

**Michael Davies. “Mind and Matter in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41 (2013): 547-560.**

Michael Davies's fascinating article builds on the wealth of research that reads Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) in terms of evolutionary theory and degenerative, to contemplate the novel's engagement with contemporary scientific debates in psychology, and specifically those debates that probe the relationships between mind and matter. Davies demonstrates how Wilde's novel can be usefully read via the work of three late-Victorian psychologists; W. K. Clifford, James Sully and William James, and goes on to trace the complex interplay between theories of mind and matter, Walter Pater's decadent aesthetics and the novel's central metaphor of the painting.

Davies argues that Wilde's "nightmarish gothic vision of mental and physical disintegration" is more than just an exploration of evolutionary discourses, and that it raises "fundamental questions about the paradoxical relations between mind and body and, crucially, of more fluid and creative possibilities in the self than are suggested by readings of the text which centre on the degenerationist paradigm" (548). Firstly, he focuses on the work of W. K. Clifford whose "solution to bridging the gap between the mental and physical" relies on the contention that within all forms of matter there is a correlation to "mental fact." The correspondence between mind and matter forms the basis for, what Clifford called, "mind-stuff" (549), which explains, Davies argues, "the atoms in the painting, which themselves seem to take on a kind of mental and moral life" (549). Thus, the key aspect of the connection between Clifford and Wilde is that the mind is not passive and that some form of "mental chemistry" (550) is at play here.

Alternatively, the work of James Sully on associationism explores the mind's ability to relate data to that gained in past experiences. Davies argues that this "points to the mind's more explicitly creative potential, and this helps to foreground Wilde's implied insistence on the power of human perception not only in the novel's exploration of aestheticism but also even at moments at which we are confronted with the spectacle of mental and physical degeneration" (552). Again, links are drawn to degeneration theories, but are also challenged by both the unpredictability of the physical and mental state and the imaginative potential exemplified in the transformation of the painting. William James is also considered, as Davies explores James's "theory of consciousness," which suggests that the "mind is able to select aspects of sensory data for special attention according to the particular interests of the individual subject" (552). James's theory "in some ways anticipates Dorian's musings on the properties of the painting's atoms" (552), and connections can also be drawn between James and Walter Pater, as both, Davies argues, address the "unnerving idea that there is no fundamental distinction between human and non-organic matter, yet both, too, insist on the active power of the human mind as a distinct entity" (553). It is important to remain aware of Pater's argument when considering Wilde's novel as it clarifies the importance of the interplay between aesthetics and the mind's ability to distort its representation. Davies observes that in Wilde's novel the "picture seems in one sense to be a random collection of atoms selected by Basil, as though Dorian's identity itself threatens to dissolve into pure materiality." Significantly, however, "thought seems able to exert an influence on the matter of the painting which is analogous to the role which James ascribes to consciousness, though in the novel that

influence is far more tangible and monstrous” (553). Further analogies are drawn between James’s theory and the novel, as Davies shows how the “painting itself, and Wilde’s descriptions of some reactions to it, both present the self as characterised by a paradoxical combination of physicality and radical fluidity” (554). However, while Lord Henry’s “vivisection methods” of psychological analysis “seems to offer a vision of the self as stable and mappable,” Davies shows how this tangibility “soon breaks down” – the fluid self, for example, is more obviously seen with Dorian’s drug addiction, “in which the self is re-shaped by literally chemical means” (554). These key themes of the novel are linked to wider “scientifically pertinent questions about the relations between mind, body, and the environment” (555) which ultimately show the fluidity between biological and physical readings of the self.

Davies manages the topic of mind and matter with originality and innovation, his fascinating analysis and subtle use of the work of contemporary theorists allows for the novel to be placed in a wider cultural/scientific context. The article contributes to the field of literature and science by making important claims for the novel’s engagement with key contemporary debates in the development of psychology. At the same time, it is explicit throughout that literature is not necessarily influenced by science but acts rather as a medium through which scientific debates can be addressed. While the article takes popular explorations of degeneration into consideration, it also usefully builds on, and goes beyond, such concerns, to recover a complex point of intersection between concepts of degeneration, Paterian aesthetics and discourses focused in and around contemporary notions of the relationship between mind, body and matter.

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