
Obsession, Destruction and Control - a Film Vs. Novel Comparison of Whiplash and the Picture of Dorian Gray

Although created in different eras, Oscar Wilde's 1890 gothic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Damien Chazelle's 2014 drama film *Whiplash* are comparable in the exploration of obsession, destruction and control by the text's creators. Chazelle and Wilde analogously explore the concept of obsessions as they evolve in the minds of the protagonists, corresponding through their utilisation of minor characters yet differing in the nature of the fixations examined. Similarly, both texts incorporate the idea of a manipulative dynamic between two individuals, forming contrasts between the methods of control explored by the authors and the diverse techniques employed to examine how fear can influence the characters. As both authors conclude their texts with the destruction of the protagonist, the ending of *Whiplash* echoes a core motif where *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exhibits a metaphoric finale. Furthermore, Wilde's symbolic portrait and Chazelle's close ups allow each to emphasise an idea of physical destruction arising out of psychological devolvement.

As characterisation and allusion allows the central characters of Wilde's novel to explore an obsession with physical beauty, Chazelle's montages reveal the protagonist of *Whiplash* developing a dissimilar ambitious fixation on drumming. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the protagonist is immediately distinguished by his appearance first described as "a young man of extraordinary personal beauty", foreshadowing the importance of Dorian's physical appearance over his disposition. This idea fuels the character's obsession with his own beauty and its preservation with Wilde forming an analogy between Dorian and the classical myth of Narcissus who tragically loved his own reflection as "in a boyish mockery of Narcissus, [Dorian] had kissed [...] those painted lips" of his portrait. Contrastively, the first short montage witnessed in *Whiplash* establishes Andrew's growing obsession, with Chazelle integrating close ups of a "Buddy Rich" photograph and album to express the idolised ambition fuelling the protagonist's fixation (Fig. 1). Additionally, the succeeding frames in the montage cut between Andrew and a low angle shot tracking in towards a drum set, emulating an atmosphere of worship and power (Fig. 2). Unlike the montages of *Whiplash*, Wilde manipulates Basil's character to explore an obsession solely developed from beauty as he declares Dorian's "me[re] visual presence" suggests "an entirely new manner in art", equating him to the "face of Antonius [in] Greek sculpture". In a different manner, a second montage in *Whiplash* implies how Andrew's obsession consumes his life by combining shots of aggressive drumming with sequences of Andrew fanatically moving to sleep next to the drums (Fig. 3). With the concept of obsession central to both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Whiplash*, Wilde explores a fixation on physical beauty through characterisation and allusions to Greek mythology, while the techniques

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integrated into Chazelle's montages convey a different, achievement-orientated infatuation with music.

Minor characters in both *Whiplash* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are utilised to explore the corresponding concept of obsessive behaviour and its alienating effects. Chazelle stresses the suppressed insanity of Andrew's fixation by juxtaposing a loud sequence of him drumming in frenzied state with a wide mid-shot of his first date with Nicole- exhibiting a contrasting calm blue-green colour scheme and softly spoken dialogue (Fig. 4). Like Nicole, Sibyl highlights the destructive obsession Dorian has with visual and artistic beauty, as he bases their engagement purely on this infatuation claiming her "mere beauty could fill your eyes with tears". Thus when Sibyl fails to meet Dorian's expectations of beauty in her acting, he cruelly rejects her declaring that she "killed [his] love" with Wilde exploiting her consequent suicide to highlight the dangerous effects of Dorian's narcissistic preoccupation with aesthetics. Similarly, while intimate medium close ups in the first date scene of *Whiplash* imply a connection between the characters, Nicole's discussion of her undecided collage major contrasts sharply with Andrew's tenacious fixation on pursuing perfection in jazz drumming. Consequently, Chazelle cuts to a wide shot accentuating the physical distance between the two characters to signify the philosophical divide between Nicole and Andrew due to his obsessive behaviour, forming the foundation of his later rejection (Fig. 5). Alternatively, Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* becomes a medium through which Wilde expresses the aesthetic theories at the core of his novel that instigate Dorian's obsession with beauty, as he declares that beauty "is a form of genius" and "the wonder of all wonders" with a "divine right of sovereignty". Ultimately, Chazelle and Wilde similarly incorporate minor characters within their texts that function as a spotlight to emphasise Andrew and Dorian's obsession and isolation.

In *Whiplash*, Fletcher encapsulates the archetype of a tyrannical leader, controlling Andrew with hostility and violence, while the charismatic and alluring Henry of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, dissimilarly prefers to entice Dorian with the promise of pleasure and excitement. Fletcher's vulgar language and malicious insults are crucial to his persona, reflecting his aggressive methodology of manipulation as calling Andrew a "worthless, friendless [...] little piece of shit" with warnings like "If you deliberately sabotage my band, I will gut you like a pig", evidently only made him practice more in the succeeding scenes. In contrast, Wilde employs the novel's omniscient third person perspective to portray Henry's more subtle and passive approach to manipulating Dorian using his "philosophy of pleasure", as the narrator observes that when Henry "talk[ed] to [Dorian] it was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow". Additionally, Chazelle examines the symbolic significance of Fletcher's hand as a weapon of control by cinematically conveying its importance with close ups, focal shifts and contrastive harsh foreground lighting (Fig. 6). Specific counter shots in *Whiplash* emphasise the ephemeral but substantial control a conductor has over his band, and Chazelle infers the power Fletcher gains from this by making his hand synonymous with

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impending violence (Fig. 7). Like Fletcher's conducting hand, Henry's extravagant language and dialogue acts as a weapon drawing Dorian towards corruption. Wilde uses this dialogue to plant the seed of Henry's influence with the narrator observing how Henry's "mere words" had "touched some secret chord [in Dorian] that [...] he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses". Although *Whiplash* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* correspond in relation to the theme of control, Chazelle highlights Fletcher's aggressive influence with hostile language and symbolism whereas Wilde characterises Henry as a manipulator with a charming approach through an omniscient narrator.

Both *Whiplash* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* examine how fear can control and influence characters decisions, though where Chazelle takes advantage of the characters physical appearance and composition, Wilde employs symbolism. Fletcher's appearance in *Whiplash* is utilised to convey the sense of threat experienced by Andrew, which is essential to understanding his consequent submissive reactions. Chazelle draws the audience's focus towards Fletcher's muscular physic with lighting, creating shadows that extenuate the lines and form the aura of power and strength that emanates from his character (Fig. 8). As Chazelle focuses on creating Fletcher's atmosphere of intimidation, Wilde exploits the symbolism of the "yellow book" to stress Dorian's fear of mortality as a key provocation for his immoral behaviour. The single difference between the book and Dorian's life in that the "Parisian" grows and unsightly while Dorian remains young becomes the basis of its symbolism. As Dorian becomes "more and more enamoured" with his own beauty and the fear of losing it, he in turn grows "more interested in the corruption of his own soul", thus as it is Henry who gave him the book, it is Henry who is exploiting Dorian's fear of mortality to reinforce his poisonous hedonistic influence. Alternatively, Chazelle emphasises the lack of physical contact but frequent closeness between Andrew and Fletcher as the framing and composition of shots reflects the invasion of the characters' personal space (Fig. 9). This implies Andrew's fear predominately stems from the threat of internal violence in the form of disapproval and disappointment rather than in the literal sense, forming the core of Fletcher's effect as Andrew's actions reflect his desire to meet expectations. While Chazelle develops Fletcher's aura of power to emphasise his manipulation of Andrew's fear, Wilde focuses on how Dorian's fear of mortality heightened by the symbolic yellow book allows Henry to further control his mind.

Although Chazelle and Wilde ultimately convey the either literal or figurative destruction of their protagonists, *Whiplash* exhibits an ending that parallels a core motif where Wilde infers metaphoric ideas to convey an underlying morale. The final scenes of *Whiplash* mirror the recurring motif of the "Charlie Parker" anecdote, in which a jazz drummer throws a cymbal at the famous saxophonist's head- who a year later performs "the best solo" of his career. The reiteration of this story foreshadows Andrew's final confrontation with Fletcher, when he ferociously drums his best performance despite the psychosomatic abuse he has suffered.

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Chazelle amplifies the intensity of Andrew's psychological destruction by combining the powerful rhythmic soundtrack with progressively shorter shots that build up to a final counter close up of Fletcher's fleeting expression of approval and Andrew's feeble smile in response (Fig. 10). The audience is positioned to accept Andrew's solo as living proof of Fletcher's sadistic teaching method, as he finally attains his ideal "Charlie Parker". However, this comes at the cost of destroying the humanity and spirit of Andrew who, ironically, by proving the effectiveness of Fletcher's abuse, will forever be prisoner to his influence. Like *Whiplash*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ends with the ironic destruction of the protagonist as, in an effort to start a "new life" and be "good", Dorian seeks to destroy the only symbol of his conscience- the portrait- and face the immorality of his soul. Yet as Dorian is essentially the essence of this immorality he seeks to destroy, by metaphorically killing the painting, he kills himself and bears the physical consequences of his sin. In depicting death as Dorian's only salvation, Wilde reinforces the idea of "purification in punishment" and thus criticizes the hedonistic lifestyle. As Wilde highlights Dorian's physical destruction with a metaphoric ending, Chazelle intensifies the final sequence in *Whiplash* to depict the destruction of Andrew's spirit and psyche as he, unlike Dorian who is liberated from his sins in death, will never to be free from Fletcher's control.

Chazelle and Wilde similarly emphasise the direct physical destruction from the parallel psychological devolvement of their protagonists, however *Whiplash* depicts this concept through close ups and hand-held shots while *The Picture of Dorian Gray* explores the idea with a portrait motif. The physical consequences of a damaged psyche in *Whiplash* is established when Chazelle juxtaposes a shot of Andrew's fast paced erratic drumming, with a slow motion close up of his bloody fist entering ice. As the blood dramatically disperses in the water, the colour alludes to the manifestation of psychological pain in the characters actions and condition, much like the "scarlet" blood that "gleamed, wet and glistening" on the hands of Dorian's portrait after he murdered Basil (Fig. 11). Contrary to the ambiguity of Chazelle's cinematic techniques, the metaphoric concept of Dorian's portrait is explicitly conveyed as Wilde writes "the picture [...] would be to [Dorian] the visible emblem of conscience". Thus, as Dorian pursues a decadent and immoral lifestyle, the portrait bears the physical traces of his "sins", transcending its two-dimensional properties to become a character in itself; a physical medium through which Wilde conveys Dorian's psychological devolvement. In contrast to Wilde's literary symbolism, Chazelle's use of erratic hand-held shots positions the audience to experience the hysterical and disoriented state of Andrew's psyche, combined with close ups of literal allusions to suffering like blood and sweat that connect Andrew's destroyed state of mind with his physical pain. Where Wilde utilises the symbolic significance of the portrait to stress the physical effects of Dorian's deteriorating mentality, Chazelle implicitly makes the same connection between the destruction of Andrew's mind and body with particular close ups and hand-held shots.

With parallel plots, *Whiplash* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* delve into the psychology of

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obsessive behaviour. Though Chazelle's montages illustrating a fanaticism for drumming diverge from Wilde's allusions to classical mythology and dissonant infatuation with beauty, both writers exploit minor characters to assert the isolating effects of this fervent behaviour. In the same manner, the notion of controlling dynamics between characters and the manipulation of fear is at the core of both texts. Wild emphasises Fletcher's aggressive influence and aura of power with composition and costume, which starkly contrast Henry's charming manipulation inferred by the narrator and highlighted by Wilde with symbolism. Chazelle and Wilde distinctively develop a connection between physical and psychological damage that ultimately erupts into the either literal or figurative destruction of the protagonist in the denouement of both narratives. Consequently, while the context of *Whiplash* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* significantly differ, the interconnected elements of obsession, destruction and control extend beyond this difference forming a timeless introspective into the darker side of human nature.

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