beyond the normalcy of life so that he might elevate his inferior peers around him. Though he spiraled into monstrosity, his intentions can be viewed for the greater good. His vile actions overshadowed his attempts to show the world how to live completely in the moment.

## Chapter 2: *We Miss You, John Keats*

It would be remarkable if John Keats and Dorian Gray met in real life. Both artists seem to train themselves in receiving aesthetic experiences; they actively seek the fleeting spark of life. Although Keats does not often discuss Beauty in people (more often, it is Beauty in objects), I have a feeling he would be grossly attracted to Gray's magnetizing persona. Both characters, a fictitious artist and real artist, recognize the futility in rejecting sorrow as the side effect of joy. To them, it is more organic to endure suffering, as this makes them likelier to experience a greater sense of pleasure. Both characters spend their youth worshipping Beauty. And both characters, so immersed in the now time of life, die young in the peak of their vitality. Keats' actual life may just be coincidence, but his characters gravely mimic his own biography. In "La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad," Keats assumes the role of spellbound knight. "And this is why I sojourn here,/ Alone and palely loitering" (45-46). Here, Keats knowingly invites his own destruction in the pursuit of Beauty. His paleness is all too relevant as a sign that he loses part of himself in the hypnotization of Beauty. After realizing that this was all a dream, he seems to be a shadow of himself; he will never return to the man he once was. By interpreting this poem in the framework of Keats' life, we must assume that his endless devotion to the Aesthetic Doctrine drained him of his life force. Thus, it requires self-risk, even sacrifice, to pursue the aesthetic experience.

The cycle of Joy and Melancholy Keats was tragically familiar with presents itself in "Ode on Melancholy". Not only does misery exist here, it is inevitable, "She dwells with Beauty-Beauty that must die" (21). The Beauty he is referring to is that of his mistress. It is a fleeting Beauty, as all mortal Beauty eventually fades. The speaker realizes that everything Beauty is *not* will make Beauty that much more exceptional. It is the same idea behind Iago's role as Othello's villainous complement. With Iago, the reader gains a greater appreciation for Othello's valorous qualities. The world of "Melancholy" is desolate, void of any form of artistry. But that is precisely why Keats must endure; he realizes that the potential of Beauty is always on the immediate horizon. It was Thomas Haynes Bayly who declared "Absence makes the heart grow fonder:/ Isle of Beauty, fare thee well!" in *Songs, Ballads and Other Poems*. Ultimately, this cliché encapsulates my observations about the aesthetic experience. The oft tormented artists of the aesthetic time period seemed to own a heightened faculty for pleasure.

Though I digress, I would like to examine the trite but accurate notion that absence lends a deeper appreciation in the beholder. It is a small example, but I experience this constantly with music. Since music is inherently synesthetic, it has the ability of leaving a lasting impact on the senses- even after it has dissipated. This is the reason for not only getting a song stuck in your head but for associating one image with a particular song. What I have noticed recently, though, is the diminishing value music can hold if received in excess. Many people rely on music to get them through their humdrum day, but what if music was ever-present? More and more, I find myself resenting certain beats and choruses by overhearing them. I *need* to break from the inevitability of the music. I recall this sensation because music is often revered as the most comprehensive example of art. Even the highest form of art can lose value through overexposure. For this reason, mystery can add monumental value to a piece of art: mystique makes the heart grow fonder. If this can be said for the highest conditions of art, it can be said for the most common emotional responses: joy and sorrow.

The interweaving of the magnificent and the mournful in both texts leads me to this conclusion: “Ode on Melancholy” can be placed as an epilogue to “La Belle.” In his encounter with the fairy child in “La Belle”, the speaker shows no restraint in reveling in the pleasurable sensory experience. The probable Day-After Blues ensue as he wakes from this deeply satisfying dream. Instead of seeking out another Beautiful experience, though, the speaker enjoys his melancholy, “But when the melancholy fit shall fall/... Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose” (11, 15). Not only is the speaker allowing his disappointment to flow, but he directs it towards a morning rose. It is as if he wants to destroy something equally beautiful to counteract his sorrows. Because of this, Beauty is constantly on the verge of destruction. Brittle Beauty is consistent throughout aesthetic curriculum. Even our greatest joys, triumphs, and accomplishments are not purely blissful because there is always the possibility of Breaking Beauty. We are mortal beings, so we will always be susceptible to unanticipated destruction.

### *Chapter 3: The Opposite of Love is Indifference - The Lumineers*

The same crucible of pain and pleasure we witness in Dorian Gray and Keats’ pale knight appears in Percy Shelley’s “To a Sky-Lark.” The events are never of just a bird, as Shelley relates them to human struggles, “Our sincerest laughter/ With some pain is fraught-/ Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought” (Shelley 88-90). Percy Shelley sounds like an advocate for Blues music in this quote. What is important to note is that Shelley uses the pronoun “our” throughout this musing. As he stands there, disconnected from this drunkenly-ecstatic bird, he cannot help but express his envy. The bird knows no suffering in its “shrill delight” (Shelley 20). Unlike humans, who are ever-burdened by the possibility of loss, sky-larks are blissfully innocent artists, “What love of thine own kind?/ what ignorance of pain?... Thou lovest- but ne’er knew love’s sad satiety” (Shelley 74-75, 80). At this moment in the poem, I believe Shelley’s jealousy mutates into pity. Yes, the sky-lark is ignorant of any sadness on the horizon of its existence; it does not have the foresight we possess. Our knowledge of our own inevitable, impending destruction is where we differ from all other creatures. The bird never tastes “love’s sad satiety.” We can admire the bird for its naiveté, but we proudly own our capacity for lovesickness! Every time a relationship leaves us fractured, we are forced to rebuild with those learning experiences as our lovetools. By citing a text I use later in my argument, I quote Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, “These sufferings are even the things of which I am most proud of, though these are things which cannot inspire envy” (“Logotherapy in a Nutshell” 144). Without the possibility of love loss, love cannot instill its dire urgency in us. These two opposite emotions are never separate, but instead run in confluence. To Shelley, our sadness is never out of consciousness, a pesky fly that still nags us in our most joyous moments.

While we search for similar words to define these occurrences, they are all variations of the same concept. Sad happiness, cruel joy, negative capability- these are all attempts at communicating the inseparability of happiness and sadness in the world. Shelley also coins his own with aesthetic phrase with his sky-lark: “harmonious madness” (103). This is my favorite of the countless aesthetic anagrams from the term. This theory debunks any attempt of putting Beauty in order, of filing it neatly into a comprehensive Cambridge Encyclopedia. Maybe aesthetics is the study of grappling with madness. And maybe the refinement of the aesthetic craft is creating some harmony out of this madness. This pinpoints the ridiculousness of dedicating a life to Beauty. If the faithful devotion to the Beautiful Movement reaches the point

of self-destruction (and there is not the notion of salvation in the afterlife, as in most theology) then why pursue something so transitory? Why participate in this coordinated insanity?

It must be the inconstant electricity that intoxicates Shelley, Keats and Gray. No reasonable person would devote such energy to such a momentary charge. But the reason for their irrationality lies in the spiritual high that the charge provides. Like a drug, the aesthetic spark elevates them from normalcy- if only for a few moments. I say spiritual because I liken it to the constant search for answers that is common in theology. Most organized religion provides us with more questions than answers, and its ambiguity can be comforting to us. A parallel to this is the welcoming of unanswerable questions in Aestheticism. The aesthetic experience is always something unseen, like an omniscient Creator. As we witness in the figureheads of the movements, suffering is inclusive to both doctrines.

#### *Chapter 4: A Wilde Search for Meaning*

Although an existential reading seems counterintuitive to the Aesthetic Movement, I believe it points to the motivations behind the artists involved. First, by claiming the following text to be existential, I intend to say that meaning is created through life choices, not upon creation. While the writers, poets, and painters from this movement may claim “art for art’s sake,” there is inherent meaning in their passion to communicate aesthetics. They *must* desire to create art that accurately portrays the uncommunicable study of feelings. In the never-ending battle between Joy and Melancholy that these documents examine, I was reminded of a Holocaust survivor’s account. I invoke Frankl’s novel to find hope in the bleakest of circumstances. As a prisoner in Auschwitz, Frankl sought answers in the unending torture. Miraculously, he spent many nights encouraging his fellow survivors, reinforcing the meaning behind their lives amidst seemingly certain death. By focusing not on the pain of suffering but instead on its meaning, Frankl found the will to retain his humanity, “If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete” (“Experiences in a Concentration Camp” 104). Although this is a much heavier subject than what we are accustomed to in aesthetic texts, it relates to the notion of negative capability. While these prisoners had no choice in their fate, they ultimately found more meaning by accepting suffering as a natural component of human behavior.

Frankl pinpoints the first signs of resigned prisoners who had completely abandoned the will to persevere. Whenever he saw a fellow prisoner smoking or using a pillow, he knew that that prisoner had sold his remaining possessions to indulge in his final creature comforts. In most cases, these victims were dead within the week. The true test of perseverance, according to Frankl, was the ability to thrive on pain, “But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer” (120). Even in the bleakest of scenarios, courage prevails. The will to knowingly suffer assisted these prisoners in survival, “It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings; the way they bore their sufferings was a genuine inner achievement. It was this spiritual freedom- which cannot be taken away- that makes life meaningful and purposeful” (87). Prisoners knew that, despite being surrounded by an all-encompassing mist of torture, pleasure still survived somewhere in the world. Those who survived the animalism of the camps knew greater joys when they returned to their previous lives. It elevated their sensitivity to even the most minuscule relief.

Ironically, we discussed this exact aesthetic tenet in one of our last class sessions about Wilde's *De Profundis*. Cautionary tales are numerous in aestheticism. The trope of the suffering artist culminates in Wilde's draining prison stint. After his taste for pain is fulfilled in his isolation, he comes to acceptance with his sorrow, "But while there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning. Now I find hidden away in my Nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all" (1018). Internment has similar effects on Frankl and Wilde. In a world seemingly bereft of pleasure, they mold purpose from their hardships. Unlike Frankl, though, Wilde is sacredly disillusioned because of his suffering.

In his previous life replete with artistic indulgences, Wilde is able to flirt with the notion of discomfort. Before he is confined to a cell, his thirst for Beauty had become insatiable. Wilde seems to be channeling his inner Dorian Gray in pursuit of something dangerously sensational, "Tired of being on the heights I deliberately went to the depths in search for new sensations. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion" (1018). He bores of the conventional pleasures of society, and seeks depravity to satisfy his urges. Then, he is sentenced to hard labor in a Victorian prison. His life flips 180 degrees after being forced to work for survival. With complacency gone, Wilde is challenged to create purpose out of foreign pains. Humility makes him rethink his reckless pursuit of novel sensation.

I am by no means attempting to equate the afflictions of Holocaust victims to those of aesthetic artists. However, I am using the most extreme of circumstances- the utter anguish of the Holocaust- to provide a framework in which to view this complex artistic movement. A consistent theme throughout these texts is the willful undoing of oneself for the cause of art. Shelley, Keats, and Wilde all risked their careers by writing about the socially unacceptable conventions of aestheticism. These artists sacrificed part of themselves in order to further grapple with the concepts of Beauty and Art. Frankl attempts to pinpoint this concept with an existential thread, "In some ways, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice" (93). All truly great artists sacrifice themselves for their craft. Keats burns through *King Lear*, not because of the simple pleasures it provides, but because of his dedication to beautiful things. In some cases, artists sacrifice their lives unknowingly as a result of how the art affects them.

### *Chapter 5: The Sacrificial Fisherman*

The aesthetic movement is one of the most tragic cultic movements in literature. While the movement itself is attractive to unknowing outsiders (Beauty, Truth, Love: who would reject these as their prophets?), those artists most deeply involved in its spirituality seem utterly distraught. For instance, nearly half of the writers we studied this term either died young or saw their careers completely unravel. Shelley, Keats, and Wilde, who can all be viewed as founders of the aesthetic movement, went through the aesthetic gauntlet of adversity. This was a combination of not only relentless critique about their works, but also the constant mystery surrounding their craft. Whereas Christianity relies on the Bible and Judaism relies on the Torah, Aestheticism relies on the writings of these men and select authors before them. Much like Jesus suffered for the sins of man, these pioneers suffered for our ignorance of Beauty. As is the case in the most gifted artists in history, their unmatched acumen make them the most troubled souls.

The same can be said for Normal Maclean's brother Paul in *A River Runs Through It*. As fly-fishermen in Montana, the brothers compete from childhood through adulthood refining their craft. Paul, however, always comes out the victor as a man seemingly born to fish, "He is my brother and an artist and when a four-and-a-half-ounce rod is in his hand he's a major artist... It is a shame I do not understand him" (Maclean 28). Like we have seen with exceptional artistry, though, Paul is haunted by demons of greatness. He struggles with alcoholism, gambling addiction, and indulgences at the local brothel. Eventually, his sinful ways lead to his demise in a very similar fashion to Dorian Gray. In a profession where one is constantly immersed in natural geographic beauty, I thought this work was pertinent to an aesthetic discussion. Paul is to fishermen what Keats represents to poets: an exceptional talent who died in the peak of his artistic energy. After catching his very last fish, Norman and his father reminisce about their last encounter with the Beautiful, "My father and I talked about this moment several times later, and whatever our other feelings, we always felt it fitting that, when we saw him catch his last fish, we never saw the fish but only the artistry of the fisherman" (100). This is a contemporary example of "art for art's sake" through the eyes of a fly-fisherman. The result of the artwork no longer matters to Norman and his father: the devotion to artistry is the subject. Anyone who was blessed to witness Paul in his element would be raised from their mortal limitations- if only for a moment.

One of the reasons this novel seemed relevant to me was its religious undertones. It closely parallels our implicit understanding of the aesthetic movement as a fevered religious doctrine. Maclean even comes out in states in his very first words, "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing" (1). Norman and Paul's dad was a minister, so their life was a constant blending of the spiritual and the real. Although spotted trout are irrelevant to our discussion, aesthetic texts do factor holiness into their search for Truth. Dante Rossetti worshipped the beauty of his projected image, and Oscar Wilde served as a prophet to a God of New Hedonism. This is just another example of earthly beings possessing divine qualities.

There are undeniable similarities between religious devotion and aesthetic dedication. For example, Christianity values the unending commitment to do God's works. This necessarily entails mortal suffering by through the sacrifice of sensual pleasures. Comparably, Shelley and Keats believed in a complete discombobulation of the senses. They sacrifice complacency for unrest. Aestheticism requires some amount of suffering (not unlike religion) to enhance the reception of Beauty. This suffering, in the cause of something admirable, creates martyrs, just as Paul was to fly-fishing, "My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him all good things- trout as well as eternal salvation- come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy" (3). This relates to the importance of the aesthetic movement as an arduous pursuit. Like fly-fishing and religion, artistic grace does not come effortlessly. Writers like Shelley and Keats dedicated their lives to the doctrine of the senses, specifically its undefinability. They spent their energy on the cause of Beauty, and for what higher purpose? According to Norman's father's definition of salvation, there is deliverance for the sacrificial artists of aestheticism. They died so that we might fully appreciate earthly Beauty.

### *Conclusion(s)*

Part of the difficulty in examining "aesthetic texts" is the inconclusive definition of aestheticism. The subjectivity of abstract terms like Love and Beauty make the aesthetic

experience different for everyone. What makes the writers of these works successful and revered is their ability to surgically manipulate the locations in the heart where these sensations exist. To be able to apprehend the most Beautiful, artists must be capable of combating its necessary counterpart: grotesque sorrow. Other objects dull when compared to Beauty, which is why this literary field is so taxing. True Beauty only confronts us for a fraction of our lives and then it vanishes. Maybe a similar experience will reappear, but maybe that is the last time we are moved so profoundly. It is the duty of aesthetic writers to sacrifice their vigor in the pursuit of this temporary spark. Though their job description is the beautiful, it is less than enviable.

Of the complete works from the term, Peter de Bolla's definition of the aesthetic experience strikes me most with its ambiguity. Aestheticism is something "barely whispered yet somehow heard" (*Art Matters* 12). There are certain life occurrences which move us beyond elucidation; they illuminate a previously foreign part of us. Aesthetic texts endeavor to put words to these feelings.

The aesthetic aim, despite claims of art for art's sake, attempts to bridge the gap between feelings and the shortcomings of the English language. Nothing can wholly encapsulate the experience of being moved, but artists devote themselves to finding groundbreaking ways of communicating *it*. A feeling is the ideal counterpart to an explanation, and can only be a reflection of the original wonder: a Platonic Form of the concept of aestheticism. This is *all* that the aesthetic movement can strive to be: a shadow of a feeling. Writers will torture themselves until Judgment Day creating new words for the strange sensation of being lifted. Maybe then, Beauty will step down from its perch and reveal its oldest secrets.