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## Influence of freemasonry in the works of Oscar Wilde

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to demonstrate the extent of Freemasonry's impact on Oscar Wilde's penmanship and how it optimally impacted his paradigm, symbolism, and issues of concern. This research looks at the oeuvre, which includes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in illustrating the presence of materialist freemasonry embracing virtue, dualism, and search for knowledge. Their involvement in Freemasonry provided Wilde with the philosophy that encloses his ideas about personal freedom, moral dilemma, and individualism while writing. Thus, the paper shows that through exploring the manifestation of symbols and ethics in Wilde's works, his involvement enriched his work in the fraternity of Masons. Thus, this paper has the following objective: to present the further understanding of the relationship between the elements of the literary work of Wilde and the principles of the Freemasonry, and, thus, may add deeper insights into the moral and creative perspective of Wilde.

**Keywords:** Oscar Wilde; Freemasonry; Literary symbolism; Moral philosophy; *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

### 1. Introduction

Renowned for his perceptive observations of human nature, flamboyant style, and keen sense of humor, Oscar Wilde was a literary star of the nineteenth century. A less-discussed but no less important part of his life is his membership in Freemasonry, a brotherhood rich in symbolism, moral instruction, and intellectual debate. Wilde's literary ideas and storytelling approaches may be traced back to this aspect of his life. "*The Picture of Dorian Gray*" and "*The Importance of Being Earnest*" are two of his most famous works that expertly incorporate the distinct philosophical viewpoint he gained via his involvement with Freemasonry. In addition to showcasing Wilde's creative brilliance, these writings mirror Masonic principles of honesty, self-improvement, and the quest for knowledge.

Upon entering Apollo University Lodge No. 357 (Nmj) in Oxford, Wilde embarked on his Masonic career. His perspective on life was drastically altered by the moral and philosophical reflections he had as a result of this event. Wilde skillfully weaves Masonic symbolism and metaphor into his works to probe questions of duality, the weight of one's deeds, and the quest for moral enlightenment. To better understand Wilde's famous works, this article explores how Freemasonry affected his creative topics. The intricate relationship between Wilde's Masonic experiences and his artistic expression may be better understood by looking at the Masonic aspects in his story structure, character growth, and theme study.

### 2. Freemasonry's Influence on Wilde's Literary Themes

Undoubtedly, Oscar Wilde's involvement with Freemasonry impacted his creative pursuits, providing a distinct perspective through which he saw and depicted social systems and moral dilemmas. In his magnum opus, "*The Picture of Dorian Gray*," he eloquently reflects Masonic ideas, notably those about personal responsibility and moral rectitude. Masonic teachings on the superiority of internal virtue over outside pretenses are reflected in the novel's examination

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of the struggle between outward appearance and inner truth. In Wilde's hands, the image represents Dorian Gray's soul, which mirrors the Masonic concept of the "hidden self" that becomes apparent in one's ethical decisions and deeds.

There is a striking similarity between the metamorphosis shown in the painting of Dorian Gray and the path to enlightenment central to Freemasonry. A representation of Dorian's inner self, his image degenerates into horror when he partakes in immoral and hedonistic activities. This physical metamorphosis of the picture might give a metaphorical interpretation of the Masonic journey from enlightenment to darkness (Oscar Wilde, Freemason). Light signifies understanding and moral cultivation in Freemasonry, whereas darkness represents ignorance. Wilde ingeniously mirrors this transformation in Dorian's portrait, which becomes increasingly disfigured as Dorian delves deeper into moral darkness. The portrait's decay is a powerful reminder of the consequences of forsaking moral integrity, a fundamental principle in Masonic teachings.

Furthermore, Dorian's ultimate fate underscores the Masonic belief in the inevitability of truth and the futility of attempting to conceal one's true nature from the world. Product of the Enlightenment as Freemasonry was. However, there was a growing tendency among many 19th-century Masons to downplay the metaphysical aspects of Masonic symbols in favor of more generic moralistic meanings. And yet, some Masons were always keen to recover and maintain the esoteric meanings of the craft's rites and symbols. The most crucial figure in the United States was Albert Pike (1809-1891), a lawyer, journalist, Confederate general, and tireless researcher and writer on the Masonic mysteries. Pike joined Freemasonry as a member of Western Star Lodge 2 in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1851 and was active in creating the Grand Chapter of that state soon after (Wilson 7).

The theme of a dual existence, another Masonic element, is prominent in Wilde's narrative. Freemasonry often emphasizes the coexistence of an outer persona and an inner, more authentic self. In "The Picture of Dorian Gray," this contradiction is shown by contrasting the deteriorating image with Dorian's immutable physical beauty. Despite Dorian's best efforts to project an image of social grace and beauty, his painting betrays the moral decline that permeates his character (Oscar Wilde, Freemason). In keeping with the Masonic philosophy of prioritizing internal virtue above outward appearances, this dichotomy prompts the reader to contemplate what it means to be beautiful and honest. Not only does Wilde's depiction of this dichotomy attack society's fixation on outward beauty, but it also symbolizes the Masonic path to self-discovery and self-awareness. A recurring motif in Wilde's writing and Masonic philosophy, the striking dissimilarity between Dorian's actual and depicted appearances is a metaphor for the struggle between outward appearances and inner character.

In addition, Wilde depicts Dorian's moral deterioration and its repercussions, which tie up with Masonic principles on the significance of taking responsibility for one's acts and the inevitability of their outcomes. One of the tenets of Freemasonry is personal responsibility and the need to act honestly and forthrightly. In contrast, Dorian Gray can escape the direct results of his acts because his image is burdened with them. But after the book, Dorian and his painting meet a terrible end, representing the final cost of his actions. A life of integrity and the certainty of moral punishment are central Masonic beliefs, and this dramatic conclusion is a powerful reminder of both.

Wilde's masterful use of symbolism and allegory throughout the work demonstrates his sophisticated grasp of these Masonic concepts (Nmj). The picture is a potent symbol in and of itself, standing for the individual's conscience and hidden realities. The slow deformity of the image represents, in reverse order, the Masonic path from ignorance to knowledge. His picture becomes a hideous symbol of the moral decay and depravity that Dorian experiences as he drifts further away from moral enlightenment.

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### 3. Symbolic References and Masonic Imagery

The works of Oscar Wilde are rich with subtle but meaningful allusions to Masonic symbolism. Two examples are the themes of light and darkness throughout his career and the complex character relationships he vividly portrays. A prime example is Oscar Wilde's acclaimed play "The Importance of Being Earnest," in which the author deftly incorporates Masonic imagery into the storyline, creating a complex tapestry of many readings and meanings (Oscar Wilde, Freemason). The masonic practice of elucidating high knowledge via metaphor and symbol is consistent with the play's investigation of false identities and concealed realities. Character interactions are humorous and profoundly severe, reflecting the Masonic ideal of moderation in seeking ethical and intellectual truths.

Masonic philosophy centers on knowledge and ignorance, and the pattern of light and darkness throughout Wilde's writings metaphorically symbolizes this idea. Light represents knowledge, insight, and truth in Freemasonry, while darkness represents moral confusion and naiveté. Oscar Wilde, Freemason, a master of nuance and subtlety, uses this duality in his characters and the progression of the narrative. In his stories, the protagonists often go through the

symbolic and actual transformation from darkness to light, reflecting the Masonic quest for enlightenment. In addition to serving as a plot element, Wilde's extended voyage reflects his philosophical and intellectual investigations, shaped by his Masonic experiences. Not only are Wilde's writings fascinating stories, but they are also profound metaphors for the life-altering potential of insight and understanding of oneself.

The Masonic symbolism of "The Importance of Being Earnest" is seen throughout the play as it delves into themes of identity and social facades. Compared to Masonic, which focuses on one's "inner self" and "outer self," the drama explores the dualism of these two aspects of an individual's identity. Adopting false identities to evade social restrictions and achieve individual ambitions, the play's characters—especially Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing—participate in an intricate dance of deception and revelation. The Masonic habit of maintaining secrecy while publicly displaying another half of one's identity is echoed in this depiction of two identities (Oscar Wilde, Freemason). The play's dualistic characters are a metaphor for the Masonic quest for self-discovery, which involves finding a balance between one's outward appearance and inner reality.

In addition, the play's depiction of Victorian society's complex social networks and rituals has remarkable similarities to Masonic rituals and their sophisticated symbolic language. Masonic rites are ceremonial and extended, and Wilde's portrayal of Victorian social conventions reflects this (Nmj). The patterns mirror the organized social interactions of the characters in Wilde's play, with their intricate symbolism and rigid conformity to form. Masonic communication is notoriously secretive and arcane, and the play's clever language is full of double entendres and hidden truths.

Wilde uses masonic imagery not only in the theme but also in the structural aspects of his works. Like the organized development of Masonic ceremonies and degrees, his stories are painstakingly constructed with precise layering and interwoven subplots. Oscar Wilde, a Freemason, likens the progression of Freemasonry degrees to the unfolding of more nuanced insights into his characters and the social criticism he gives in his plays. This structural imitation does double duty: it makes his tales more complicated and quietly teaches his audience about the Masonic path to enlightenment. Wilde uses several narrative layers to create a work of literature reflecting Masonic advancement's illuminating and life-altering journey.

One interpretation of the play's conclusion is that it represents a moment of Masonic revelation when the secrets of the play's protagonists are exposed, and the fundamental nature of things is made clear. Oscar Wilde, a Freemason, recalls the Masonic ideal of self-knowledge and finding the truth at this moment of enlightenment when characters encounter and accept their actual selves. Wilde expertly synchronizes the narrative's dramatic unfolding with the Masonic focus on revealing concealed wisdom and knowledge in this crucial sequence. Also, the play's deeper themes are reinforced by the characters' triumph over adversity and acceptance of who they are, representing the Masonic quest for honesty and moral rectitude.

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#### 4. Moral and Philosophical Alignments

Freemasonry and Oscar Wilde's shared commitment to exploring profound philosophical and moral concerns run parallel throughout Wilde's work. His work is marked by honest reflection, and his support for individuality and aestheticism is particularly pronounced. In his epistle "De Profundis," Wilde exemplifies the Masonic influence in his work by reflecting on his road of self-discovery and growth, much like a Freemason.

While incarcerated, Wilde penned "De Profundis," a moving testimony to his intellectual development. Delving deeply into the realms of self-reflection, remorse, and spiritual enlightenment, this masterpiece surpasses the superficial glamor of his previous works. The issue of moral responsibility and the quest for ethical life, which Wilde explores in this reflective story, echoes the Masonic focus on these things. Members of Freemasonry are encouraged to strive for personal excellence by developing their moral and spiritual qualities (Oscar Wilde, Freemason). Wilde's introspections in "De Profundis" mirror this philosophy as he begins a journey of self-redemption by reflecting on and reevaluating his life decisions and views.

Masonic principles are congruent with Wilde's examination of individuality in his writings. A person's character and the quest for enlightenment are values that Freemasonry promotes. Individualism is lauded in Wilde's works as a powerful tool for self-expression and liberty. His early writings indicate that he often fought for individual rights in opposition to societal conventions. His one-of-a-kind view of individuality is in keeping with the Masonic philosophy of honoring the uniqueness of every person and their path to self-actualization.

The Masonic value of art and beauty is congruent with aesthetics, a theory Wilde passionately advocated, especially in his early work. The aestheticism of Wilde, which supports "art for art's sake," is similar to the Masonic faith in the

transforming power of beauty. Freemasonry, with its rich symbolism and focus on creating beautiful locations and experiences, views appreciating beauty as a way to gain enlightenment and more profound knowledge. It is possible to interpret Wilde's commitment to aesthetics and his faith in beauty's ability to uplift the human soul as an expression of this Masonic principle.

Wilde's self-discovery route, especially in "De Profundis," is similar to the Masonic way of introspection. Members of Freemasonry are urged to seek greater insight into themselves via contemplation and meditation. The spiritual path followed by Wilde in "De Profundis," in which he considers his origins, values, and perspectives on love and pain, is similar to this Masonic path. Central to Masonic teachings is the practice of self-reflection, which Wilde uses to get a better knowledge of himself and his role in the world.

In addition, the duality of human nature is a recurring issue in Wilde's moral reflections. The eternal conflict between good and evil is a central tenet of Masonic philosophy, which centers on this idea. An essential notion in Masonic philosophy, Wilde's examination of this duality, particularly in "The Picture of Dorian Gray," reveals his profound comprehension of the complexities of human nature (Oscar Wilde, Freemason).

Another indication that Wilde was in accord with Masonic principles is his involvement with moral philosophy in his works. Pursuing truth and leading an ethical life are highly valued principles in Freemasonry. Much of Wilde's work, especially from his latter years, deals with moral dilemmas and the pursuit of truth. Masonic search for moral and ethical knowledge finds resonance in examining topics like atonement, forgiveness, and the repercussions of one's acts.

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## 5. Wilde's Personal Masonic Experience

Oscar Wilde's writings showed that he was an accomplished writer and a strong advocate for autonomy and aestheticism (Nmj). The moving letter he wrote while incarcerated, "De Profundis," is a prime example. Wilde reflects on the Masonic quest for enlightenment and self-improvement in this profoundly reflective work by setting a path of moral reflection and self-discovery.

Reflecting a time of deep contemplation and personal growth, "De Profundis" is a marked change from Wilde's earlier, more colorful writings. This change aligns with the Masonic principle of improving oneself, essential to the Brotherhood. This piece by Oscar Wilde, "Freemason," has many themes consistent with Freemasonry's teachings, which urge its members to seek eternal salvation via introspection and moral development. Like Mason's devotion to personal and ethical development, Wilde's introspective character in this epistle reveals his desire to comprehend and reflect on his life's path. In addition, the Masonic quest for honesty and integrity in one's private life and more extensive societal relationships is reflected in Wilde's embrace of responsibility and vulnerability in "De Profundis."

While writing "De Profundis," Wilde reflects on the universal themes of human nature, including pain, atonement, and character. His life, his downfall, and the wisdom gained from adversity are all things he mulls over. Masons are urged to explore their inner selves, face their shortcomings, and seek moral and spiritual improvement via the Masonic journey, similar to introspection and the pursuit of personal truth. Beyond a straightforward account of events, Wilde's story delves deeply into the transformative power of the human spirit. Reflecting the Masonic tenet of acquiring knowledge through life's trials and tribulations, his reflective path is characterized by openness and self-awareness. Wilde's readiness to face and express his profound sorrows and insights further shows the Masonic principle of introspection as a means of self-transformation and enlightenment.

In addition, the Masonic value of art and beauty is congruent with Wilde's aestheticism, the idea of beauty and art for its own sake. Freemasonry's symbolic and ceremonial nature gives great weight to the aesthetic, and the order views beauty as a means to a more profound knowledge of reality. This Masonic principle is reflected in Wilde's promotion of aestheticism, especially in his early writings (Oscar Wilde, Freemason). The Masonic concept that one may achieve enlightenment and fulfillment via appreciating beauty is in harmony with his conviction in the transforming power of art and beauty. Because of this link, Wilde's work is aesthetically superior and imbued with greater symbolic significance via his meticulous attention to form and language. In addition, how he depicts individuals who value art and beauty as a way to express themselves and find joy reflects the Masonic ideal of seeking understanding via appreciating the better things in life.

Masonic principles are reflected in Wilde's intellectual contemplations on individuality as well. By promoting free thought and cultivating personal values, Freemasonry works to help its members grow as people. Wilde often lauds individuality in his writings, which question established conventions and fight for people's freedom of speech and choice. The Masonic tenet of individual liberty and self-determination is mirrored in this celebration of uniqueness.

Furthermore, the moral contemplation found in Wilde's writings, especially in "De Profundis," mirrors the contemplative path followed by Freemasons. Membership in Freemasonry is based on the tenets of self-reflection, life experience, and the pursuit of moral perfection. This Masonic process of self-reflection and moral reassessment is mirrored in Wilde's descent from celebrity to despair and his later contemplation of these events (Oscar Wilde, Freemason).

As she writes "De Profundis," Wilde ponders universal themes like love and forgiveness. He contemplates his relationships, art, and identity in his journey to discover and embrace who he is. The Masonic path to enlightenment and self-knowledge is congruent with this introspection and pursuit of honesty. Wilde's investigation of his innermost feelings and ideas in this reflective process reflects the Masonic focus on introspection and the pursuit of greater self-awareness. The Masonic principle of growing morally and spiritually by learning from one's mistakes and successes finds resonance in his forthright and moving analysis of his life's ups and downs.

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## 6. Conclusion

More than simply a fraternity association, Oscar Wilde's venture with Freemasonry offered a complex tapestry of symbolism, ethics, and philosophical reflections that profoundly impacted his body of work. The incorporation of Masonic concepts and images into Wilde's writings is evidence of his active involvement with the values held by the Brotherhood rather than a simple coincidence. The Masonic symbolism that permeates his novels, especially in "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and "The Importance of Being Earnest," adds profound intricacy and depth to his storytelling. Echoing the Masonic path from ignorance to enlightenment, Wilde explores issues of moral integrity, the duality of self, and the repercussions of one's conduct in these works. Among Wilde's many personal and creative developments is his Masonic journey. Wilde was inspired to question and investigate human nature, examine and challenge cultural standards, and face moral and ethical difficulties by the teachings and spirit of Freemasonry. The more he participated in the fraternity, the more he learned about humanity and reflected on his experiences, which he powerfully depicted in his works. A monument to this metamorphosis, "De Profundis" displays Wilde's philosophical realignments and personal journey.

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