

The Picture of Marilyn Monroe: How Oscar Wilde Predicts the Frightening Afterlife of the Dead Celebrity Persona

BRADY SIMENSON

“Good artists exist simply in what they make, and consequently are perfectly
uninteresting in what they are.”

—Lord Henry (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 50)

Dead celebrities have been a growing cultural commodity for many years. Recent figures put the value of dead celebrity licensing and royalties at over \$2.25 billion annually (Kirsta). T-shirts, coffee mugs, and various other products still carry the faces of stars like Marilyn Monroe, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain even decades after their deaths. Dead celebrity tours are offered all over Los Angeles and Elvis Presley’s Graceland brings in numerous visitors every day. As technology has developed, however, family estates and production companies have gained even more potential control over dead celebrity personas. No longer is this a mere issue of images, works, and names being used after death, but now the issue has expanded to an almost complete resurrection of the persona itself. Tupac Shakur can perform at Coachella in front of a live audience. Peter Cushing can reprise his *Star Wars: A New Hope* role from 1977 as Grand Moff Tarkin in 2016’s *Star Wars: Rogue One*, more than 20 years after Cushing’s death. Technology’s increasing ability to digitally resurrect and commodify dead celebrity personas has also inspired a growing academic interest in the subject. Researchers have often utilized the morbid, yet nonetheless useful, pun “delebs” to describe the celebrity persona as it is used after the death of the bodied individual (D’Rozario 486). Such researchers focus on a variety of topics related to the commodification and worship of dead celebrities including their frequent use in advertising, the obsessive collecting of

Brady Simenson is an English instructor and Master’s student in Film and Literature at Northern Illinois University. His research interests are contemporary popular culture, the horror genre, and video games. His writing has most recently been featured in the journal, *Popular Culture Review*, and for the websites, *Pop Matters* and *Haywire Magazine*. He can be reached at bradysimenson@gmail.com.

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 7, No. 2
Copyright © 2019

dead celebrity memorabilia, fan control over dead celebrity legacies, and of course, the ethics of such dead celebrity control (Black; D’Rozario and Bryant; Newman et al; Petty and D’Rozario).

As useful and interesting such research is in understanding the contemporary and growing trend of dead celebrity usage in popular culture, it is important to acknowledge that control of the dead celebrity persona is far older than the modern computer technology that has brought the topic into the spotlight. Modern technology has simply provided the opportunity to resurrect and control the dead celebrity persona in a way that the public has wanted to do for as long as celebrity has existed. I do not seek to trace this trend to the origins of celebrity itself, as identifying such a point in time is perhaps a fool’s errand in and of itself, but I do seek to highlight how this conversation has existed significantly not only far before the technology of CGI and holograms, but even before the popularization of film itself. I will do this through a focus on the philosophies of Oscar Wilde and his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which I argue is a pioneering work in the history of discussing the celebrity persona after death.

While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been most often encountered in journals dedicated to Victorian Literature or the Gothic, in recent years more scholars have connected Wilde’s ideas in the novel to a variety of postmodern studies discussing simulation, images, and authorship, amongst many other subjects (Boyiopoulos; de Vries; Gomel). While I have no intentions to label Wilde as any sort of proto-postmodernist, I do seek to argue that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes startling predictions about the evolution of popular culture and the use of dead celebrity personas. *Wilde’s* novel is a predictor of our use of the dead celebrity persona in a similar way to how George Orwell’s *1984* is a predictor of the proliferation of a technological police state. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* highlights a cultural desire to immortalize and control the celebrity persona beyond the bodily death of the human being behind the image. While contemporary writers have studied modern technology’s ability to digitally resurrect dead celebrities such as Shakur at Coachella or Cushing in *Rogue One*, it is important to acknowledge and study that this cultural control and manipulation of the personas of dead celebrities has existed long before we possessed the technology to so literally do so. Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a startling example of such cultural desire for control over the dead celebrity persona, and the novel offers further proof of Wilde’s importance to dead celebrity studies. The most important example of such future control comes

from the woman behind one of popular culture's most iconic visages: Marilyn Monroe.

Oscar Wilde's Own Immortal Persona

Laura Mulvey, the pioneering feminist film theorist, says that in Marilyn Monroe's prime she was "an ultimate signifier of sexuality [...] always more image than character; she personified a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' in which interiority would be, by and large, irrelevant" (207). Monroe's celebrity persona was a "highly evolved masquerade" of image and performance that was "frozen" and "immutable" (Mulvey 207). As Mulvey argues, Monroe was, and is, to most people in the world, experienced as a cultural image rather than as a bodied person, a being of surface rather than substance. At the height of her fame, however, the still living and breathing woman behind the façade grew frustrated with the lack of depth and diversity that her employer, Fox Studios, afforded her. Monroe yearned to move beyond her fetishized image. With her then husband, the writer Arthur Miller, and director John Huston, Monroe developed a character for the film *The Misfits* (1961) "on which she pinned so many hopes for her new image," an image that would evoke more of "a vulnerable persona" (Mulvey 208).

Monroe's first appearance in *The Misfits* is written as a bittersweet echo of her true self, a rare on-screen allusion to the woman behind the persona. In the film, Monroe's character sits in front of a mirror, and as Ana Salzberg describes the scene:

Captured in the luminosity of the looking glass, her visage wears all its famous beauty: simply, she wears the mask of Marilyn Monroe, movie star. As she turns away from the mirror to face the lens directly, however, the camera reveals a somewhat different figure in medium close-up: a woman with swelling under her eyes and lines around them, the strain on her face so diffused by the reflection now altogether apparent. (144)

Here can be seen a beautiful yet vulnerable human faced with the fear of mortality as she gazes on her own immortal, artistic persona, a dynamic that offers startling echoes of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Of Wilde's one and only novel, Elana Gomel says it "can be read as a prescient commentary on [...] [Wilde's] own posthumous transformation into a cultural icon.

The novel dramatizes the dangers of pursuing an ideal self to the exclusion of all the complexities and divisions of a living psyche. It shows what happens when the artistic ‘fiction of the self’ turns against the body” (Gomel 79). Since Wilde himself acknowledges Dorian Gray as “what he wanted to be,” and Basil Hallward as “who he actually is,” it is fair to see the portrait of Dorian, as it was painted by Hallward, as Wilde’s own artistic persona (Gomel 85). As Hallward even directly confesses, “I have put too much of myself into it” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 6). Dorian identifies with his “ideal self,” presented in the painting, which is “both unified and incorporeal, free from the gross materiality of the body and the instability of the human psyche” (Gomel 80). The painting enraptures Dorian as it offers a perfect version of his persona that is free from his own body’s inevitable physical and moral decay. He wishes to literally become the persona, and “thus to achieve the immortality and immutability of the objet d’art” (Gomel 80). Unfortunately for Dorian, this is precisely what he achieves. He trades the ravages of physical and moral decay to the painting, and gives up his humanity in the process, and before his horrific end, realizes that it was his very soul that he “bartered away” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 181).

Both Dorian Gray and Marilyn Monroe share this disturbing split between the bodied self and the creatively-crafted persona that enters the realm of artistic images, destined to long outlive the mortal, organic being hidden below the surface. Monroe, like many other dead celebrity icons, has only become more popular since her untimely demise, so much so that she remains a significant and lucrative cultural commodity. Monroe’s image is still an incredibly frequent presence on t-shirts, posters, drink glasses, and endless other forms of merchandise. While there is no way of knowing the cultural fate of Dorian’s portrait in the fictional realm of the novel itself, the final image we are left with is the portrait, “in all the wonder of his exquisite beauty,” surviving the “withered” and “wrinkled” body, evoking in the reader a sense of the artistic persona’s immortality (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 188).

The Picture of Dorian Gray makes an eerily accurate prediction that the world will come to prefer artistic personas over the bodied beings behind the performances, as will later happen with Monroe and even Wilde himself. This becomes increasingly true as our image culture evolves through film and social media, making the world privilege the persona more and more. Just as Monroe’s immortal persona has become vastly removed from her original self, so too has been the case for countless artists like James Dean or Elvis Presley, whose personas

become progressively more manipulated after death. The seed of this culture can be found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as it involves the evolution of artistic persona in bodily life and after bodily death. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not only predicts the immortal life of the artistic persona, but even more disturbingly, it predicts our modern romanticizing of dead artists.

Wilde was clearly aware of the necessary split between the bodied being and the incorporeal persona, between the artist and the art. In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde states, “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” (3). The great irony is that the world reacted to the story as a novelized sponsor of Wilde’s own aesthetic lifestyle, and the content of the story was even held up against Wilde when he was charged with gross indecency. During the trial, Wilde protested the idea that the *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was an autobiography, but later acknowledged privately to Max Beerbohm that the subject matter was indeed “taken directly from his life” (Gomel 87). Wilde’s artistic persona simply was and remains too powerful to conceal within his work. As Gomel says, “Far from concealing the artist, Wilde’s art has put him on permanent display. Hardly any other writer has been the subject of so many biographies, novels, films, and plays” (Gomel 79). Wilde’s persona has become as everlasting as Dorian himself, and at least in the same realm of immortality as Monroe and other iconic artists. They have all become symbols freed from the confines of bodies subject to physical and moral decay.

Of all these figures, the wonder of Dorian, of course, is that he inverts the dynamic between organic being and art by making his body the unblemished icon while the painting takes on the mortal vulnerabilities of the flesh. Wilde himself, like all other celebrity icons, suffered the fate of hiding his personal humanity away from prying eyes, as Dorian later does with the cursed portrait. Wilde’s art, which he wrote and lived, shows he was aware of this necessary split between eternally bodied man and the artistic, temporarily bodied, persona. Wilde was never interested in “constructing a static identity,” but, rather, he lived a series of “self-transformations that belie the notion of an essential or unchanging Oscar Wilde” (Dumortier 156). One crucial example would be his shifting his persona from a more Bohemian aloofness as an aesthete, to a more sophisticated and socially-engaged dandy. Thus, since Wilde himself privileged the constructed persona as his way to engage with the world, he was aware of how little use the public has for the “essential,” private truth of a person. An individual’s own mind is the only one to experience that truth, so the immortal persona, at least in the public perception,

achieves far more reality. In this sense, Gomel is incorrect to suggest that Wilde failed in “concealing the artist,” as Wilde’s persona is what was really put on trial for gross indecency, and his persona is what still lives on today. The “essential” Wilde, trapped in his mortal body, suffered the physical punishment of the persona’s trial, and the “essential,” bodied Wilde died not long after, to be still outlived by the persona today.

The horror that faces a celebrity persona after bodily death is that the public assumes total and immediate control over the persona now eternally free from bodily influence. The long-dead “essential” Wilde is no longer pulling the persona’s strings. While many in the world still experience him through his written work, his persona’s afterlife is mostly pictorial. The vast majority of people today do not experience Wilde’s persona through his writing, but rather through his “visual ubiquity,” including endless internet memes, merchandise, and book covers, “a commercial afterlife of images not unlike Monroe” (Dumortier 148). For those who experience Wilde in such a way, his lasting persona is even further removed from the original bodied man. The closest many contemporary people get to Wilde’s writing is through the ubiquity of his famous quotes, but even those are suspect as famous figures are misquoted frequently, Wilde himself being commonly and prominently among the misquoted.

While the above suggests that the thoughts and intentions of the bodied Wilde are of little consequence to those who only casually experience his persona today, many who study his life thoroughly are also far more interested in the persona than in the bodied man. Despite having a variety of visual representations throughout his life, and despite also having a variety of opinions that evolved throughout his career, there are still many biographers who “fit [Wilde] into moulds of their own making and, on discovering that he overlaps the edges in a tiresomely uncooperative way, have simply trimmed off the surplus” (Holland 4). Indeed, many biographers and scholars have the tendency to overrepresent images of Wilde from his aesthetic period, particularly his most famous 1882 photo session in the United States with Napoleon Sarony, which has greatly shaped Wilde’s contemporary persona. This aspect of Wilde’s persona was actually quite brief and privileging those images “constrains understanding, doing insufficient justice to Wilde’s complexities and variations over time” (Dumortier 148). The “essential” Wilde is thus ignored by many of today’s most qualified literary experts, and even those who seek a more complex, well-rounded concept of the bodied man, can never completely achieve that. The “essential,” interior being is lost forever, and

the best that even well-intentioned scholars can ever do is to craft personas that are as close to the original, bodied Wilde as can be managed.

Wilde's Prophecy of the Immortal Persona of Sybil Vane

The posthumous crafting of the dead celebrity persona is crucial to the public obsession with these icons. Like Wilde, many other artists such as Monroe, Presley, or Shakur have died tragically only to be immortalized in our visual culture even by those who have little familiarity with their work but have better familiarity with their life stories as generally accepted in the zeitgeist. For example, many people know about the culturally accepted narrative of Monroe's affair with John F. Kennedy, or of her tragic death, even if they have not seen any of her films. The disembodied personas of icons like Monroe and Presley, and the cultural stories those personas signify are just as controlled and commercialized today as Wilde, if not more so. Those who lead the most fascinating lives, whose experiences tell the most interesting story, become cultural signifiers. They exist beyond death as symbols, their immortal personas imbued with innumerable levels of meaning from innumerable perspectives. Wilde's persona, as is the case with all the aforementioned celebrity icons, is now more of a communally-crafted story about his cultural legacy than anything else. As Gomel says, "The drama of Wilde's trials, incarceration, and premature death has all the elements of a good story, which somehow suggests its being scripted" (79). Eerily, Wilde seemed to be attuned to this fate of the artistic persona, and one need look no further than *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the crafting of Sibyl Vane's persona.

Sibyl is a stage actress at the local theatre. The profession makes her a clear fit for Wilde's concept of living an artistic persona while hiding away the "essential" being. Dorian falls madly in love with Sibyl while watching her perform. Dorian experiences these feelings for Sibyl before having even met her away from the stage. Her artistic persona is so powerful that Dorian falls in love with it rather than with the person behind it. Dorian says to love Sibyl is to "take my love out of poetry, and to find my wife in Shakespeare's plays [...] I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth" (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 66). Because of Dorian's tendency to speak of Sibyl mostly in terms of her characters, Henry slyly asks him, "When is she Sibyl Vane?" (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 48). To this, Dorian's reply is a startlingly simple, "Never" (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 48). Her artistic persona is all that matters to Dorian from the

beginning, and she initially seems to be a perfect fit for him because she only seems to care about his persona as well.

Sibyl agrees to marry Dorian before even knowing his real name, knowing him only by the fictional persona, “Prince Charming” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 59). Their love of this shared fiction positions the relationship itself as a mutual artistic persona, like lovers in a romantic play. They are both incredibly happy until the facade is broken, and Dorian is faced with the reality behind the performances. After Sibyl falls in love with Dorian, her onstage acting becomes “artificial” and “false,” horrifying Dorian and the rest of the audience (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 72). Sibyl herself is overjoyed with her terrible performance and tells Dorian, “before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 74). Essentially, Sibyl’s artistic persona was all that mattered to the world before someone came along who seemingly cared about the woman behind the facade. She goes on to tell Dorian that “painted scenes were my world [...] and I thought them real,” but he taught her to see “through the hollowness” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 74). The world’s love of the artistic persona is indeed a hollow one. While Sibyl Vane’s artistic persona itself has a flesh and blood woman beneath the facade, the love Dorian has for her is one that denies the “essential” being at the core.

After Sibyl confesses that her love for Dorian is why she will never act well again, Dorian furiously spurns her. He tells her that she no longer produces any “effect,” and that he only loved her because she “realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 75). She is thus to him nothing but a defunct objet d'art, “shape and substance” manifesting art rather than her own, inconsequential being. As Dorian tells Sibyl, “Without your art you are nothing” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 75). For him, the ultimate obsessed celebrity fan, the persona is simply more real than real.

Dorian’s rejection drives Sibyl to suicide on that same night. Dorian is initially devastated when he hears the news from Henry the next day, blaming himself for having murdered her. Henry, however, eventually convinces Dorian to see her death “from a proper artistic point of view” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 94). Henry argues that Sibyl’s suicide “possesses artistic elements,” and that there is something “quite beautiful about her death” because it makes him “believe in the reality of [...] romance, passion, and love” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 87-8). Sibyl’s suicide is a triumph of art, and Dorian is comforted knowing that it is “one of the great romantic tragedies of the age” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 93). Her

life and death become the incredible story necessary to achieve her persona's immortality as a cultural signifier.

While her persona is elevated to such iconic heights, Henry makes it painfully clear how little the woman behind the persona mattered:

The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare's plays and left them lovelier for its presence, a reed through which Shakespeare's music sounded richer and more full of joy. The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away. Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are. (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 89)

Wilde frames Sibyl, the bodied being, as "less real" than the "dream" or the "phantom" she became in the minds of those who experienced her artistic persona. This intangible essence of Sibyl is the entity that lived in the "sphere of art" and continues to do so after the death of the bodied being, who is not "real" enough to mourn. To underscore her artistic afterlife, Dorian asks Basil to do a drawing of Sibyl so that he can have more of her than just troubled memories. Sibyl reaches the level of iconicity for Dorian; her persona remains with him for the rest of his life.

Wilde's Prophecy Fulfilled in the Immortal Persona of Marilyn Monroe

Sibyl's life story falls into the hands of her spectators, in this case Dorian and Henry. Dorian metaphorically takes possession of her image, an action, as has already been seen with the afterlife of Wilde's persona, that can control the immortal perception of the deceased artist. What happens here to Sibyl Vane, especially in the context of Wilde's celebrity persona throughout his life and cultural afterlife, offers an eerily accurate prediction of modern celebrity life and death. Linda Levitt, while writing about the commodification of stars and their deaths, argues that the images of dead celebrities "are valuable intellectual property" (67). Levitt stresses that after a celebrity dies, the media coverage often focuses on "what that person represents culturally and how audiences made

meaning of his or her career” (63). Monroe specifically has had her persona controlled and her life story debated intensely after her death, a suicide by poisoning that is remarkably like what happened to Sibyl Vane. Levitt says that Monroe’s “image is [...] repurposed to serve various ends. Monroe's narrative— abandoned by her parents, her difficult marriages, her shocking death— is used to represent the tragedy of stardom” (65). Before Monroe’s suicide, her difficult upbringing “legitimized the American Dream,” but after, “the narrative about Monroe had to open up to new meanings and interpretations” (Luksza 69). Today, she is not only seen as a victim of the Hollywood machine, but has also “come to represent a sexuality rooted in freedom and liberation rather than promiscuity and the male gaze. In these ways she becomes a simulacrum, as her personality recedes behind representation” (Levitt 65). Monroe is now a socially controlled image and narrative often produced by those with little interest for the “essential” being beneath. Her suicide, and Sybil Vane’s suicide, succeeded in killing their bodies, but changed their stories forever, propelling both forever into the “the sphere of art.”

The story of Monroe’s death is an indelible mark beneath the surface of the immortal persona. Mulvey says of Monroe:

The shock of her untimely death is now so much part of her mystique and her legacy that the artifice and cosmetic nature of her image seems to be already simultaneously defending against and prefiguring it. Furthermore, the closeup ‘Marilyns’ that Andy Warhol silk-screened as a tribute to her after her death in August 1962, are easily projected backwards on to Marilyn’s own closeup, fossilizing the emblematic Marilyn with connotations of death. In these works, he makes the mask of beauty and the death mask uncannily close, and the superimposition of the Warhol images onto the then-living Marilyn has a sense of deferred meaning, as though the pose prefigured the stillness of death. (208-9)

Mulvey’s idea here that knowledge of Monroe’s eventual death is tied inextricably to any experience of her living persona has echoes of Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller.” In his essay, Benjamin suggests the meaning of one’s life can only be revealed once death has been achieved. For example, “a man who died at thirty-five will appear to remembrance at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five,” just as Monroe in real life, and Sybil Vane in her fictional world,

will always appear to remembrance as women who met their own tragic fates (Benjamin 10). Benjamin also suggests that a story's protagonist is so significant because their death can provide us with a sense of "the meaning of life" (10). The vicarious experience of another's death through the art of the story, provides us with a taste of the unknowable, "this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate" (Benjamin 10). Vicarious experience is crucial to understanding our general interest in celebrities and has been investigated as one of the most important factors in celebrity obsession by many theorists (Basil; Fraser and Brown). Giving another life a final, narrative end provides it, at least in remembrance, an overall narrative meaning that everyone who is still living likes to imagine themselves eventually achieving.

As Mulvey suggests, Warhol immediately sought to imbue the life and death of Marilyn Monroe with a larger, existential meaning, doing so in an appropriately Wildean fashion. Warhol's "Marilyn Diptych" is a silkscreen painting featuring fifty seemingly identical images of Monroe with twenty-five on the left side in color and twenty-five on the right side in black and white. At closer inspection, however, the images are not identical, but rather, they show varying shades throughout the colored side and a ghostly distortion and fading effect throughout the black and white side. While appropriately Wildean, art is forever subject to a multitude of interpretations and perspectives, and the Marilyn Diptych seems to specifically represent that multiplicity itself with Monroe's persona as the subject. The side of color represents her multiple personas during life, while the monochrome side represents the continued Monroe personas, though blurred and distorted, that survive her bodily death.

According to Donald Kuspit, Warhol represents Monroe as "the vulgar version of the eternal feminine-and with that an all the more ineradicable part of collective consciousness and popular memory [...] She comes to represent the omnipotence of ephemeral public imagery" (46). Warhol frames Monroe as a social invention without substance and suggests that the artistically constructed nature of Monroe and all celebrities is the secret of their success. Celebrities so often self-destruct because they collapse under the pressure of keeping up with the persona. They lose all sense of self in the process. The idea represented by Warhol's Monroe echoes the fate of Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane, both of whom destroy themselves because of the pressure of maintaining their immortal personas. Dorian, who comes to embody the artistic persona, stabs the portrait, which had become his human,

“essential” self, his “conscience,” as he says (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 187). Sybil, meanwhile, regrets not showing herself “more of an artist” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 76). Confirming Dorian’s death as suicide, his body is what dies after the stabbing, “withered and wrinkled,” while the portrait reveals its immortality through its return to “exquisite youth and beauty” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 188). Sybil’s persona lives on as well, becoming “a wonderful tragic figure sent on to the world’s stage” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 90).

This is the world according to Wilde, as well as the world according to Warhol, whose work “suggests that all successful people are actors on a social stage [...] [and] that there is nothing behind the act: they are all inorganic facades, putting on a show for the audience, whose reality as living persons they are ultimately indifferent to” (Kuspit 44). Warhol commercialized Monroe and other celebrities after their deaths because he essentially saw them as “fixed immortal product[s]” (Kuspit 39). With Warhol’s celebrity paintings having become so iconic, and with celebrity personas living more and more after their bodily deaths, both Warhol and Wilde have been proven correct in their contentions. As a society, we appear to care more for the everlasting artistic persona than we do for the bodied beings at their core.

Wilde’s Prophecies of the Immortal Persona Alive Today

The modern preference for the immortal icon is immediately apparent after the death of any celebrity. A celebrity’s death significantly elevates their stature and even increases the value of their products (Radford and Bloch 43). For some of these artists, those who reach the level of icon, the adoration for them continues indefinitely. The estate of Elvis Presley makes \$50 million a year off his persona (Radford and Bloch 45). Monroe’s grave brings in hundreds of visitors every day (Levitt 62). A celebrity’s death increases their sacred status, it creates a mythology around them, especially when they die unexpectedly. The tragedy of early death not only brings the same artistic quality to their lives as it does for Sybil Vane, but it also freezes the artistic persona in time, as we see most powerfully with Dorian himself. Dying at the height of his fame allows the artistic persona to be “immortalized in youth,” as has been the case with Monroe, James Dean, Jim Morrison, and countless others (Levitt 67). These personas will never age, their eternal youth and beauty cannot be marred by age and decay. These images are also free from the stigma of immorality. Companies are eager to own the rights to these

personas because “a potential by-product of the artist no longer being around anymore is that they can’t mess up their life and attract the kind of bad publicity that can sometimes destroy a career” (Neate). The eternal youth and freedom from the consequences of immorality is the soulless horror that Dorian eventually cannot stand to live.

While some today no doubt seek to shape the immortal artistic persona as a genuine dedication to artists whose work they admire, thereby elevating the artist’s cultural meaning, these cases are unfortunately too few (Kitch 176). As can even be sadly seen with those manipulating Wilde’s image for their own gain, the immortal persona today is all too often manipulated for selfish means, making the “essential” beings behind the facades more and more meaningless. These grim, soulless figures are paraded around shamelessly in advertisements like Monroe being used to sell Sunsilk or Cary Grant being used to sell Diet Coke (Hudak 383). Even more unnerving, perhaps, consider the literal hologram of the late Tupac Shakur performing at the Coachella music festival in 2012. These personas, far removed from the control of the original, bodied beings, are now subject to performing the whims of others, most often large corporations. While Kuspit, when discussing Warhol’s work, portrays artistic personas as “puppets on a social string,” Wilde would more likely cast them as “monstrous marionettes” (37) (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 156).

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as Dorian rides a hansom cab to an opium den, they pass a set of windows where can be seen “fantastic shadows” that move like “monstrous marionettes” and make “gestures like live things” (156). As Dorian sees nothing that gives these shapes a true, bodily identity, they are much more persona than human. The terms used to describe the personas are taken almost directly from one of Wilde’s previous poems. In “The Harlot’s House,” the narrator stands outside of a brothel with an unnamed woman as they watch “silhouetted skeletons” dancing in the windows “like wire-pulled automatons” (Wilde, “The Harlot’s House” 14-13). The figures eerily resemble humans, but something is clearly off as their “laughter echoed thin and shrill” and they only “try and sing” but somehow fail to do so properly (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 18, 21). These “clock-work puppet[s]” are described by the narrator as “the dead [...] dancing with the dead” (1 Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 9, 26). One of the “horrible Marionette[s]” even comes outside to smoke a cigarette “like a live thing (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 22-24). As in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, these beings are a soulless farce of humanity, Wilde’s language dehumanizes them and makes it seem like they only

mimic humanity. They are the same breed of hollow simulacrum that Monroe, Presley, Shakur, and so many other artists will eventually become. The windows of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “The Harlot’s House” might as well be stages, television sets, cinema and iPhone screens. They are filled with the same images of the singing, laughing, and dancing dead.

These “monstrous marionettes” come to represent Wilde’s most startling manifestation of the persona, an empty, soulless form of being that is only a shadowy projection of humanity. Dorian looks at them and immediately hates them, feeling “a dull rage [...] in his heart” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 156). Dorian hates these soulless personas, perhaps, because they reflect himself, just as he looks at the portrait before his suicide and hates that “mirror of his soul” for the same reason (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 187). There is a tragedy to Wilde’s recognition of this split between the bodied human and the artistic persona. Even though he personally admitted that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflected many elements of himself, he still denied its validity as an autobiography in his trials for gross indecency. He knew that his persona was what was really on trial because the public cared primarily about that and had little interest in the “essential” Wilde beneath. The trials were a play in their own right, a great tragic end for Wilde akin to the tragic end for Sibyl Vane or Marilyn Monroe. The theater of it is what really mattered. The public gazed upon Wilde’s trials with the same mixture of rapture and disgust that the narrator of “The Harlot’s House” or Dorian himself, might look upon ghastly personas dancing in a window. If Dorian then is indeed an aspect of Wilde, and we can read the novel, like Gomel says, “as a prescient commentary on [...] [Wilde’s] own posthumous transformation into a cultural icon,” it is here sadly apparent that in his own work, Wilde saw the reflection of a horrifying future for his eternal persona (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 79).

What Wilde wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and how Wilde lived in his public life make the novel and himself well-suited to discussions of the dead celebrity persona in the history of popular culture. Like Dorian, Wilde has become the everlasting image while his true self was sacrificed to the wages of time and the loss of public face. Like Sybil Vane, Wilde and other future artists such as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Kurt Cobain fell victim to the pressures of a public persona and now have said personas existing forever in the “sphere of art,” controlled and manipulated by those with little if any interest in the original, bodied beings. While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a limited source when discussing the reification of the celebrity persona via hologram or CGI, discussions about

controlling the dead celebrity persona should not be restricted to the technological ability to do so. Understandably, before such technological ability existed, serious theoretical discussions on the topic of controlling the dead celebrity persona would be nearly nonexistent and only speculative in nature. With this in mind, speculative fiction itself becomes a worthwhile avenue of critical exploration for those seeking to form a greater historical perspective on cultural ideals concerning dead celebrity reification. In a similar way to how George Orwell's *1984* can be studied as a startling predictor of how future technology will increase a government's ability to enforce an omniscient police state, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be studied as predicting our popular culture's ability to have an unending control of the dead celebrity persona.

Works Cited

- Basil, M. D. "Identification as a Mediator of Celebrity Effects." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, vol. 40, 1996, pp. 478-95.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." *Evergreen State College*, 1936, ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/frankfurt/storyteller.pdf.
- Black, Jack. "The Reification of Celebrity: Global Newspaper Coverage of the Death of David Bowie." *International Review of Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 1, Mar. 2017, pp. 202-24.
- Boyiopoulos, Kostas. "Simulation in The Picture of Dorian Gray: Echoing Hamlet, Anticipating Baudrillard, and the Comparative." *Comparative Critical Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, Feb. 2014, pp. 7-27.
- De Vries, Kee. *Oscar Wilde and Postmodern Thought*. PhD Dissertation, Bangor University, 2012.
- D'Rozario, Denver. "Dead Celebrity (Deleb) Use in Marketing: An Initial Theoretical Exposition." *Psychology and Marketing*, vol. 33, no. 7, July 2016, pp. 486-504.

- D’Rozario, Denver and Frank Bryant. “The Use of Dead Celebrity Images in Advertising and Marketing—Review, Ethical Recommendations and Cautions for Practitioners.” *International Journal of Marketing Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2013, pp. 1-10.
- Dumortier, Laurence. “Oscar Wilde’s Multitudes: Against Limiting His Photographic Iconography.” *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, vol. 58, no. 2, Apr. 2015, pp. 147-63.
- Fraser, Benson P and William J. Brown. “Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence: Identification with Elvis Presley.” *Mass Communication and Society*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2002, pp. 183-206.
- Gomel, Elana. “Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the (Un)Death of the Author.” *Narrative*, vol. 12, no. 1, Jan. 2004, pp. 74-92.
- Holland, Merlin. “Biography and the Art of Lying,” *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, edited by Peter Raby, Cambridge UP, 1997, pp. 3-17.
- Hudak, Kasey Clawson. “A Phantasmic Experience: Narrative Connection of Dead Celebrities in Advertisements.” *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 55, no. 3, Nov. 2014, pp. 383-400.
- Kirsta, Alix. “Selling the Dead.” *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 3 Feb. 2012, www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/9056455/Selling-the-dead.html.
- Kuspit, Donald. “From Max Ernst’s ‘Oedipus Rex’ To Andy Warhol’s ‘Marilyn Monroe,’ Or Why the Sphinx No Longer Has a Secret.” *Art Criticism*, vol. 20, no. 2, Oct. 2005, pp. 35.
- Levitt, Linda. “Death on Display: Reifying Stardom through Hollywood’s Dark Tourism.” *Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 65, 2010, pp. 62-70.
- Luksza, Agata. “The Girl, Nature, Goddess, or How Marilyn Monroe Became ‘the Queen of Glamour’?” *European Journal of American Culture*, vol. 37, no. 1, Mar. 2018, pp. 57-73.

Mulvey, Laura. "Thoughts on Marilyn Monroe: Emblem and Allegory." *Screen*, vol. 58, no. 2, Summer 2017, pp. 202-9.

Newman, George E., Diesendruck, Gil, and Bloom, Paul. "Celebrity Contagion and the Value of Objects." *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol 38, no. 2, 2011, pp. 215-28.

Petty, Ross D., and Denver D'Rozario. "The Use of Dead Celebrities in Advertising and Marketing." *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 38, no. 4, Winter 2009, pp. 37-49.

Radford, Scott, and Peter Bloch. "Consumers' Online Responses to the Death of a Celebrity." *Marketing Letters*, vol. 24, no. 1, Mar. 2013, pp. 43-55.

Salzberg, Ana. *Beyond the Looking Glass: Narcissism and Female Stardom in Studio Era Hollywood*, Berghahn Books, 2014.

Wilde, Oscar. "The Harlot's House." *The Major Works*, edited by Isobel Murray, Oxford, 2008, pp. 539-40.

---. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oxford, 2008.