

Aestheticism and Social Anxiety in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Mitsuharu Matsuoka

But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. (19)

And Beauty is a form of Genius—is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation. (31)

1.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; revised 1891), the namesake tragic hero conforms neatly in his behavior to the Benthamite philosophy that mankind is governed by two sovereign motives, pleasure and pain. Stringent discrimination among pleasures may distinguish aestheticism from hedonism, but the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement in art and literature, which advocated the credo of “art for art’s sake,” might be seen as a conceptual variant of Bentham’s hedonism in the form of a modern Epicureanism.¹ The aesthetic value of a thing or event depends on its capacity to evoke pleasure. For aesthetes, the pursuit of beauty is the most important of aims in life. It is the artist’s duty to integrate selected elements from nature—without paying attention to moral or didactic issues—into a work of art that exists for its own sake.

“*Fin de siècle*” (137) British aestheticism, largely associated with the circle of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), usually carries the connotation of decadence. At first Dorian Gray has his cake and eats it with relish,

enjoying a frivolous and debauched lifestyle without recriminations. He is, as it were, a symbolic representation of Wilde's way of coming to terms with his own personality. However, it is noteworthy that Dorian ultimately reacts against this lifestyle, choking on his "new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival" (104) and that represents the interests of the bourgeoisie in Victorian society. A great sense of doom hangs over Dorian, as when "he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realise his conception of the beautiful" (115). Wilde seems to present an ironic celebration of aestheticism, at once supporting it and revealing the social anxiety which inhabited attitudes towards art and culture. He appears even to observe faults in the aesthetic movement's creeds.

2.

The aesthetic movement was "a mixture of straightforward rebellion against Victorianism, new theorising, and extravagant posing—all meeting in unstable fusion in the symbolic rise and fall of Oscar Wilde" (Gilmour 237). It originally comprised authors, painters, critics, and collectors of art. Leading figures were John Ruskin (1819-1900) and William Morris (1834-96). They were avid supporters of the Pre-Raphaelites, defending their artistic innovations and regarding their enthusiasm as a driving force behind the aesthetic movement. One possible explanation for this movement is a human reaction against ugly products manufactured by invented machines in the Industrial Revolution and against the kinds of industrial artifacts displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851. It is, in Wilde's words, a reaction against "the crude primaries of a doubtless more respectable but certainly less cultivated age" and "the crude brutality of plain realism" (Holland and Hart-Davis 436). No doubt, the expanding industrialization of Victorian England heightened Ruskin's and Morris's alertness to the disappearance of the beautiful.

Art, for them, primarily meant an appreciation and enjoyment of

beauty in its many forms, a view which diverged from that of the more established members of the middle classes, who still expected to find moral significance in art. What these aesthetes sought to subvert was the notion that a work of art should serve some higher moral purpose. To the aesthetic movement, art should not be educational, but should aspire to provide sensuous fulfillment for the individual. To this end Lord Henry Wotton, the aristocratic spokesman of Wilde's aesthetic philosophy in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, affirms that "it is better to be beautiful than to be good" (147). Walter Pater (1839-94), who greatly influenced Wilde,² agreed that the goal of aesthetic contemplation was not to learn lessons but to stimulate the desire for beauty and the love of art for art's sake. Aesthetic values, in Pater's opinion, are a matter of the highest priority and exceed all other values, even moral or ethical ones.³ In "The Critic as Artist" (1891) Wilde claims that "the first condition of criticism is that the critic should be able to recognise that the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate" (1048).

3.

As for the triangular relationship of Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian Gray, and his older friend, the artist Basil Hallward, Eve K. Sedgwick argues that "the lurid dissipations of the characters [. . .] are presented in heterosexual terms when detailed at all, even though (biographical hindsight aside) the triangular relationship [. . .] makes sense only in homosexual terms" (176). Sedgwick does not elaborate further on this point, but she is probably referring to the lurid dissipations in such scenes as where Dorian is seen "creeping at dawn out of dreadful houses and slinking in disguise into the foulest dens in London" (118). In fact, such is the place where James Vane, the brother of Dorian's actress-lover Sibyl, first catches sight of his nemesis (144) after she has committed suicide. "Dorian has like Wilde experimented with two forms of sexuality, love of women and of men" (Ellmann 297), and he also seduces and ruins people of both sexes at various points. Two victims of this seduction are Lady

Gwendolen, whom “not a breath of scandal had ever touched” (118) when Dorian met her, and his former acquaintance, the chemist Alan Campbell, whom Dorian blackmails into “destroy[ing the dead body of Basil] so that not a vestige of it will be left” (129). The lurid dissipations in the novel are limited to Dorian himself, though. Lord Henry does some fast talking, but not a lot of actual inappropriate behavior can be accredited to him. He enjoys a wicked life only vicariously through Dorian.⁴ His pleasures are a thing of the past, if he ever engaged in anything more than decadent rhetoric. Even Basil never does anything but paint, so that he seems to Lord Henry to be “just a bit of a Philistine” (54).

In any case, it is only to a limited extent that Sedgwick’s argument about the triangular relationship is justified. It does make sense at one level when something like sexual jealousy is involved, even if the eroticism is not directly acted out. However, there is more to the triangular relationship than the sexual implication. Consider, for example, the straightforward parallel between Lord Henry and Walter Pater. The former’s rhetoric, characterized by the separation of beauty and art from morality, comes straight from the latter’s “Conclusion” of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Likewise, Basil and John Ruskin have much in common; they are both aesthetic moralists.⁵ Pater’s and Ruskin’s different approaches to aesthetics serve to explain the struggle between the two characters. Wilde, whose career can be seen as a war for cultural hegemony between these two former mentors from Oxford, is letting them argue their two variant forms of cultural criticism.⁶

Basil wishes to live in the pursuit of beauty and pleasure. As a Ruskinian moralist, though, he refuses to sever the good from the beautiful and the pleasurable. Basil hopes that Sibyl is good enough to “create the sense of beauty in people whose lives have been sordid and ugly” (71). When Dorian begins to criticize her performance, Basil admonishes him: “Don’t talk like that about any one you love, Dorian. Love is a more wonderful thing than Art” (73). Wilde apparently considered that of these characters Basil best represented his own vision of himself.⁷ He confesses

it in his letter of 12 February 1894: “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps” (Holland and Hart-Davis 585). “The main difference between a morally committed aesthete and a decadent,” Christopher S. Nassaar maintains, “is that the latter, looking within and discovering not only purity but evil and corruption, yields to the corrupt impulse and tries to find joy and beauty in evil” (37). Lord Henry, Dorian’s vile tempter and mentor, divorces morality from beauty to prove his aesthetic theory. What he calls morality is simply the attitude he adopts towards his hated Victorian “middle-class virtue” (90). Dorian had “his beautiful face, and his beautiful soul” (56). He was “simple, natural, and affectionate” (90), but he has grown “more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul” (103) since Basil’s portrait of him “taught him to love his own beauty” (78). Dorian’s beauty has been “equalled only by his debauchery” (114). Wilde dramatizes the divorce between beauty and morality in the character of Dorian and his reactions to “the fatal picture” (165) to which all his misery is due.

4.

Attitudes towards the visual arts earlier in the nineteenth century, before Oscar Wilde’s time, were radically different. There lurked a breakdown of the rigid class system beneath grandiose schemes for improvement within various reform movements. “Many reformers,” notes Raymond Chapman, “were concerned with doing good to a section of society represented as the ‘working class’ or the ‘labouring population’ or the ‘lower orders’” (43), but the reform enthusiasm of middle-class Victorians supposedly promoted improvement across all classes. The status quo, which allowed middle-class hegemony, was bound up with the notion of the personal improvement of the men, women, and children of whom society was composed. Personal narratives of social success, such as *Self-Help* (1859) by the Victorian entrepreneur Samuel Smiles (1812-

1904), illustrated how all individuals could and should improve. For example, Excelsior Working Men's Club (51, Kensington Park Road, Notting Hill) had "for its object to provide instruction for its members in useful branches of knowledge" (Dickens, Jr. 94). Education reform emphasized respectability through industry, thrift, and self-improvement. Indeed, improvement was a key part of middle-class culture. The visual arts, in particular, were seen as a means of educating the masses, and bringing different classes together. Well-meaning writers, such as the modern art collector Robert Vernon (1774-1849) and the member of parliament Thomas Wyse (1791-1862), saw the visual arts as the perfect medium for the moral improvement of the population.⁸

The standpoint of the middle classes and their awakening aesthetic instincts was represented by the *Art Union*. It was first established in 1836 and then renamed the *Art Journal*. Using the arts for the improvement of social conditions, it soon introduced a yearly lottery (the prizes being works of art). This is a Victorian paradox of education on the one hand and materialism on the other. An article in the *Art Union* of 1847 hailed the arts as a means of rescuing the working classes from the ravages of alcoholism and crime:

The salutary influence of Art on the universal mind requires no argument: it is impossible that a people can be coarse or vicious whose sources of enjoyment are refined and intellectual; [. . .] men to whom public galleries are open will seldom be found in public houses. (Ackroyd 6)

This romantic vision of the middle classes, if overly optimistic, was well-meant. British Romanticism is replete with images reflecting an optimistic outlook towards individual and social change. The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, linked later by Max Weber (1864-1920), vitally informed the considerable prosperity and optimism of the rising middle classes, and the Great Exhibition can be seen as a triumphant manifestation of this Victorian spirit.

It seems, however, that in this process of self-deception based on an unrealistic optimism, the middle classes were simultaneously attracted by ideas that caused social anxiety. Peter Gay gives an incisive account of these conflicting attitudes:

Although many members of the middle class took pride in their status, it was leavened with a good deal of uneasiness; for them, an age of confidence was also an age of anxiety. Moderating between the aristocracy's persistent claims to preeminence in politics, society, and high culture and an increasingly restive working class pressing for a living wage and the vote, to be "middling" took hold less as a compromise than as a widely supported bourgeois ideology. (3)

The middle classes enjoyed the prosperity created by the Industrial Revolution, feasting on the surplus of enormous wealth that made extravagant luxuries affordable. They placed a premium on what was perceived to be high culture, and the visual arts achieved an unprecedented position in Victorian society. The aesthetic was used as an ideological tool of the bourgeoisie.⁹

While praising the best work of Basil Hallward, Lord Henry Wotton, "Prince Paradox" (147) Dorian calls him, points out the wealthy bourgeoisie's fickle nature regarding the appreciation of high culture:

"You must certainly send it next year to the Grosvenor. The Academy is too large and too vulgar. Whenever I have gone there, there have been either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse. The Grosvenor is really the only place." (18)

The Royal Academy of Arts, founded in 1768 and originally visited exclusively by the art peerage of Great Britain, represented the dominant artistic taste and values. In the course of the nineteenth century, though, that taste and those values began to be replaced by those of the *Art Union* and the middle classes' growing financial wealth. The shift in patronage at

the Academy led to a drastic change in the genres of Victorian art. The viewing audience became broader and broader, and the middle classes' preference for paintings of domestic realism and respectability greatly weakened the authority of the Academy. Wilde provides a cynical view of this wide and vulgar interest in the arts during the Victorian period. The objects themselves have actually become secondary to the social aspect of gallery visiting, and to the pleasures of observing and being observed in a mask of Victorian respectability.¹⁰ Lord Henry is committed to protesting against the vulgarity of middle-class values: "Nowadays people know the price of everything, and the value of nothing" (48). An aesthetic criticism directed against this superficial middle-class respectability is revealed throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, not least by his witty, ironical social view.

5.

Oscar Wilde's philosophical analysis of aestheticism is the primary subject of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but he also focuses on the hypocrisy of the English ruling classes. For instance, Dorian Gray puts it with infinite contempt to Basil Hallward:

"[. . .] The middle classes air their moral prejudices over their gross dinner-tables, and whisper about what they call the profligacies of their betters in order to try and pretend that they are in smart society, and on intimate terms with the people they slander. In this country it is enough for a man to have distinction and brains for every common tongue to wag against him. And what sort of lives do these people, who pose as being moral, lead themselves? My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite." (118)

Certain young intellectuals with none of their own virtues, including Wilde, could unmask with unsparing derision the moral hypocrisy and smug complacency of the wealthy middle classes. The aesthetes held all things bourgeois in contempt for their hypocritical double standard and

staid conservatism. It can safely be said, however, that the contempt was not simply their conscious detestation of a typically bourgeois concern for appearances but a manifestation of their own hypocrisies in imagining the bourgeoisie as external to themselves. The ugly, depraved portrait of Dorian, therefore, could be seen as a symbol of the bad conscience and gross immorality of the middle classes, while his “extraordinary good looks” (86) function in relation to these as symbols of bourgeois hypocrisy.

Wilde makes monumental observations about humanity through Lord Henry Wotton’s cynical judgments of the motives hidden behind benevolence. For instance, in response to Basil’s praise for Lord Henry the latter says:

“The reason we all like to think so well of others is that we are all afraid for ourselves. The basis of optimism is sheer terror. We think that we are generous because we credit our neighbour with the possession of those virtues that are likely to be a benefit to us. We praise the banker that we may overdraw our account, and find good qualities in the highwayman in the hope that he may spare our pockets. I mean everything that I have said. I have the greatest contempt for optimism [. . .].” (67)

Optimism seems to be a genetic trait of the upper classes hidden within the framework of the existing social system. Like several unpleasant mental states, such as anxiety about the rise and hegemony of the bourgeoisie, a propensity for optimism can be inherited. Fear is obviously at the heart of Lord Henry’s thinking. It is the fear that his cozy and privileged world is under threat. He is “the analyst of sin whose own worst vice is passivity, the rationalist whose diffident virtue hides in paradox” (Buckley 235), and the passivity and diffidence result from his social anxiety.

Lord Henry admits that Christian morality is based on such social anxiety: “The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion—these are the two things that govern

us” (29). The middle classes’ morality reflects “a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves” (104). One should not forget, though, that Lord Henry’s disparaging comments on middle-class social order and Protestant morality are nothing but self-deceiving expressions of his own anxiety. Basil puts it succinctly: Lord Henry’s “cynicism is simply a pose” (20), but it is one he strikes merely not to betray his social anxiety. Lord Henry, with his paradoxical speech and witty enigmas, has “a curious influence” (51) over Dorian, but there is some whiff of self-deception in his remarks on the supremacy of beauty, such as “beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins” (19) and “Beauty is a form of Genius—is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation” (31). Both his rejection of any explanation and his insistence on the incompatibility of beauty with intellect are born from the fear of being integrated into bourgeois society. Lord Henry cautions, “Dorian, don’t deceive yourself” (162). This caution may best be described as a psychological projection which results from the repression of his guilty conscience about an idle and non-productive life in the bourgeois society.

Wilde depicts the extravagance of the privileged classes against a background of severe hardship which was the lot of the majority in Victorian England. Lord Henry muses on the conversation subjects he has missed by not attending a luncheon at his aunt’s house: “The rich would have spoken on the value of thrift, and the idle grown eloquent over the dignity of labour” (26). The Victorian notion is that sweet idleness equals the privilege of the upper classes which support high breeding and high culture in society. Doing something, for them, means vulgarity and moral emptiness. Lord Henry is self-critical here: “A *grande passion* is the privilege of people who have nothing to do. That is the one use of the idle classes of a country” (49-50). “Beautiful sins, like beautiful things,” even though they are immoral passions, “are the privilege of the rich” (69). However, Wilde exposes the indifferent duplicity of the privileged classes, posing behind a façade of staunchly upright and morally reverberative

characters. He comments on their idle lifestyle with a highly ironic pen, parodying “the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing” (38), the art that is linked to the idea of a decaying morality. Their way of enjoying life’s passions with nonchalance is a caricature of the romantic Italian idea of *dolce far niente* [sweet doing nothing], just as the picture of Dorian is “some foul parody, some infamous, ignoble satire” (121) on his bad conscience.

Wilde parodies this way of life, connecting the upper and lower extremities of society, with the aristocratic patrons of opium-dens, such as Adrian Singleton (142) whose young life was ruined by Dorian. In his own experiments with depravity, Dorian visits the “dens of horror where the memory of old sins could be destroyed by the madness of sins that were new” (140). The stark descriptions also highlight the problems faced by Victorian London’s underworld:

He hurried on towards the left, glancing back now and then to see if he was being followed. In about seven or eight minutes he reached a small shabby house, that was wedged in between two gaunt factories [. . .].

[. . .] He dragged it aside, and entered a long, low room which looked as if it had once been a third-rate dancing-saloon [. . .].

At the end of the room there was a little staircase, leading to a darkened chamber. As Dorian hurried up its three rickety steps, the heavy odour of opium met him. He heaved a deep breath, and his nostrils quivered with pleasure [. . .].

Dorian winced, and looked round at the grotesque things that lay in such fantastic postures on the ragged mattresses. The twisted limbs, the gaping mouths, the staring lustreless eyes, fascinated him. He knew in what strange heavens they were suffering, and what dull hells were teaching them the secret of some new joy. (142-43)

Dorian, the social guinea-pig, flips between the highest and lowest status of society. He may be debauched, but he is non-judgmental. At this stage, even though Dorian is not physically affected by his overindulgences, he is mentally alert to the fact that he also has sunk far into lascivious

sensualism.

Sensualism can be defined as the worship of the senses or the elements of “a new spirituality, of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant characteristic” (104). It is the creative source of a certain aesthetics. A noteworthy fact is that a look of fear was in Dorian’s eyes when Lord Henry first said, “Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul” (31). Dorian is now at odds with himself, and is suffering in an aesthetic or moral dilemma: “He was prisoned in thought. Memory, like a horrible malady, was eating his soul away. From time to time he seemed to see the eyes of Basil Hallward looking at him. Yet he felt he could not stay” (143). His meeting with Singleton at the opium den moves him, strangely enough, to escape, even from himself. Dorian’s uneasy conscience is presented in a way that respects the reader’s ability to make his or her own evaluation about aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic danger.¹¹ The whims of Lord Henry, to whom “Beauty is the wonder of wonders” (32), were carved for Dorian, who has explored the doctrine of art for art’s sake and related philosophies to their fullest extent. As Dorian lives quite well off the profits of aesthetic sensualism, it seems—at least for a while—as though a life of sin and corruption does indeed pay. The ironic conclusion, however, is that a life dedicated exclusively to the arts and senses will lead to nothing but self-gratification.

Living in heartless joy for years, Dorian collects jewels, finery, and art, but these treasures are “means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne” (111). Surrounding himself with nothing but beauty, Dorian falls into the worst sort of escapism. It merits special notice that he pursues beauty for its own sake to excess as a means of avoidance, switching beautiful unrealities for the ugly realities of the most depraved life. Beauty clarifies longing while ugliness necessitates escape, but the beautiful surface Dorian finds so seductive is what brings him down to the ugly realities:

Ugliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason. Ugliness was the one reality. The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense actuality of impression, than all the gracious shapes of Art, the dreamy shadows of Song. They were what he needed for forgetfulness. (141)

This excerpt presents evidence for the profound changes in Wilde from Victorianism to modernism, because it is a negative reaction against the aestheticism of those who worshiped beauty for its own sake, a kind of romantic escapism into fantasy characterized by refusal to see the ugly realities hidden inside of an aesthetic world. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it may be argued, is a fantasy novel of the tragic hero feeling “the terrible pleasure of a double life” (134) but being anxious to escape the recognition of beauty and ugliness as the ins and outs of life.

6.

One of the underlying themes related to social anxiety in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that of different attitudes towards sexuality. In his condemnation of social repression as the enemy of liberty and individualism, Wilde tried to undermine the encrusted Victorian social values, paradoxically through the moral deterioration of Dorian Gray. Dorian’s frustrated erotic desire is the result of bourgeois Victorian repression of all non-reproductive sexuality. By presenting the portrait of Dorian as “the origin of all his shame” (119), Wilde revealed a specific Victorian complex, an unconscious sense of sexual guilt. “Paradox though it may seem,” says Vivian in Wilde’s essay “The Decay of Lying” (1889), “it is none the less true that Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life” (982). The belief that life imitates art corresponds to the equation of Wilde’s essentially personal vision of sexual scandal with his artistic and creative identity. Wilde secreted himself behind his private persona as an aesthete and a homosexual so as to escape from the social anxiety which

female sexuality, the straight-jacket of Victorian morality, aroused in him.¹²

Wilde, his life submerged in the allegations of homosexuality brought out by the Marquess of Queensbury in 1895, was particularly concerned with non-conformity as a response to the unthinking conformity of middle-class values. Jonathan Dollimore draws a correlation between Wilde's alleged sodomy and his search for self-identity, suggesting that he created a natural self only by casting down "a Protestant ethic and high bourgeois moral rigor and repression that generated a kind of conformity which Wilde scorned" (3). This search for self-identity can be interpreted as not just a will for freedom but also a respect for individuality. In "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891), for example, Wilde talks of "the natural inability of a community corrupted by authority to understand or appreciate Individualism," and states that "Public Opinion [. . .] is infamous and of evil meaning when it tries to control Thought or Art" (1094).

Lord Henry Wotton directly refers to this in a conversation with Dorian Gray:

"To be good is to be in harmony with one's self," he replied, touching the thin stem of his glass with his pale, fine-pointed fingers. "Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One's own life—that is the important thing. As for the lives of one's neighbours, if one wishes to be a prig or a Puritan, one can flaunt one's moral views about them, but they are not one's concern. Besides, Individualism has really the higher aim. Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality." (69)

Challenging the myth that socialism is opposed to individualism, Wilde connects socialism with aestheticism in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" by claiming, "A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want

[. . .]. Art is the most intense mood of Individualism that the world has known” (1090).

It may be concluded, however, that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is “the tragedy of aestheticism” and “the aesthetic novel *par excellence*, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers” (Ellmann 297). It is important to note the source of Wilde’s inconsistency here, the tension between his individualism and his unconquerable obsession with social status. Paradoxically, Wilde seems to reject the notion of egocentrism and the doctrine of art for art’s sake by providing a didacticism the aesthetic movement at first observed but ultimately rejected in mainstream Victorian art and culture.¹³ That life which Wilde deeply criticized is the one he finally chose to live himself. The didactic nature of the novel is a veil of irony.¹⁴ An overriding sense of irony and doom permeates the novel from the moment Basil Hallward mentions his intellect and art, Lord Henry’s rank and wealth, and Dorian’s good looks: “[. . .] we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly” (19). At the sight of his own portrait Dorian undoubtedly understands Lord Henry’s “strange panegyric on youth, his terrible warning of its brevity” (34). Dorian’s words sound like a prophecy of doom: “I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. . . . If it were only the other way!” (34) “There is something fatal about a portrait” (95), admits Dorian. Lord Henry regrets the fixed fate of beauty in the Gray family: “What a pity it was that such beauty was destined to fade!” (41) The irony of doom also portends the underlying sense of tragedy pervading the personal plight of Wilde, the upper-class champion of aestheticism. Any belief in pessimistic fatalism degrades him by depriving him of artistry, autonomy, and freedom, while middle-class attitudes to art are optimistic because tragedy is regarded as being of little moral or educational use.

What is often overlooked is the fact that Wilde raises the theme of personal moral choice in the novel. Although Dorian is doomed by what Lord Henry has said about “the search for beauty being the real secret of

life” (49), his curiosity getting the better of him, the reader still juggles this with the notion that in the end it is Dorian with his freedom of will who makes the moral choice to give in to temptation. Witness Dorian’s relationship with Sibyl Vane. It is the touchstone of Lord Henry’s baneful influence on him. Dorian seems to choose art rather than love in order to satisfy his acquisitive instinct, though it is incompatible with true appreciation of beauty. Peter Raby is right in saying that “Dorian’s choice is analogous to Faustus’s (and Faust’s) first action of egotistical self-delight; and the Mephistophelean figure of Lord Henry is present to strengthen the protagonist’s resolve” (72). An opium den’s prostitute swears that “he has sold himself to the devil for a pretty face” (146). The portrait is the ultimate symbol of this Faustian choice of Dorian’s.

Wilde suggests that conventional codes should not be accepted passively but explored by the individual to create a personal moral code of right and wrong. Dorian’s greatest sin is murder, and Wilde’s is homosexuality. From his own perspective, Wilde’s sin is a crime in no sense because he believed his conduct must contain no vulgarity: “All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is crime” (160). In Victorian England, however, the notion of homosexual love, closely connected with a sense of immorality, was spat on and treated with suspicion and contempt. Eve K. Sedgwick discusses homosexuality in aristocrats as viewed by the Victorian middle classes: “[. . .] it came under the heading of dissolution, at the very time when dissolution was itself becoming the (wishful?) bourgeois-ideological name for aristocracy itself” (174). Many analogies have been made between Dorian’s life and Wilde’s. Autobiographical references are frequent, and Wilde relates a plethora of personal experiences in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The tragedy of Wilde is the product of prejudices in the society he lived in. He may have believed it a form of the grossest immorality to accept the moral codes of an age, but rejecting them must lead to association with decadence and moral corruption even while practicing the most innocent of crimes.

7.

The primary aim of Dorian Gray is an inverted kind of hedonism and *carpe diem* [enjoy the day] sentiment, and one which holds true for Oscar Wilde's firm purpose in life.¹⁵ After all, Dorian could never be true to himself, so he avenged society through overindulging in life's momentary pleasures, giving no heed to their fateful consequences. His self-deceptive and self-righteous moral choice hints a profound self-destructiveness. This choice is encouraged by Lord Henry Wotton at the beginning of the novel:

“[. . .] Ah! realise your youth while you have it. Don't squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims, the false ideals, of our age. Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. . . . A new Hedonism—that is what our century wants [. . .].” (32)

Is Wilde serious here? Is this his critical voice coming through? In a society ruled by the middle classes so ardently opposed to difference and so insistent on conformity, when the upper classes were guilty of the same gross hypocrisy, it seems that to openly indulge in the sensual pleasures of life was an acceptable way forward for such bohemians as Wilde.

Like his mother, Wilde was a strong-willed bohemian aristocrat. He vacillated between high society and bohemian circles, and played, as Dorian does, the double role of “rebellion” (144) as well as “Dandyism, [. . .] an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of beauty” (103). Wilde was both a morbidly refined, sensuously self-indulgent aristocrat and an individualist who needed bohemian freedom. These aesthetic poses he adopted to alleviate his growing anxiety were something quite subversive which demanded suppression and swift entombment in Victorian England. Society was Wilde's chief anxiety, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is saturated with an apprehensive quality, revealing his deep mistrust and cynical attitudes towards his contemporaries.

Notes

¹ Epicureanism is subtly different from hedonism. The former is, so to speak, a more tempered ethical hedonism. It attempts to moderate pleasure-seeking with a qualitative differentiation which leads to the admission of some standard other than pleasure itself. Walter Pater's review of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the *Bookman* (November 1891) is penetrating in this respect: "A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, [. . .] as Mr. Wilde's heroes are bent on doing so speedily, [. . .] is to lose, or lower, organisation, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development" (Beckson 84).

² His relations with the Pre-Raphaelites led Pater to imbue his academic world with something of their doctrine. He was teaching with Ruskin in Oxford during Wilde's student years (1874-79). Wilde's discussion on the autonomy of art reflects the aesthetic movement. Wilde and his contemporary aesthetes retained significant vestiges of Pater's ideas.

³ In *The Romantic Agony*, his classic study of decadence literature, Mario Praz rightly regards Pater as "the forerunner of the Decadent Movement in England" (355). Pater's aesthetic teaching in the last lines of his "Conclusion" of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* is that the love of art for art's sake is the highest form of wisdom: "Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (239). This conclusion promulgated a kind of aesthetic gospel. Influenced by Pater's aesthetic teaching, Wilde became the center of a group glorifying beauty for itself alone, though he also found himself satirized with other exponents of art for art's sake. *Punch*, the Victorian weekly comic magazine, launched its campaign of ridicule against the aesthetic movement with cartoons by George du Maurier (1834-96) in 1879, when Wilde began to share lodgings in Chelsea with the fashionable portrait painter Frank Miles (1852-91). Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *Patience* (1881) is their lampoon of the Pre-Raphaelites and the aesthetic movement. Wilde attended a performance soon after arriving in New York on 5 January 1881.

⁴ Explaining the shift from production to consumption models in economics and aesthetics in the second half of the nineteenth century, Regenia Gagnier claims that "the *fin de siècle* emphasized the consumer of the work and the incessant search for

pleasure and sensation,” and that the basic stance towards the economy at that time was “boredom with production but love of comfort, insatiable desire for new sensation, and fear of falling behind the competition” (228). Gagnier’s claim is justified, at least in Lord Henry’s consumption of women like cigarettes, vicariously through Dorian: “Basil, I can’t allow you to smoke cigars. You must have a cigarette. A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied” (70). Committing sins vicariously enables Lord Henry to escape the hidden hazards of the new sensation. “As the true critic and artist,” Donald H. Ericksen rightly points out, “his personality never becomes a burden to him, for the artistic form Lord Henry created in his own life and personality is held separate from life and consequently never degenerates into chaos” (116).

⁵ In a study of the relation between aesthetics and religion in Victorian literature, Hilary Fraser objects that “despite their antagonism towards Ruskinian aesthetics and conventional morality, both Wilde and Pater betray a moral sensitivity in their work and are interested in exploring the possibilities for a redefinition of the moral implications of aesthetic experience” (198).

⁶ Wilde is often read in relation to subsequent concerns of the modern period, but he also might be read as engaging retrospectively in a dialog with Ruskin, Morris, Pater, and others. For arguments elaborating the sage writers and their later counterparts, see Thais E. Morgan’s *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse*. Wilde is concerned with some of the same political and social issues as they are, even if his answers are different from theirs. So if one focuses entirely on Wilde’s sexuality (either his actual conduct or the sexual dimensions of his texts), something is being missed. If more emphasis is laid on criticism, on the battle of the Victorian sages from whom Wilde drew some of his own ideas, the sex angle becomes somewhat less overbearing. Indeed, the lurid dissipations of the characters Sedgwick mentions might well seem to be more window dressing than anything substantial. It is also fair to say, however, that seeing Wilde solely as a writer in the tradition of the Victorian sage or cultural critic assimilates him to a tradition which many in *fin de siècle* Britain came to find inadequate and even reactionary.

⁷ Suggestive here is Norbert Kohl’s oxymoronic account of Wilde as a conformist rebel. Kohl concludes that Wilde’s original artistic talent lies “in the provocative yet conformist attitude he adopted towards Victorian society, and in his attempt to preserve the autonomy of art against bourgeois interference” (318). Wilde’s mixed identity can be concisely (though roughly) explained in terms of a conflict between

individualism and conventionalism.

⁸ Robert Vernon was a wealthy patron who bought pictures, mostly by British artists, and took the first practical step towards the creation of a national gallery of British art in 1847, when he presented 166 paintings and sculptures from his large collection to the National Gallery. Sir Thomas Wyse was a liberal unionist in politics and a diplomat who was interested in education. Highly influential in the introduction of a bill for national education in Ireland, he advocated many pedagogical reforms with the publication of *Education Reform* (1837).

⁹ In his Marxist study, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton discusses the ideological function of art: “[. . .] the category of the aesthetic assumes the importance it does in modern Europe because in speaking of art it speaks of these other matters too, which are at the heart of the middle class’s struggle for political hegemony. The construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact is thus inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order.” He complicates his discussion by adding that the aesthetic provides “an unusually powerful challenge and alternative to these dominant ideological forms and is in this sense an eminently contradictory phenomenon” (3).

¹⁰ Wilde decided, though briefly, to adopt a life of Victorian respectability. In 1884 he married Constance Lloyd (1858-98), the well-read daughter of a prominent Irish barrister, and the couple had two sons. With a family to support, Wilde accepted a respectable position in 1887, being given the task of resuscitating the popular magazine, *The Woman’s World*. Respectability was too much of a load for Wilde, however. He formed a liaison with the young Lord Alfred Douglas in 1891, ending his respectable marriage in 1893.

¹¹ In his letter of 30 June 1890 to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, Wilde defended himself against the observation in a review of his novel that Dorian had a cool, calculating, conscienceless character: “[. . .] he is extremely impulsive, absurdly romantic, and is haunted all through his life by an exaggerated sense of conscience which mars his pleasures for him and warns him that youth and enjoyment are not everything in the world” (Holland and Hart-Davies 436). His self-defense is corroborated by Dorian’s earnest desire: “I want to be good. I can’t bear the idea of my soul being hideous” (82). The reader is presented with the classic battle of the deceitful forces of evil over the innocence of good. It is for the complete liquidation of the conscience that Dorian finally destroys the portrait with the knife that stabbed Basil.

This is, as it were, Dorian's suicide by the immediate and eternal silencing of his conscience. The portrait is nothing but the picture as he paints it in his conscience. "The picture, changed or unchanged," in other words, "would be to him the visible emblem of conscience" (79). It is never described for the reader unless through the eyes of Dorian. When his footmen entered the barred room after his suicide, they found "a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty" (167).

¹² In his *Sexuality in Victorian Fiction*, Dennis W. Allen refers briefly to Wilde and homosexuality: "Although homosexuality was associated with the erasure not only of gender but also of class boundaries, Wilde's concern is finally with psychic rather than social chaos, with the effects of homosexual desire on the distinctions of subject and object and self and other" (115). Allen's reference has no further expatiation but shows the importance of self/other dynamics in the shaping and construction of identity. If *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is autobiographical, it will necessarily involve the politics of subject/object representation by the author. Wilde is narrator and hero, observer and observed, subject and object, and self and other. Granted that the author is homosexual, the self/other relationship can be far more complicated than what has been presented here. Homosexuality blurs, erases, and disrupts the self-other dichotomy.

¹³ Robert K. Miller, among others, states that Wilde is far from an advocate of art for art's sake: "Wilde showed that our real obligations lie elsewhere. Art, like experience, is good only so long as it contributes to self-development. When it is used as a luxurious means of passing time, it is no better than the drugs to which Dorian eventually falls victim" (30). It is impossible, however, to deny that Wilde was continually haunted by the exquisite temptations he condemned. Biographically speaking, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the work of a man uncertain of his own beliefs and morally torn between conscience and temptation. These moral dilemmas are Wilde's self-imposed destiny, which awaits advocates of Lord Henry's paradoxical view such as Dorian: "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (29).

¹⁴ "The central irony of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," says Claude J. Summers, "is that the Hellenic ideal of 'the harmony of soul and body' pursued by Basil and Henry alike, and localized in their separate visions of Dorian, is not realized largely because they project onto the young man their own unbalanced and fragmentary images. Moreover, in the corrupt and materialistic world of late-nineteenth-century London, Dorian's project of self-realization amounts simply to a self-indulgence that

mocks both Basil's idealism and Henry's tendentious (mis)interpretation of Pateresque epicureanism. Rather than harmonizing, in the course of the novel, Dorian's soul and body become increasingly disconnected and finally separated entirely, as symbolized in the increasing disjunction between the unaging beauty of Dorian's body and the hideous representation of his soul (that is, the picture). This irony suggests that the Faustian theme is by no means confined to the gothic diabolism of Dorian's supernatural bargain for a youthful appearance. By assuming godlike powers of creation, Basil and Henry also partake in the Faustian desire to escape human limitations" (694).

¹⁵ G. K. Chesterton, a more eccentric though less charming prince of paradox than Wilde, explicates a *carpe diem* mentality for male aestheticism: "Walter Pater said that we were all under sentence of death, and the only course was to enjoy exquisite moments simply for those moments' sake. The same lesson was taught by the very powerful and very desolate philosophy of Oscar Wilde. It is the *carpe diem* religion; but the *carpe diem* religion is not the religion of happy people, but of very unhappy people" (94).

Works Cited

- Ackroyd, Peter, ed. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. By Oscar Wilde. London: Penguin, 1985.
- Beckson, Karl, ed. *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.
- Buckley, Jerome H. *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture*. 1951, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1981.
- Chapman, Raymond. *The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society 1832-1901*. New York: Basic Books, 1968.
- Chesterton, G. K. "Heretics." 1905. *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*. Ed. David Dooley. Vol. 1. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986. 37 vols. to date.
- Dickens, Charles, Jr. *Dickens's Dictionary of London*. London: Charles Dickens and Evans, 1879.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1991.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

- Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987.
- Ericksen, Donald H. *Oscar Wilde*. Boston: Twayne, 1977.
- Fraser, Hilary. *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- Gagnier, Regenia. "Modernity and Progress in Economics and Aesthetics." *Rethinking Victorian Culture*. Ed. Juliet John and Alice Jenkins. London: Macmillan, 2000.
- Gay, Peter. *Pleasure Wars*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998. Vol. 5 of *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*. 5 vols. 1984-98.
- Gilmour, Robin. *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890*. London: Longman, 1993.
- Holland, Merlin and Rupert Hart-Davis, eds. *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Henry Holt, 2000.
- Kohl, Norbert. *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*. Trans. David H. Wilson. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Marsden, Gordon, ed. *Victorian Values: Personalities and Perspectives in Nineteenth Century Society*. London: Longman, 1990.
- Miller, Robert K. *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982.
- Morgan, Thais E., ed. *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990.
- Nassaar, Christopher S. *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1974.
- Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. 1910, New York: Johnson Reprint, 1967.
- Praz, Mario. *The Romantic Agony*. Trans. Angus Davidson. 1933, Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Raby, Peter. *Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1988.
- Sedgwick, Eve K. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Summers, Claude J., ed. *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage: A Reader's Companion to the Writers and Their Works, from Antiquity to the Present*. Rev. ed. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Critic as Artist." *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Introd. Vyvyan Holland. London: Collins, 1966. 1009-59.
- . "The Decay of Lying." *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Introd. Vyvyan Holland. London: Collins, 1966. 970-92.

- . *The Picture of Dorian Gray. The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Introd. Vyvyan Holland. London: Collins, 1966. 17-167.
- . "The Soul of Man under Socialism." *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Introd. Vyvyan Holland. London: Collins, 1966. 1079-104.