Asking Dorian Gray for a Digital Civics Education

Estelle Clements, PhD
http://digitalcivics.org
Estelle@digitalcivics.org
ORCiD 0000-0003-4261-584X

Abstract

Employing Victorian literary resources to teach digital literacy and digital civics, this paper identifies the philosophical and ideological concepts that can aid digital citizens in understanding their world. By developing historical perspectives and foundational understanding of the birth of digital technologies, alongside their traditional literary and historical curricular experiences, learners can develop an important set of literacy, linguistic, and critical analysis tools to serve as critical educational resources for digital civics and ethics. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* as employed by UNESCO City of Literature Dublin's literacy project, provides the example for this discussion: demonstrating how such literature maintains its relevance, and reminds us that the themes we address in our daily digital interactions are founded on the longstanding experience of the human condition.

This paper presents Victorian literature as a powerful educational resource for the teaching of digital civics, while simultaneously complementing its value for history and literacy development. Offering new insight into the the potential of historical and literary resources to support student development in the digital age, this work observes the pertinent lessons to digital age life that can be garnered from Victorian literature specifically, and advocates their subsequent usefulness to approach digital age civic and social issues in classroom learning through digital literacy and digital civics. Exploring this avenue of utility, this paper seeks to support teachers as they deploy educational materials in a digital age classroom, while still meeting their practical curricular obligations. While teachers are frequently challenged to integrate new digital life lessons into their classrooms, they are often left to do so in the absence of specific guidance as to how they might make their requisite classroom materials relevant to an unfolding set of digital age circumstances.

In other words, this paper asks, how can such differing periods as the digital and Victorian be made compatible for students studying literature, and what possible insights could Victorian literature and history have to offer them in pursuing digital civics, and digital age literacy skills?

In approaching this pedagogical query, this paper identifies opportunities to scaffold learner development through the observation of human experiences in the Victorian period, as sympathetic to the lives of digital age learners, to help them appreciate, not only the universality of the human condition, but also the ways in which their own digital experiences are in fact founded in concepts that date back significantly beyond their understanding of what constitutes the 'digital age'. Indeed, many of the lessons and ideas of the digital age find their grounding in the scientific and technological breakthroughs of their Victorian forebears (McCormack, 2010).

By developing historical perspectives and foundational understanding of the birth of digital technologies, alongside their literary and historical explorations, learners can develop not only an important set of literacy, linguistic, and critical analysis tools, but also the knowledge, confidence, and empathy to solve digital age civic and social challenges, an important aim of digital civics (Clements, 2020; 2022). Thus, through the literary works of their Victorian counterparts, students can formulate awareness of their own digital age historical antecedents and develop approaches to the apparently novel challenges they face in the digital age, supported by the literary insights of long-cherished authors.

This paper will first discuss: (1) the nature of digital civics and its pedagogy, commenting of the early use of such literacy initiatives in the emergent formulation of digital civics education. Teaching students to set aside the pervasive narrative that the digital age is somehow set apart from previous history and literature, it then engages with philosophical concepts to highlight the continuity of the human experience throughout time.

Thusly, with a view to re-orienting the historical narrative about digital technologies and the digital environment, to accomplish reconciliation with historical antecedents, this paper then turns its attention to engagement with the Victorian period, and its connection to the underpinning philosophical concepts occurring in the digital age. Appreciating the Victorian era as pivotal to contextualising the digital environment, this work will then frame the problem of teaching in the digital age by considering; (2) the Victorian approaches to education still prevalent in formal education, and will consider the challenges this presents when preparing students for life in a digital age world. Observing an opportunity within this challenging situation, it will comment specifically on; (3) the potential of this era, and its literature, as a means of teaching digital age skills pertinent to digital civics and ethics. The provision of

pertinent and targeted insights from the Victorian period to formulate solutions precisely tailored

to approaching challenges posed by the digital environment will be operationalised through an

examplar using; (4) Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* This will highlight: the book's

salient plot points; author's own life; and book's reception (particularly with regard to the

concept of shame). The potential to engage in higher order learning outcomes will also be

suggested through discussion of the Aesthetic movement, of which Oscar Wilde was part.

Through this exploration, it is suggested that Victorian literature can embolden healthy,

confident, and innovative interaction with digital technologies; spur important ethical discourse

on its societal impact; and infuse learners with a sense of their connectedness to the full

resources of history and literature, unleashed through literary investigation and the development

of literacy skills.

What is Digital Civics

Digital civics is: the study of the rights and responsibilities of citizens who inhabit the

infosphere and access the world digitally. (Clements, 2017; 2020). This definition, in circulation

for over a decade, and utilised as part of UNESCO Dublin's literacy education initiative in 2010

(See: Clements, 2020), includes a thorough conceptual underpinning for digital civics, grounded

in the philosophy of information (hereafter PI) (Floridi, 2002), and incorporating philosophical,

ethical, historical, and civic ideas (like the skills for good decision-making, the value of the rule

of law, or the ontological continuity of the informational environment) that help to formulate

critical perspectives about the digital age world, and the lives and interactions of all entities

within it (Clements, 2020).

Germane to this paper, it should be observed that digital civics acknowledges that not only is

historical inquiry an important part of skills development for critical thinking and the humanities,

it is also fundamental for appreciating the historical underpinnings which help us conceptualise

our digital age world, an important factor in digital age problem solving (Clements, 2022). As an

"awareness of the precursors that lay the foundations upon which we have built our ideas over

time" is necessary to understanding digital civics and its pedagogy (Clements, 2020: 575)

Indeed, the aforementioned 2010 UNESCO Dublin project utilised precisely this Victorian

historical and literary approach through use of Oscar Wilde's novel Dorian Gray, to teach

literacy, English, History, and digital civics, and the underpinning historical and literacy concepts

that supported this successful early formulation will be discussed in this paper.

 The increasing need to engage with new technologies and prepare students for life as citizens of

a digitally mediated world has been a longstanding concern in educational quarters, particularly

as part of English and Humanities subjects, where media literacy education has often taken place

(Barnes et al., 2009). As early as the Grunwald Declaration of 1982, an international interest in

the teaching of media literacy and its connection to active citizenship, can be observed. "The role

of communication and media in the process of development should not be underestimated, nor

the function of media as instruments for the citizen's active participation in society" (Grunwald

Declaration, 1982). The longevity of this international interest is further made evident through

the more recent Paris Declaration that makes clear the requirement of "continuous innovation in

research and practice for media and information literacy" (Paris Declaration, 2014).

  Drawing from these early influences, of literacy, media literacy, and information literacy, digital

civics pedagogy has been able to adapt and formulate some useful tools for deployment in the

digital age educational environment (Clements, 2017). But to be critically successful, such tools

have needed to take into account the pillars (philosophical, ethical, historical, and civic

structures) that underpin digital civics (Clements, 2020). Failure to consider these aspects, can

lead to failure to communicate vitally important information to students about their world and the

impact of their behaviours in it, with serious consequences. For instance,

> "A digital civics education initiative that fails to appreciate an informational
> ontology may fall victim to a false notion of dualism (suggesting a separation
> between the on and offline worlds). If teachers cannot make clear to students
> that the online and offline spheres are part of the same over-arching
> environment, then we cannot be surprised when students undertake
> compromising actions in one arena and fail to appreciate they will impact the
> other. This emphasises the importance of helping teachers and educational
> administrators understand and employ PI in their work…" (Clements, 2020:
> 576)

There are numerous benefits to incorporating these digital civics pillars into practical education

initiatives. As will be discussed, the ability to consider our digital age circumstances

philosophically and historically (a process of contextualisation vital for literary exploration)

allows us to formulate connections with our past; to draw out solutions to problems we may

initially fear we lack the prior knowledge to face; and to understand and strengthen our sense of

personal identity at a challenging time of social upheaval. Such benefits can have wide ranging

impact on civic and social society, including the preservation of democratic aims and even the

prevention of extremism. As anthropologist, Stephen Rea writes, "Clements' (2020, p. 571)

vision of digital civics makes possible not only "democratic engagement in the digital realm" but

also digital extremism's effective confrontation by educating students about the technological

and institutional factors underpinning extremists' toolkits through practical exercises." (Rea,

2022: 17).

But, understanding the underpinning mechanisms of digital civics can also open new

pedagogical opportunities in the classroom by helping teachers (and students) appreciate the

plethora of resources at their disposal with significant relevance to the digital age; even when

those resources seem deeply removed from it. For instance, when we realise that many of our

digital age challenges are the result of how we think about new discoveries and technologies

(Floridi, 2007): about how our view of the world is altered by our interactions with technologies,

and how our subsequent reactions are shaped by these changing beliefs and ideas, we begin to

understand our digital age challenges as issues of philosophy, as opposed to issues of technology

(Clements, 2020). We then recognise that we have experienced new technological development

before, and that this has caused us to undergo similar philosophical challenges previously

(Clements, 2022). We can then examine how those challenges changed and impacted humanity,

and how humanity was able to meet them; by exploring the literature in which these human

responses were codified and presented. Thus, when the pedagogical focus is placed onto the

ideas, and not the technology, we are reminded that we can acquire useful lessons for the digital

age from many sources, including texts written long before many of our present-day

technological innovations were created.

Learners can reach out, both philosophically and historically, and formulate important

tools that help them understand and access the depth of shared prior knowledge with the capacity

to inform their everyday digital experiences, that is available to them from a rich variety of

contexts and settings. Not only does this support their subject specific learning, but it also helps

to negate any false narratives that they come into contact with about the isolation of their digital

age world from the rest of history, "that as we face the challenges of digital age civic life, we are

not devoid of help from our past" (Clements, 2022: 781).

Mastery of philosophical concepts like critical thinking when deployed in the context of

technological skills, serve an invaluable role allaying personal destruction in our lives, or the

lives of others, by helping us prevent the: accidental posting of inappropriate content; careless

surrender of our personal data; or by falling prey to targeted advertising or 'fake news' (For more

see: Clements, 2022). Indeed, all of these issues are long-standing problems (Clements, 2022).

Knowing how technology operates is a vital component of digital age life, but understanding

how it impacts your life and the lives of those around you every day, is equally, a fundamental

skillset. As Eshet-Alkalai (2004: 103) puts it, such critical literacies are a set of survival skills.

Acknowledging the importance of philosophical skills, in addition to technological skills,

means educational approaches that help support digital civic learning can still be formulated,

even in less-than-ideal instances where access to classroom technology might not be readily

available. For instance, to help support the necessary blend of online and offline conjoined

experiences in our classroom circumstances, we could make a conscientious effort refer to apps,

memes, GIFs, online current events, or digital platforms during instruction to help students

situate their personal digital experiences within the texts they are studying. That is, while we may

not be able to address the full breadth of technological skills, we can at least facilitate

appreciation of the philosophical elements requisite for understanding their digital age

circumstances by drawing direct parallels between their online experiences, and the offline study

they are undertaking in the classroom. Such actions should serve to reinforce our appreciation for

the value of student's online experiences as part of their lives, and encourage them to reflect how

their own life interactions may align with the literature (or other learning) they are undertaking in

class. This may seem straightforward, or even 'common sense' in many of our educational

practices, but can prove challenging when the material we are studying doesn't appear to have a

great deal in common with the digital age.

To demonstrate how these concepts can practically function, I will later discuss a specific

example of how historic literature, expressly a piece from the Victorian era, might facilitate

discussion and exploration of digital civics and digital ethics concepts in the context of the

English classroom: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Indeed, Wilde's story will be

presented as highly suited to such a task. (A list of discussion questions to accompany this

example, is appended.)

First however, it is helpful to reflect on the educational environment within which such

explorations take place, and to consider the ideas pertinent to the Victorian era's spirit of

technological innovation and adoption that we might draw upon to achieve the outcomes of

successful digital civics pedagogy alongside the requirements of other curricular aims in the 21st

century classroom.

A Victorian pedagogy in a Digital Age

The Media scholar Marshall McLuhan observed that "today's child is bewildered when

he enters the 19th century environment that still characterises the educational establishment…"

(McLuhan, 1967: 18). Unfortunately for students and teachers alike, little seems to have changed

in this regard in the 50 years since McLuhan composed these words. As the more contemporary

scholar Potter, notes, "The school curriculum in many countries… is designed around a 19th-

century industrial-pedagogical model" (Potter, 2012:115). This consists of a hierarchical

structure in which a teacher dictates to students, in a highly structured and generally isolated

environment. That modern educational means fail to achieve the necessary preparation for life in

the digital age is a point oft-argued (see, for instance: Murray [2015], Robinson [2010], Heppell

[2005], Gatto [1992], and Little [2014]). This point seems further supported by research on ICTs

and learning, conducted by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), that

noted "the real contributions ICT can make to teaching and learning have yet to be fully realised

and exploited" (OECD, 2015: 15). This study further observed the need "to provide educators

with learning environments that support 21st-century pedagogies and provide children with the

21st-century skills they need to succeed in tomorrow's world." (OECD, 2015:15). Even the

recent pandemic has apparently failed to solidify increased use of digital tools. Programs such as

Zoom or Microsoft Teams may have proved a helpful patch during a time where in-person

classrooms were impractical, but these have swiftly been swept aside, and a return to our

traditional Victorian approaches seems to predominate.

When one considers the calls of the aforementioned Grunwald and Paris Declarations for

media and information literacy skills, in the context of the digital age classroom concerns raised

by the OECD, and our apparent unwillingness to sustainably progress toward the integration of

digital tool in the classroom, it is clear that a strong vision is required to progress. But perhaps

more importantly, we must consider the lived realities of educators working within a myriad of

complex and challenging circumstances. In attempting to meet the future, we must offer

practicable steps that can support teachers and learners in "real" ways, not merely suggestions of

what "should" be. The realities of classroom life mean that opportunities to directly engage with

technology can be restricted by legal concerns if something goes wrong; to social censure about

the inclusion of such technologies; to fiscal restraints where school budgets are unable to extend

to technology purchase. Often, the reality is that, as the media scholar, Henry Jenkins, put it in

interview, "many of the best ways kids are learning are locked out of schools" (Jenkins, 2006:

00:21).

It might appear that the digital age classroom is more suited to the Victorian era in which

it was developed than the digital age in which it is still employed. If this is the case, then we

must find a way to turn this failing into an advantage. That is, if current pedagogical approaches

cannot leave behind the Victorian era, then perhaps the Victorian era can help us leave behind

current pedagogical approaches? Focusing on the spirit of ingenuity and innovation for which the

Victorian's prided themselves, particularly in regard to their drive for technological and scientific

development, can infuse a sense of support for technological integration in a classroom. It also

reminds teachers and learners that history is not about refusing to budge from the safety of the

past, but rather, about studying our drive forward and how we can take lessons and learnings

from those who have traversed these difficult challenges before us.

Employing the Victorian Age as a pedagogical approach has distinct advantages. For

instance, it can help to ground student understanding of the digital age in the foundation where

many of the ideas citizens hold about the modern world were formulated (McCormack, 2010).

This provides an opportunity to reflect on how much value our past has to offer us when facing

apparently novel issues, and an opportunity to challenge assumptions that we make about the

digital age, and the ideas that it is predicated upon, at their source. And, as discussed, learning

about their Victorian predecessors can empower students to formulate an understanding of the

digital age as connected to the entirety of human experience and the universality of the human

condition, thereby negating the isolation from history they may feel because of their

technological circumstances (that is, the development of these new technologies). For digital

civics then, the Victorian period is not only relevant, but highly useful to explore. The question

then becomes how to present Victorian history and literature in ways that help digital age citizens

appreciate its pertinence to their lives, serving the outcomes of both digital civics aims, and

historical and literacy aims expected by existent curriculum.

Even when we appreciate an overlapping of philosophical ideas and experiences may be

present, how can we help a student empathise with a Victorian character who has never seen a

meme, sent a text, or had to contend with the pressures of social media? How can we take a story set in a world so apparently different to our present one, and suggest that it is deeply relevant to our current circumstance of swift technological change and digital dilemmas? And perhaps most crucially, as we explore the human condition, how can we employ this literature to formulate healthy ideas about ethics and civics in a digital age?

We might begin by relating how surprisingly closely the experiences of the Victorians, who saw a massive leap forward in their own technological prowess, and who laid down many of the foundational ideas that still shape our social beliefs today (McCormack, 2010) resemble our own, by observing their similarities and direct correlations to our digital lives, particularly in regard to their scientific advancements.

Victorian Antecedents of the Digital Age

Integrating ideas about our Victorian antecedents, and their opportunities to address digital age challenges, can be explored in the classroom through two useful mechanisms: the thus far discussed concept, that we can view our digital age challenges as issues of philosophy, as opposed to technology, allowing us to draw from philosophical resources familiar with the types of challenges we face, rather than the novelty of the technology itself; and that our technological development, being predicated upon previous scientific discoveries and innovations, means that we can explore the chain of events preceding these developments to better understand them. This latter, is the direction to which we now turn our attention. First, by considering some of the broad historical antecedents we might keep in mind, and subsequently, by exploring these more specifically though a literary example.

In the case of the digital age, many of the developments necessary to formulate our digital technologies spring from the burst of technological prowess during the Industrial

Revolution, and the shaping of these new technologies into new mechanisms for everyday life

during the Victorian period.

Indeed, the Victorian period lays down many of the ideas and precedential expectations

about everyday life that we now consider our social 'norms' (McCormack, 2010), including;

notions of celebrity culture (McCormack, 2010), the introduction of telephone networks (Bright,

2014), and even the impact of mass production on personal identity (Floridi, 2009: 11) (an idea

encapsulated by the Aesthetic movement to which I will later return). Usefully, we can observe

the societal adoption and impact of these early incarnations of technological breakthrough –

including the exploration of ethical consequences from scientific discovery – through the

literature of their time.

It should be noted that because digital technologies are predicated on a long history of

scientific knowledge developed incrementally throughout human history, it is possible to identify

useful precursors at any juncture. But it is the scientific breakthroughs that enable the future

development of digital communications, during this period that make it particularly useful as a

discussion point for media and information literacy skills in the English classroom.

It is worthwhile considering the timescale of such inventiveness. Three years after

Alexander Graham Bell's success with the telephone in 1876, Muybridge presented the video, in

1879. Within this three years Edison had invented the phonograph and the light bulb. By 1895

the Kinetophone had been developed. Soon after, short films were becoming a part of Victorian

public events. The claim that digital age technology is advancing more rapidly than ever before,

diminishes by comparison to the Victorians, who within a period of a few years, went from letter

writing to film viewing.

The challenges posed by discovering the potential immediacy of interaction offered by

new communications technology can also be viewed, within the Victorian experience. For

instance, the opening of international phone lines, such as the Paris-London telephone exchange,

allowed new forms of communication in which the immediacy of interaction, as well as future

potentials, were apparent. As Charles Bright reflected of this 1891 telephony exchange, in 1898

"inventors and experimenters are constantly engaged in endeavouring to better these beginnings,

and even hold out some hope of someday talking to America by telephone" (Bright, 2014: 208).

Certainly, there is little question that many of the thinkers and inventors working on these

ideas were readily aware, and quite curious, about their eventual impact. The work of James

Clerk Maxwell on Thermodynamics (necessary to wireless technologies) is described by his

fellow physicist J.J. Thomson (1931:44) as:

> instrumental in providing the methods which may bring all inhabitants of the
> world within hearing distance of each other and has potentialities social,
> educational and political which we are only beginning to realize.

That we can see, from our 21st century vantage, how those laying the foundational

infrastructure for our digital and social technologies were themselves, curious and excited about

their potential results, and believed they would have the impact that they have achieved, can help

us appreciate our own place in history, and our own future potentials: an important notion of

legacy useful in explorations of the human condition.

But, the swiftness of this technological development also proved unsettling to the

Victorian mind. Just as is the case today, the adoption of these new technologies led to significant

social and ethical questions highlighting the same fears of technology moving too quickly for

humanity to cope, with serious consequences. Science fiction writers, including H.G. Wells and

Jules Verne, posed questions we are still exploring (and which might equally make useful studies

in the English classroom). Though perhaps one of the most interesting examples come from the

American writer and politician, Ignatius Donnelly, who published *Atlantis: The Antediluvian*

World (1882). A story that changed the moral of the widely circulated Platonic myth to place

blame for civilizations' downfall on an inability to balance technology with ethics. This re-

imagining persists in popular culture (from Disney films to conspiracy theories), usurping Plato's

warnings in his original telling of the story of Atlantis, as a cautionary tale against the dangers of

empire. The hysteria about new technology is also palpably visible in the printed media of the

day, like newspapers and magazines where stories of 'railroad spine' abound: the railroad

terrified many Victorians, who feared it would damage their brains (Torrey & Miller, 2007), or

indeed, far worse.

There are also plenty of examples to remind us how the digital age has simply re-

invented old challenges, such as the advance-fee scam: A confidence trick once known as the

"Spanish prisoner" and discussed in the New York Times of 1898, describes exactly the same

tactic now used in emails – requesting advance payment to a bank account now, on the promise

of a substantial reward later, when the receiver comes into their fortune – more commonly

referred to in the digital age as the "419 scam".

Even modern arguments about the way in which humans are changed in response to

technology are also tempered, when one considers Michael Booth's suggestion that the new

architecture and new forms of entertainment (such as spectacle theatre) meant that the Victorian

audience used their eyes differently to their ancestors (Booth, 2015:4).

Developing resources based on these insights, and responding to the need for increased

digital civics and ethics education in classroom learning, the "Dublin One City, One Book"

project in 2010, undertaken as part of Dublin's UNESCO City of Literature office, harnessed

such Victorian literature to develop strategies for digital civics and literacy education. The 2010

initiative was based the previous year's 2009 effort, that harnessed Victorian literature to teach

literacy and history, (later circulated in a New York City Partners Best Practice Report [2012]).

The digital potential for a similar project was made clear given the generation of content for

social media distributed by participants online, and overlap of social discussions, between the

Victorian and digital ages, precipitated in the wake of the 2009 event. The book adopted for the

2010 events, to meet the new digital civics challenges put forward, was Oscar Wilde's *The

Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891a). The following materials, which discuss the specific

opportunities within this piece of literature, are next explained, with a view to supporting

teaching opportunities for digital civics and ethics education through literary study.

Dorian Gray

Already studied in many formal education curriculums, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* holds

numerous (and seemingly obvious) parallels to digital age life, providing an opportunity to

integrate these important areas for civic development into existing curricular means. Oscar

Wilde's enduring popularity makes him a figure with which many people are familiar, and his

links to modern popular, and celebrity culture are well documented. (Helpfully, the scholar

Jerusha McCormack provides an accessible popular lecture, developed for the 2010 UNESCO

Dublin project and available by podcast, on the subject, in addition to her academic work: a link

is available in the references to McCormack, 2010). And despite Oscar's insistence in his preface

to the work that it is neither moral nor immoral, and that he holds no "ethical sympathies" as an

artist (Wilde, 1908: 6), perhaps he will forgive us a little, if, in exploring it as scholars, not

artists, we can allow it to give rise to questions of an ethical nature. The following discussion is

intended to raise such questions that might be useful to teaching digital civics concepts in

concordance with English and historical classroom aims. It is, by no means an exhaustive study,

but provides starting points, by raising observations for further reflection, to open conversation

on the matter. The particular relevance of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for use in digital age

education is perhaps best initially argued through an exploration of its major plot points, and we

first turn to these for consideration.

Book Plot Points

    The Picture of Dorian Gray (Wilde, 1891) tells the story of a man who keeps his true self

locked in his home while an Avatar that looks nothing like him roams the world preying on

young people. Circulating media (a yellow book) of a morally questionable nature, he also

deletes criminally compromising physical evidence from existence. The full weight of his

behaviour is eventually brought to bear, with significant consequences as it transpires that the

world of his avatar and the world of his physical reality must inevitably meet. The relevance to

digital age social quandaries seems immediately apparent in this description, but a closer look at

the plot provides further opportunities to spur student discussion, reflection, and application to

students' own lives.

    Fully escaping physical reality, Dorian portrays to the world an avatar of self-

representation depicting the best of his attributes while covertly managing short-comings away

from public view (in his attic). He is able to manipulate his own appearance beyond the bounds

of physical expectation, like a digital character (or perhaps, an Instagram star). He is also capable

of using that ability to manipulate others, highlighting the potential of online users (particularly

anonymous ones) to "do harm", or the potential vulnerability of social media followers to be led

down a road of misinformation to their own self-detriment if they are more interested with

outward appearances, than genuine fact.

    The death of a young woman is one of the consequences of Dorian's shallow and

dismissive attitude. One is reminded of the consequences of people aspiring to live the life

portrayed by their favourite influencers and personalities, without realising the very real

consequences of fame (Smith, 2017), or that the personalities of celebrities are formulations of

branding as opposed to individuals (Rindova, Pollack& Hayward, 2006).

The "yellow book" Dorian acquires (in the Victorian Era, books could be wrapped in yellow

paper to warn of their immodest content [Ledger, 2007]) shows the extent to which humans are

affected by the information with which they come into contact. The sources of media one

consumes and how they might be valued are relevant lessons in the modern digital age

classroom, just as readily as they are to the world of Dorian Gray: a sobering thought given the

suggestion that some young people prefer opinionated journalism over objective news (Marchi,

2012).

This is further pertinent when one considers the censorship made possible through the

exertion of social and legal pressures in the Victorian era, for instance, the censure made possible

through the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, and the control exerted now by those who can

manipulate distribution of digital content through their platforms, such as the curation of content

through the Facebook algorithm (Bucher, 2017).

When Dorian later commits murder, he annihilates the evidence, dissolving the victim's

body in chemicals. That a person can somehow be deleted by removing all physical evidence

raises interesting questions about physicality and reality in the digital world. In our digital age,

does something require physical evidence in order to be real? And how are the physical and

digital elements of our lives potentially linked? (A question with significant value in exploring

concepts of information in the digital age, See: Floridi, 2007.) And what can Dorian Grey teach

us about the value of digital evidence, particularly when physical evidence may no longer exist?

For instance, a violently quashed protest can be witnessed on social media by millions, despite

the disappearance or death of its protestors, and new technologies can allow the dissemination of

material that can circumvent government blocking (Gregory, 2015). How have the uses of digital

social media altered the ways in which oppressive governments were once able to quietly destroy

physical evidence of wrong-doing? Or how might images be manipulated without our

understanding what has actually taken place?

There are further ideas to consider too, such as the nature of our own behaviours, and the

ways in which we may respond to our technology regarding them. Dorian tries to project his

guilt onto the technology – his knife – that he uses to commit the murder of his friend. To find

digital age relevance for this we have only to consider the many digital tools around us that we

hold accountable for our daily foibles and failings: do we blame Facebook for losing time and

focus on our work? Is it Twitter's fault that we chose to share something publicly that we should

have kept private? Is YouTube to blame for the three hours we procrastinated? Indeed, the old

(and gender insensitive) adage 'it is a poor workman who blames his tools' suggests that blaming

technology outright is merely a strategy to cover ones' own shortcomings (Florman, 1981). This

can promote discussions about personal responsibility, managing one's own behaviour, corporate

moral and legal responsibilities, and the morality and nature of technologies.

Given the falseness of Dorian's own physical form, and the pre-occupation of the book

with discerning the difference between what is real and what is illusion, notions of physicality

are also raised for discussion. Students can continue to question the relationship between what is

real and what is not, as they explore the difference between Dorian's real and projected personas.

They can also note how Dorian's behaviours eventually cross this imaginary boundary, and that

the consequences of his actions are not contained to his portrait in the attic- they spill out into the

sphere of his projected avatar's life, just as a students' interactions spill out across online and offline spheres and impact their lives (Floridi, 2007; Clements, 2020). It is important to consider the ways in which the online and offline worlds interact, and teachers should present this knowledge, that offers conjoined consequences for our actions in the online and offline realms, as a significant fact in the daily lives of students and citizens: the behaviours we demonstrate online can, and frequently do, impact our life offline, and the behaviours we demonstrate in the offline world may easily find themselves uploaded online (Clements, 2020: 576). Not only is this conjoining now recognised in law (Bachelet, 2019), but several high-profile incidents, painfully pertinent to the lives of students can be noted, and, should be treated with care: such as the case of Rehtaeh Parsons, the young Nova Scotian student who was cyber bullied after pictures of her allegedly being raped at a party she attended were posted online (Pepler & Milton, 2013). Her subsequent death spurred an international outcry and shed light on the prevalence of such issues, in which online and offline circumstances are inextricably conjoined. Students will almost certainly have their own experiences upon which they may choose to privately reflect.

The interrelated nature of consequences between the online and offline spheres of life is only enhanced by Dorian's decision to destroy the painting of himself which provides him with these seemingly magical properties. The paining, inevitably, survives while Dorian himself perishes. This presents ideas about personal conduct, consequences, the opportunities we have to change our course, and behavioural self-regulation (that is, managing one's own behaviours through a process of critical self- reflection and response [Baumeister Schmeichel & Vohs, 2007]).

Author's own life

The division of Oscar's own personality, like that of his character, Dorian Gray, provides

further parallels for consideration by the student. Oscar was at once the loving father to his

children, a family man, and yet also characterised in the press as a 'sexual deviant' preying on

'rent boys' (minors, by today's standards) leaving his peers to ask who the real Wilde was, and if

both people could exist simultaneously. A parallel with more modern beloved celebrities whose

personal lives shocked fans, as revelations about them circulated virally on social media, such as

Kevin Spacey, or Bill Cosby (whose identification as a family man on the popular sitcom 'The

Cosby Show') can be seen here, and perhaps observed by the educator to help students

appreciate just how publicly painful and spectacular Wilde's fall from fame really was. Just as

occurs now, the Victorian's too, struggled to separate the artist from their work.

Wilde's romantic relationships with both the men and women in his life, at a time of sexual

social censure raise further questions about the way a society deals with those whose behaviour

challenges social 'norms', and the damaging role that rumour through socially connected groups

can play in a person's life. Indeed, the media of the day printed gossip columns with equal

fervour to today's tabloid press, and Wilde's name has become synonymous with identity politics

(Ledger, 2007).

Wilde was also keen to establish and maintain control of his public identity and

individuality. Pushing the boundaries of accepted social behaviour, he helped shape the modern

world through: his notion of celebrity; media manipulation for fame; and his advocacy for the

breaking down of shame and privacy barriers (McCormack, 2010). (His role as an aesthete is

discussed later, below.)

Book's Reception

It has been argued that Wilde's time in prison was not the result of his breaking sodomy laws

through dubious liaisons with numerous rent boys, or his affair with Sir Alfred Douglas (against

whose father his first trial was mounted) (Holland, 2010; or see: Clements, 2009 for accessible public interview). Rather, Wilde's prison term seems a direct consequence of the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, because the book revealed the hypocritical behaviour and concealment that went on in most "respectable" Victorian households (Holland, 2010). Oscar's crime was his shattering of the social contract that maintained a veil of respectability over the shameful transgressions enacted as commonplace in Victorian society: it was the public desire to conceal shame that led to the jailing of Wilde. The length of prison term he was given was expected to kill a man of his social delicacy. It destroyed him socially: he ended his days in penury, in exile, in France. Overturning the bounds of social acceptability, forcing people to examine the truth of their lives and actions, to face, contemplate, accept and cope with their shame is also an aspect of the interaction enabled by digital social networking. This is evidenced by many young people online, who openly admit their behaviour by posting pictures of their antics, illegal or otherwise, to Facebook. Ever present in online contexts, shame plays a complex and significant role witnessed in, fat-shaming, revenge porn, and negative reviewing, for instance. It "arises mainly after moral transgressions or incompetence, and gives rise to feelings of worthlessness, inferiority and damaged self-image" (Hooge et al., 2011: 940).

There is an educational opportunity to teach students how to recognise feelings of shame, and to approach them (instead of avoid them) to repair this damaged self-image and build resilience to shame's impact, particularly in digital contexts (Rooney 2015). An experiment by Hooge, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans in 2011, revealed that "shame mainly motivates approach behaviour to restore the damaged self, but that this restore motive decreases when situational factors make it too risky or difficult to restore" (Hooge et al., 2011: 939). For instances when U.K. plus-sized model Iskra Lawrence was fat shamed on social media by users referring to her

as a 'fat cow' who ate 'too many bags of crisps', she employed a shame approach behaviour by

posting photos and videos of herself with, and eating, bags of crisps. (Buzzfeed, 2016).

Lawrence was able to regain control over how her image was being represented, and restore the

damage caused by the shaming. By contrast, in the aforementioned case of Rehtaeh Parsons, who

was also being shamed online, the sustained bullying she received made approach behaviours too

much of a risk to undertake. Even after moving schools to escape bullying and social exclusion,

she lacked the opportunity to restore the damage done to her image by the shame. This paints a

valuable picture for students, who can learn the potential of exercising control over their

emotional circumstances through employing approach behaviours to shame in online contexts,

and, equally their limitations if citizens are not also able to demonstrate compassion for one

another when approach behaviours may not be possible to undertake (Clements, 2022).

Certainly, in Wilde's case, the opportunities to enact approach behaviours and rehabilitate his

image were slim. Even moving to another country was insufficient (just as Parson's moves

between schools were insufficient to protect her)- Wilde's celebrity meant there was no

anonymity and thus no escape: a point many digital age citizens can appreciate as their

anonymity dissipates in the viral sharing environment of the online world. But Wilde was not

entirely without support. Immediately on his release from prison, he met with a group of friends

who had worked to defend and assist him, including More Adey and Ada Leverson (Ellman,

1988). And, Bram Stoker reportedly visited him in France (Rose, 2016: 393). The role of

friendships and the support of friends who stand by us in overcoming shame and rebuilding our

lives is critical to our survival, and as important to the digital age, as to Wilde's.

The Aesthetes

      A student, looking to master higher order learning outcomes might consider the roll of

Aestheticism in Victorian age society: a movement which believed in Art for the sake of Art

alone. Possibly because, as Oscar Wilde put it "It is through Art, and through Art only, that we

can realise our perfection" (Wilde, 1891b). This group, with which Wilde was affiliated, provides

an excellent opportunity to introduce ideas from Luciano Floridi's philosophy of information: the

very philosophy that conceptually underpins digital civics, and can provide students with

important conceptual information about their world (Clements, 2020). Professor Floridi is an

internationally renowned Oxford philosopher whose work informs significant avenues of digital

age policy pertinent to digital age life (Clements, 2020). He convincingly argues that digital

convergence and digital technologies have brought about a shift in the way we view ourselves,

and consequently, the ways in which we behave and interact with one another (Floridi, 2007). As

part of this change, Floridi, proposes the Industrial Revolution as the stage that "marked the

passage from the nominalist world of unique objects to the Platonist world of types of objects, all

perfectly reproducible as identical" (Floridi, 2009: 11). The impact of this mass production is

chiefly what gives rise to the Victorian counter culture of the Aesthetes, who understood the

challenges it posed to individuality (McCormack, 2010). As Floridi explains, in a dephysicalized

world, people begin to feel that they are typified individuals; that they too are mass produced and

anonymous among other mass produced and anonymous abstract entities: their very identity as a

person is eroded (Floridi, 2009). We can begin to understand from this, the reasons that citizens

sometimes feel their individuality is under threat, or the need to reach out and distinguish

themselves in the online world through the personalisation of social media profiles (boyd, 2007:

10). This is the terrifying prospect that Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetes had feared and fought: the

destruction of beauty and individuality borne out through the mass produced ugliness of the

Industrial Revolution (McCormack, 2010). And perhaps the Aesthetes of Oscar's day would also

have reacted to this de-personalised world of 'types' and 'things' as people today do: engaging in

self-branding in cyberspace through blogs, social networking sites, or any digital ecosystem that

provides the opportunity to express our personality (Floridi, 2009: 11). And, this raises yet

another problem for students to consider. If we are reliant on digital products to help us identify

our own individuality (like Facebook or Twitter) where does that lead society in the years to

come? (Clements, 2020: 580) How can we ensure that we do not lose the sense of beauty, art,

individuality, and a sense of self that are critical to a healthy life and a healthy society? How can

we protect ourselves from branding and advertising made specifically for us? There may be no

ready answers, but the shared philosophical questions, of the digital age and the Aesthetes,

provide fertile ground for students to explore their contemporary challenges through studying

past literature, and a sense of solidarity with their historical counterparts whose own experiences

may provide insightful perspective.

Conclusion

Only a few of the many potential insights that Wilde's Dorian Gray can provide digital age

citizens are presented here as a means of spurring discussion for digital civics issues in the

educational environment, alongside the curricular aspirations teachers must already approach. Yet,

this one literary example hints at the wealth of insight that lies inside the pages of work composed

by our Victorian progenitors. Understanding life in the digital age is not about understanding the

technologies, but rather about understanding the very real philosophical changes – the changes in

how we think and what we believe – that come about as a result of the technological progress in

our world. The development of these critical skill sets can be aided through the exploration of

philosophy, history, and literature. In this example, the foundational importance of the Victorian

period, and the ethical issues its technological development prompt, in conjunction with the

relevance of Oscar Wilde's own life, and the pertinence of plot points in *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* all provide a useful support for raising and discussing such questions of digital age ethics and civics. Thus, Wilde's Dorian Gray maintains its relevance to our lives, and reminds us that the themes we address in our daily digital interactions are not novel or fleeting concepts with which we have no previous experience to contend, but rather are founded on a deeper and more longstanding experience of the human condition.

The Victorian period, sitting at the cusp of the digital world, and its literary offerings, provides a strong, and vitally important perspective to the digital age, and an excellent starting ground in which to formulate a sense of meaning-making about digital age life, and the digital environment, with which future citizens must contend. The Victorians fashioned the doors and infrastructure to this digital world, it seems fitting that they would hold the keys for understanding how to unlock them.

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Appendix

Useful Questions for discussion in teaching Wilde's Dorian Gray in the digital age:

How is Dorian a Figure we can relate to in the digital age?

How is Dorian's ability to keep his true self locked in an attic problematic, for those around him, and for himself?

What is the Yellow Book? Why is it significant?

What can the Yellow Book teach us about the positives AND negatives of free movement of information and censorship?

Can a person be deleted if we remove all physical evidence of their existence? What is real?

How has digital evidence changed the way in which civic discourse happens?

Dorian projects his guilt onto the technology he uses. What are some of the everyday ways that we project our guilt onto the technology we use?

Do corporations also have a responsibility to make sure that the technologies they create are safe and fair?

Are technologies in and of themselves good or bad?

Are the consequences of Dorian's actions confined to the painting in his attic? How might our interactions in our digital lives spill out into our offline lives?

What are some of the ways that the life of the author, Oscar Wilde has shaped our modern views of the world.

What sort of experiences did the Victorian's have that might parallel to our own digital age experiences with new technology?

How is shame a part of everyday Victorian life? How is it a part of everyday digital age life?

Who were the Aesthetes and what was their concern about mass production?

How do we identify ourselves as individuals online? What sorts of products do we use?

What are the risks if we use digital products to help us identify ourselves online, instead of building our own identity through self-reflection and critical thinking?

How can we protect ourselves from advertising that has been tailored specifically to us?