Useful Sources


Historical Context

The essay was first published in 1889 in the *Fortnightly Review*, then later in 1891, in the collection *Intentions*, along with “The Critic as Artist,” “The Decay of Lying,” and “The Truth of Masks.” Antecedents include Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” (1729) and Thomas De Quincey’s “Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” (1827). Wilde’s own antecedent is his unpublished work on Thomas Chatterton. Other influences on Wilde’s style in this period include W. Carew Hazlitt, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Matthew Arnold, and Walter Pater.

From *De Profundis*

“Do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you that it is irrevocable, do not believe them. The past, the present and the future are but one moment in the sight of God, in whose sight we should try to live. Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of thought. The imagination can transcend them, and more in a free sphere of ideal existences. Things, also, are in their essence what we choose to make them. A thing is, according to the mode in which one looks at it. (...) What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes, to make the world look on it with different eyes, to make God look on it with different eyes. This I cannot do by ignoring it, or slighting it, or praising it, or denying it. It is only to be done fully by accepting it as an inevitable part of the evolution of my life and character: by bowing my head to everything that I have suffered.” *De Profundis*, p. 1059 of the Holland Collins
A few guiding remarks about “Pen, Pencil, and Poison”

1) “Wilde rejects conventional either/or dichotomies in favor of employing more diverse both/and dispositions to sustain his argument (…)”

2) The essay “creates a series of ambivalences and antinomies toward the criminal and the society in which he operates (…)“

3) “From these feelings,” (the feelings the essay inspires) “the essay invites the reader to exploit a number of possible alternatives for responding to the work of Wainewright the artist (both as an engraver and as a forger) if not to Wainewright the murderer.”

(From Gillespie 1996 cited above, culled from pages 40 and 160, respectively.)

Ambivalences and Antinomies

Limitation versus versatility
Experience versus character
Genius versus strangeness
Popularity versus distinction
Manners versus sensibility
Reputation versus achievements
Temperament versus rectitude
Technique versus composition
Realism versus phenomenology
Defectiveness versus quintessence
Historicity versus accuracy
Style versus obscurantism
Revenge versus profit
Sin as result versus sin as cause
Personal life versus artistic life
Self-restraint versus authenticity

Questions

How ironic do we think Wilde’s treatment of Wainewright is? Does Wilde use him for his own purposes? To what extent is he writing about himself? Does he regard himself as a kind of Wainewright-like figure? Why the constant slip between one opinion and another when it comes to his judgments regarding Wainewright? What is admirable in being inconsistent? If inconsistency is a style, does it become consistent? To what extent is Wilde’s treatment of him a moralizing one, however implicitly? What is Wilde’s central agenda? Does he fear that a certain age of “great men” has been lost and is irrecoverable?