

## Epidemic and Life Attitudes: Bioethics Implication in The Picture of Dorian Gray and Its Inspiration to Life Education in The COVID-19 Era

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**Abstract:** Victorian era was a great age of irresistible epidemics. The spread of smallpox, cholera, malaria, syphilis, and other diseases not only brought a high death rate but also influenced people deeply on their attitudes toward life and death. It is valuable to be concerned about Victorian literary and artistic works to find out some clues and hints about this impact. Oscar Wilde was one of the most typical Victorian writers, whose only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exhibited distinct time features and illustrated his view of life. This article attempts to analyze his works on a new aspect, bioethics, within the historical background, the medicine and technology development to detect the sameness and difference between the Victorian era and now, and find out Wilde as a Victorian people's attitudes toward life and death, such as his fear of death, and his ponder of what is the value of life. All the above may provide some inspiration for how epidemics influence people's attitudes toward life and death, and facilitate life education in the COVID-19 Era.

**Keywords-** The Picture of Dorian Gray, Bioethics education, COVID-19 era, epidemic, life and death education

### I. Introduction

When it comes Victorian era, improvement becomes the most frequent topic. The breakout of the industrial revolution, the great development of science and technology, the flourishing of arts and intellectual fields, the booming of the industrial city, and most significantly, the establishment of the empire on which the sun never sets... Also, we should notice the increasingly huge gap between the rich and the poor. The upper class lead an unprecedented prosperous life, the middle class expand, while in the east end, the poor lived as stinky and filthy as beasts, especially in the Workhouse after *the New Poor Law*, as it wrote in *Oliver Twist*, the terrible living condition of the poor was desperate and horrible.

The Victorian era is also a great age of irresistible epidemic. Smallpox, cholera, malaria, syphilis... In Victorian anatomy museums, countless symptoms of diseases were shown by Wax figures. However, even though several hospitals were set up after the Enlighten movement, as the center of medical study and education, as well as the mainstay of health care, which brought great progress for medicine, even though The General Board of Health was established after *The Public Health Act*, neither money nor pray can stop people dying from diseases. The high death rate accompanied by evangelical's Sanctification and ritualization of death, and the widowhood of Queen Victoria after the early death of Prince Albert, romanticized death for Victorian people. In the meantime, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and France, Bioethics, which was called medical ethics at that time, rise as an ideological trend in philosophy and medical fields.

All of the above impelled people at that time to focus more on life and death.

Oscar Wilde is one of the most typical Victorian writers, it is valuable to analyze his works on a new aspect, bioethics, to find out his attitude towards life and death as well as the worth of life. This article attempts to analyze Oscar Wilde and his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, within the historical background of the Victorian era, the medicine and technology development as well as Victorian people's life, to find out the bioethics metaphor, especially Wilde's view of life in the novel, according to the plot

and the main characters, and to facilitate life education in the COVID-19 Era.

## **II. Brief introduction of the plot**

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* narrates a story about a handsome young man named Dorian Gray. In Basil's studio, Dorian Gray was instigated by his friend Henry's doctrine about the beauty of youth, and realized his own beauty as soon as he saw his portrait painted by Basil. Dorian decided to give his soul to prevent his beauty decay. Dorian fell in love with an excellent actress named Sybil, but his love brought Sybil from art to reality and descended her into an ordinary actress. Dorian dropped Sybil, which broke Sybil's heart and she committed suicide. After Sybil's death, Dorian noticed the portrait not only undertook the trace of aging, but also undertake all the punishment of crime. Fearing and regretting, together with the morbid desire of remaining youth and beauty made Dorian depraved, committing sinful acts one after another. At last, Dorian decided to stop all these and begin a new life, so he stabbed his portrait with the knife he used to kill Basil. However, Dorian was found dead in the room the next day, with a wrinkle and ugly appearance, and the portrait was young and beautiful as the beginning.

## **III. Bioethics metaphor in the Picture of Dorian Gray**

In this section, Oscar Wilde was seen as an example of Victorian people, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will be deliberated to find out the bioethics metaphor in the plots and how the epidemic influenced Victorian people's attitudes toward life and death.

### **1. The fear of death and the pursuit of immortality**

As recorded in ancient books, such as the plague that came after the flood was seen as the presence of the god of pestilence in the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, the Chinese ancient ruler of Anyang asked whether the year have pestilence caused death, as well as the epidemic in Biblical texts for example in the Book of Exodus (McNeill, 128), plagues always influenced deeply on human life. The helplessness and the despair, the suffering and death of those who were infected, as well as the empathy, aggravated people's fear of death. In the Victorian Era, the epidemic caused a high death rate, especially premature death. The fear of death and the pursuit of immortality can be seen as the thread of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which includes Dorian's fear of aging and death, his desire, and his pursuit of remaining his youth and beauty. In Basil's studio, Dorian was instigated by Henry's doctrine about the beauty of youth and the shortness of life. As soon as Dorian saw his portrait painted by Basil, it was the first time Dorian realized his own beauty, then he felt a sharp pang of pain that he would grow old, horrible and dreadful one day, while the picture would be always young, he felt jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. Then a crazy idea came up with Dorian: if it were himself who was always to be young, and the picture that was to grow old. For this desire, he can give everything, even his soul.

In the follow-up content, Dorian's dream came true, it seems a good deal that the portrait instead of Dorian undertook the trace of aging. However, when Dorian noticed a slight of cruelty showed on the portrait's mouth that the picture changed what he should undertake after Sybil's death, he was more scared than excited. Thinking of countless mornings when he immersed in the beauty of the portrait, Dorian felt pity that the portrait would be desecrated by all of his shame. But he could not give up this chance of keeping youth forever.

The novel illustrated another side of the deal, as the rethink of immortality. The portrait not only undertook the trace of aging, but also undertake all the punishment of crime. In the meantime Dorian was aware of his immortality, all punishment became invalid for him. Without ethical restriction, Dorian was dehumanized gradually. The portrait shows Dorian's evil inward under his eternal charming appearance, becoming heinous and disgusting with every fault Dorian had committed. As Wilde wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "this portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul" (59; bk. 1, chap. 8).

Dorian was so fearful of his ugly inner side being seen by others that he hid the portrait upstairs, covered it with a purple pall, and refused the painter Basil to just have a look at it. The fear even made Dorian run to the locked chamber as soon as he went back home, looking at the terrible wrinkled face and comparing it with his beautiful young face in the mirror, indulging in his own beauty and teasing the ugly man on the portrait. Fearing and regretting, Dorian eventually decided to tell Basil everything for redemption, but the morbid desire for remaining youth and beauty discouraged him to do that. With the shame of guilt, together with the evading of punishment, Dorian was depraved, committing sinful acts one after another. Basil's attempt of persuading led to Dorian's hatred and killed him. Alan helped Dorian to conceal the evidence of the murder and shot himself to keep the secret. Sybil's brother wanted to revenge

on Dorian but died by accident in Dorian's hunting...

## **2. Re-examination of the value of life :**

Wilde's re-examination of what is the value of life was illustrated in the love story and the tragedy between Dorian and Sibyl. Dorian and Sibyl metaphors two different attitudes toward the value of life. According to Dorian, the only value of life was art and beauty, while to Sibyl it was truth and love. In the novel, Dorian encountered an excellent actress named Sybil in an awful theater, but his love brought Sibyl from art to reality and descended her into an ordinary actress. Seeing Sibyl's terrible act, Dorian was irritated and dropped her, which broke Sibyl's heart and she committed suicide.

Under the background of the epidemic, the suffering and death result people paying more attention to life, the value of life is one of the most important topics of bioethics. The value of life and the relationship between life and beauty was deliberated in Oscar Wilde's literary critic *Intentions*. And in the novel, as Henry said at the beginning, Dorian Gray was a Narcissus (2; bk. 1, chap. 1), Dorian has a morbid obsession with his own beauty. He saw beauty as the only value of life, and pursued madly to maintain his youth and beauty. The allusion of Narcissus comes from Greek mythology as an extraordinarily handsome young man who loved nothing but beauty. Countless admirers were attracted by his charm, but they were all disdained because Narcissus was too arrogant to love anyone. The suffering and even suicide of these heartbroken admirers irritated Nemesis, the goodness of revenge, she punished Narcissus by seeing his reflection in a pool. Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection and drowned in the water.

One of the clues of the allusion of Narcissus in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is in chapter 8 when Dorian was thinking about choosing between stopping depravity or remaining beauty:

A feeling of pain crept over him as he thought of the desecration that was in store. For the fair face on the canvas. Once, in boyish mockery of Narcissus, he had kissed, or feigned to kiss, those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him. Morning after morning he had sat before the portrait wondering at its beauty, almost enamored of it, as it seemed to him at times. (59; bk. 1 chap. 8)

Like Narcissus, Dorian was also a chaser of beauty and obsessed with his own beauty after seeing his portrait. To maintain his youth and beauty, Dorian was willing to sacrifice everything including his soul. Dorian's mad dream came true, the portrait undertook his senile and sin instead of him. Despite regret, Dorian was more afraid of his beauty decay than his depravity.

In Chapters 4-7, Dorian once fell in love with the actress Sibyl, but in fact, he fell in love with the beauty of art in Sibyl's performance. Dorian's love brought Sibyl to reality, but this Sibyl was not an excellent actress anymore. Irritated by her terrible performance, Dorian spurned Sibyl. Their broken-up grieved Sibyl to commit suicide. As the punishment in Narcissus's story after his admirer's death, Dorian was also punished after Sibyl's death: the emotion of his portrait became cruel. And after all of his depravity, Dorian's portrait was wrinkle, loathsome and hideous. It was too late when he regretted it. In the last chapter, Dorian stabbed a knife into the portrait to stop all of these terrible things to begin a new life. But he was found dead ugly with a knife in his heart.

While Sibyl represents another view of what is the value of life. Dorian's love brought Sibyl from art to reality, then Sibyl's depraved to an awful actress. However, the characterization of Sibyl reveals Wilde's re-examination of life: According to Dorian, the only value of life is beauty, which makes his love for Sibyl consist in her art as an actress and as the embodiment of beauty, rather than Sibyl herself as a person. Dorian sees art and beauty as the only value of Sibyl's life, which results in Sibyl's suicide. At the same time, two comparisons can be seen in this plot: one is the extremely beautiful exterior and the ugly interior of Dorian, and the other is the immortality of evil Dorian and the death of innocent Sibyl. It on the one hand represents Wilde's repudiation of excessive realism in the late 19th century and its theory of far-fetched relevance between beauty and moral. According to Wilde wrote in *Intentions*, beauty does not express moral, it even not express anything thing but beauty itself. And on the other hand, this plot can be analyzed from a bioethics aspect, as Wilde's ponder of different dimensions of life value.

## **3. Dorian's consumptionism and hedonism life attitude**

As a Victorian upper class, Dorian Gray is a typical dandy image, for the concerning with his gorgeous appearance, stylish clothing, and aristocratic manner. In chapter 11, among the young man who saw or fancied that they saw Dorian, Dorian Gray's combination of the real culture of the scholar with all grace and distinction and perfect manner was the true realization of what they had dreamed. They were infatuated with Dorian, and idolized him as those whom Dante describes as having sought to "make themselves perfect by the worship of beauty".

For Dorian Gray, life itself was the greatest art, all of the other arts are preparations and

decorations of life. In Dorian's inmost heart, he desired to be something more than a mere *fashion pioneer*. He sought to elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles. For this life target, Dorian began to search for sensations that would be at once new and delightful, and possess that element of strangeness that is essential to romance. Dorian indulged in a luxurious life, which was full of consumptionism and hedonism. He often adopt certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature, abandon himself to their subtle influences and then leave them with curious indifference.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* made a detailed description of Dorian's consumptionism and hedonism life: It was rumored of Dorian once that he was about to join the Roman Catholic. However, for a season, Dorian was inclined materialistic doctrines of the Darwinism movement in German. Then he studies perfumes and the secret of their manufacture, distilling heavily-scented oils, burning odors gums from the east, and seeking to establish the real psychology of perfumes. At another time, Dorian devoted himself entirely to music, giving curious or eccentric concerts, collecting together the strangest instrument that could be found from all parts of the world, trying and touching them. On one occasion he took up the study of jewels, spending a whole day settling and resettling the various stones that he collected, discovering all wonderful mythology and historical stories about jewels. Then he turned his attention to embroideries, and to the tapestries that performed the office of frescoes in the chill rooms of the Northern nations of Europe, accumulating the most exquisite specimen that he could find of textile and embroidered work, absorbing what he look up and mourning by the ruin that time brought on beautiful and wonderful things...(bk. 1 chap. 11)

At the beginning of the novel, Dorian Gray was an innocent young man. Basil regarded Dorian Gray's extremely handsome appearance as the motive in art: according to him, everything could be seen in Dorian's beauty, and it was indispensable for Basil to draw excellent pictures. Henry's doctrine about the marvelous youth and do not squander the gold of days instigated Dorian. Dorian felt it was the first time he recognized himself and sense his own beauty. All these caused Dorian's morbid pursuit of eternal youth and beauty. On the one hand, it reveals the advocating of eternal things in western life attitude. On the other hand, the influence of Basil and Henry reflects the impact of the social environment on the individual. It is also the reason why Dorian is depraved and indulged in hedonism and consumptionism life. Henry, a charming and articulate gentleman from the upper-class society, is crucial for Dorian's change. His talk with great eloquence about youth is the one thing worth having and *carpe diem* had a profound effect on Dorian's lifestyle and life attitude. To some extent, Henry can be seen as a representative of the Victorian aristocracy and exhibited the view of life that most Victorian people possess in upper-class circles who rolled in wealth and rioted in debauchery. The overelaborate etiquette, the overfastidious taste, and the elegant speech are regarded as status symbols. They wore resplendent clothes and participated in social affairs from one to another. They were addicted to pleasure, indulged in materials, lead extravagant life, and were obsessed with leisurely entertainment. At the same time, Victorian society was notable for its restricted morality, emphasis on renunciation, asceticism, and restraining desire. Ironically, the widespread syphilis is evidence of the enormous gap between Victorian moral concepts and actual behavior. Dorian's life attitude not only represents Wilde's repudiation of far-fetched relevance between beauty and morality, but also sarcasm on hypocrisy moralists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **IV. Inspiration to life education in the COVID-19 Era**

As a Victorian novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was written in an epidemic era and illustrated people's attitudes under the shadow of plagues and death. The bioethics metaphors demonstrated in section III can provide us with many inspirations for life education in the COVID-19 Era. Dorian's pursuit of immortality exhibits Victorian people's helplessness for the epidemic and the high death rate. However, the dehumanization after Dorian's immortality inspires us: in the Covid-19 era, rather than alleviate the fear of death, it is more important to re-examine death and provide a further comprehension of death. The love tragedy between Dorian and Sibyl not only leads us to think about different dimensions of life value together with Wilde, but also imply us the necessity of mutual understanding between people with different life attitudes.

##### **1. Epidemic: as a mirror of people's inward**

The portrait in the novel can be seen as a mirror of Dorian's soul. Likewise, the epidemic unveiled people's inward. On the one hand, people under the epidemic are inevitability feared, anxious, depressed, and helpless. These negative emotions may surmount people's rational thinking and lead to a series of bad

consequences. For example, as Alpert, who “attend on the Internal Medicine, Cardiac Care Unit, and Cardiology consults services” during Covid-19, pointed out, the internal medicine inpatient population in covid-19 became much more badly ill and dying than in the past data, because the patients with chronic diseases tried their best to keep away the hospital for the fear of being infected by COVID, and their distrust of medical personnel that they may pay more attention to COVID patients. Hence, life education in the Covid-19 era is obligated to help people think more rationally about plagues and medicine. On the other hand, courage and determination as well as countless good qualities are demonstrated in the epidemic. For example, China’s great spirit of combating the COVID epidemic like putting people’s lives first, nationwide solidarity, sacrifice, respecting science, sense of mission for humanity... These good qualities, together with the heroic moving deeds should be advocated in life education in the COVID-19 era.

## **2. Death education of the Covid-19 era**

### **2.1 Comparison between Chinese and western death attitudes**

A general conclusion can be drawn from the western death attitude: Western people maintain a keen interest and curiosity in the afterlife, they believe that the soul is immortal. For example, Socrates regarded that human life can be reincarnated continuously, Descartes wrote in *Discours de la Méthode* that our soul is completely independent of the body in essence, so it will never die with the body (Descartes, 1999). Traditional Christianity believes disease, suffering, and death are recognized within a cosmic narrative of sin, forgiveness, and salvation (Engelhardt, 314). For the plagues and the high mortality rate, death and mourning occupied an important part of Victorian people’s daily life, they created a series of ceremony traditions, and commemorate their dead relatives in various ways. The complex rituals, and the widowhood of Queen Victoria after the early death of Prince Albert, romanticized death for Victorian people and form a social atmosphere of the “cult of death”. However, in Victorian literary and artistic works, we can still find the fear of death concealed in the aesthetic expression and romantic rhetoric.

Differently, the traditional Confucius view of death “If you don’t understand what life is, how will you understand death” made Chinese people remain silent about death. Chinese philosophers always avoid facing the essence of death directly. There lacks rational discussion of the ultimate problems such as what exactly is death. We can notice a common phenomenon in Chinese society that most people see death as a taboo topic. However, the avoidance of talking about death in Confucian culture does not imply contempt for death. Actually, it is a reflection of the Chinese positive attitude of being happy in life that people should be responsible for their lives and be realistic. We should not think too much about “death” and the afterlife, but should consider the question of how to “live”. Yet, due to the deficiency in the rational exploration of death, the traditional concept of “happy to live” but “fear of death” was formed between the masses. Thus, death education is a necessity for us, especially in the Covid-19 era to alleviate people’s fear of death.

### **2.2 Re-examination of death**

Similar to Dorian, death is dreadful for many people. They are afraid of death, thinking of the badness and the evil of death. People yearning for eternal life, trying different matters for their longevity. The development of contemporary medicine made a great contribution to today’s life expectancy.

However, as is written in the novel, Dorian’s dehumanization is the other side of his immortality. All moral constraints became invalid as soon as he escaped life limitations. What we love, what we treasure, what we care about were insignificant for one who can live forever... The novel just reveals one evil consequence if people are immortal. In the real world, there will be a lot of negative impacts when the life expectancy was prolonged infinitely, such as, class consolidation without the transfer of power; the pension burden will increase while the fertility desire will decrease which affects a lot of diversification of people; even though the fertility desire decrease, the increasing number of population will soon exceed the resource capacity... Besides, contemporary medicine is not invincible. The burst out of COVID seriously imperiled public health and evoked people’s fear as well as death anxiety at the same time.

Thus, life education in the Covid-19 era, should not only relieve people’s fear of death, but also lead them to reexamine death, and provide them with a broader perspective to look upon life and death. The existence of death leads people’s devotion and cherishing of life, the limitation of life impels them to understand and respect life, all of these push them to live mindfully and be present in the moment, and makes life wonderful. On the other hand, ethical restrictions and moral values become important for the limitation of life. And life was diversified because of death.

## **3. Life education in the Covid-19 era**

### **3.1 Life attitudes**



Under the background of the epidemic, the suffering and death remind people of the limitation and the vulnerability of life, impelling us to pay more attention to real life and to enjoy real life. Thus, life education is a necessity for us in the Covid-19 era, helping people to understand the entire life process systematically and deeper their comprehension of the meaning of life. Knowing the essence of life is the premise of living a better life and enjoying real life. Conversely, Dorian's hedonism and consumptionism life attitudes revealed in the novel is more an indulgence than an enjoyment. Bioethics education in the Covid-19 era should focus on reality, but it also needs to guide people to pursue higher values, besides material and carnal enjoyment.

### **3.2 Different dimensions of life value**

Dorian and Sibyl represent two different attitudes toward what is the value of life, which caused their love tragedy. And this difference is more complex in the reality, especially under the moral pluralism of post-modernity. Different cultural identities, religious beliefs, life experiences, and other personal reasons make people see life, epidemic, and death differently, and value life in different dimensions, which results in the diversity of morality in bioethics fields. The prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic call for global cooperation on the basis of consensus. As a consequence of moral pluralism and the diversity of bioethics, people may have a consistent understanding of certain ethical concepts, but it is impossible to force everyone to reach an agreement on their life attitudes. Thus, it is necessary for current life education to seek mutual respect and understanding between people with a different moral choices, and try to bridge the differences between people with different ethical perspectives.

## **V. Conclusion**

As Foucault wrote in *Discipline and Punish*: "this 'contempt' for the body is certainly related to a general attitude to death; and, in such an attitude, one can detect not only the values proper to Christianity, but a demographical, in a sense biological, situation: the ravages of disease and hunger, the periodic massacres of the epidemics, the formidable child mortality rate, the precariousness of the bio-economic balances – all this made death familiar and gave rise to rituals intended to integrate it, to make it acceptable and to give a meaning to its permanent aggression." In Covid-19 Era, life education toward the crowds is a necessity. This life education is not to educate people to ignore death, evoke 'contempt' for the body, or give a religious or cultural meaning to death, but to provide a broader perspective for people to look upon death, love and cherish life, find the value and meaning of life, as well as help people live a better life.

Moreover, the development of network technology and the rise of online courses popularize life education and made it accessible to the public. For further study, it is worth discussing how to make space for all people with all cultural and intellectual backgrounds in contemporary life education, alleviate their fear, help them think more rationally about plagues and medicine, as well as educate them on how to treat life and death.

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