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DIDACTIC ANTI-DIDACTICISM: AESTHETICS AND CONTRADICTIONS IN OSCAR WILDE'S THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

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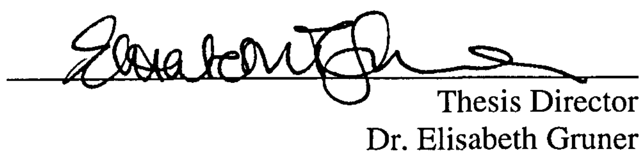
Master of Arts, English
University of Richmond
2004

Dr. Elisabeth Gruner and Dr. John Marx, Thesis Directors

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* calls for a reinvention of aestheticism during the Victorian Age. Wilde felt that the Victorians had surrendered any ornamentation in art to the rules of formality in religion and politics. He also believed that art should teach solely through its existence that there is a realm above mankind. Art should not be used for anything else. Dorian curses himself when he uses his portrait to exchange his soul for eternal beauty. Wilde wrote this novel as his work of art. And, the novel is to "civilize" the Victorian public, to return them to a Hellenic and Renaissance ideal, thus contradicting his aesthetic beliefs. Also, Wilde used the novel to cunningly mask his homosexual life. Wilde ingeniously presents his didactic anti-didacticism through a complex and complicated novel about art and its dangers and rewards.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dr. Abigail Cheever



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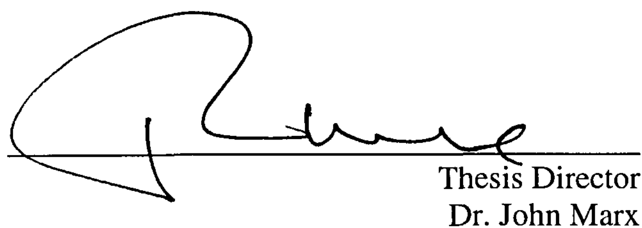

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DIDACTIC ANTI-DIDACTICISM:

AESTHETICS AND CONTRADICTIONS

IN OSCAR WILDE'S

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

By

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B.A., University of Richmond, 1999

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

in Candidacy

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

May, 2004

Richmond, Virginia

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Elisabeth Gruner and Dr. John Marx for their endless dedication and direction throughout the production of this thesis. Your efforts and remarks have been most helpful during the whole process. I would also like to thank Dr. Abigail Cheever for her productive advice and insight.

Many of Oscar Wilde's works are indeed contradictory. Many of the plays and essays contain didactic elements or sayings that provide some lesson on life while at the same time a character, and Wilde himself, argues against the stricture of ethics and morality. True, many of these lessons may involve Wilde's tenets of immorality, but it is compelling that Wilde wants his audience to adopt his ideals, resulting in a non-conformist conformity. So, what exactly is the audience, and a character, supposed to learn?

With the trials, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* became a marker of homosexuality and furthered the public's belief that Wilde's ideals were corruptive. And, queer readings can't be ignored when studying *Dorian*, especially when analyzing Basil Hallward's affection for Dorian. But, a queer reading is not the only way of examining Wilde's work. Wilde, living a life of "unspeakable" pleasure, used the novel to cunningly report not only his secret life of homosexuality, but also his purpose to reinvent aestheticism. By the time Wilde wrote *Dorian*, the Victorian ideal of art had become formulaic. Many works of art had lost any sense of visionary beauty, any ornamentation in technique. Much of this loss was due to the Victorian teachings of manners and morality, of what should and should not be seen, done, spoken, read or heard. Wilde was struggling against a whole era of formality and rules. In his plays, he hid his tenets behind comedy of manners, gender and dandyism. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he didn't hide his teachings so much anymore, especially by adding his famous "art" Preface. The public was shocked to read arguments that went against their beliefs, that actually made them think about what their rules truly were. Wilde faced many objections from Victorian society once the novel was published.

Wilde claims in his Preface, "All art is quite useless." The Victorian world did not expect this blatant disregard of its artistic culture from the man who had penned so many of their famous plays. Wilde was arguing against art having to teach the world something meaningful. He wanted his public to look at a work of art and appreciate its beauty, just for being beautiful. Wilde sought for the world to view art as a pleasure-producing medium, not as being a formalized piece that teaches rules about the world and self and not as an object that one can own. So, here arrives *Dorian* and its damnable picture. And here, the contradictions begin.

As much as Wilde argued against the usefulness of art, he also fell, whether knowingly or not we may never know, into the trap of utility with his one and only novel. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the novel itself, is a work of art that is meant to teach, to guide the public by Wilde's beliefs. The plot involves the danger of involving oneself too heavily within the production or viewing of a piece of art. It is ultimately Dorian's instance on making art useful, wanting to exchange places with the portrait, that leads to his horrible demise. This is part of Wilde's lesson. But, he contradicts himself by writing this novel and expecting it to be a useful lesson for the public. Yet, was there any other way? What was he trying to say in producing a work of art as lesson that preaches not to make lessons of art? If one looks closely at *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one will see that the novel is a call for the return of a high aestheticism that begs for understanding art as teaching about art and beauty, not really about morality and ethics.

As I stated, it is impossible, given the trials and modern intellectualism, to disregard a queer reading of the novel. The novel, like Wilde's plays, is full of sexual innuendos. There is Basil's description of when he first meets Dorian (21). Jeffrey

Nunokawa says in his essay "The Disappearance of the Homosexual in *The Picture of Dorian* Gray," "We have no trouble diagnosing Basil Hallward's perturbations as the birth pangs of homosexual identity; we may have trouble diagnosing them as anything else. His attraction to Dorian Gray appears as nothing other than the first act of the now well-developed drama of self-realization we call coming out" (184). But, we can in fact diagnose Basil's "perturbations" as more than homosexual desire. Nunokawa disregards the aesthetic quality of Basil's affections for Dorian. When asked by Lord Henry why he will not exhibit Dorian's portrait, Basil responds "Because, without intending it, I have put into it some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry . . . .the world might guess it; and I will not bare my soul to their shallow prying eyes" (Wilde, *Dorian* 24-5).

It is obvious to the modern (and queer-sensitive) reader that Wilde was describing his hidden life of homosexuality. Alan Sinfield writes, "The whole book is pervaded with queerness" (100). But, for Sinfield, this queerness is not homosexuality; the queerness is the "homosocial rather than homosexual" (101). Homosexuality had not been defined, nor even termed, during the Victorian Era. The homosexual's identity was quite different then than it is now. Homosexuality did exist, but it was a lifestyle that was not discussed openly. Therefore, the objections to homosexuality did not become part of a public forum until Wilde's trials. The book does not present blatant homo-sexual activity, identity thus being attached to the sexual act. But, homosexuality as identity can involve the attraction as well, if one believes in strict terms of sexual identification. Sinfield's "homosocial" relies more on stereotypes, brought to the definition by Wilde's trials and dandyism, much like today's meterosexual. So, the question of sexual identity is never concrete. Is one homosexual because of the way he or she acts?

In his essay entitled "The Importance of Being Bored: The Dividends of Ennui in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Nunokawa says, "One species of passion does manage to slip through the safety net that stops all others . . . one that dare not speak its name" (161). Yes, Wilde did lead a homosexual life and his works do involve homoeroticism. But, Wilde would not have believed in being labeled a homosexual. Lord Henry says, "To define is to limit" (Wilde, *Dorian* 148). Wilde did not assent to a definition of the homosexual, partly because there wasn't a concrete term to accept or reject at the time. Ironically though, he did promote a definition of the dandy, which would later stereotype the homosexual. Homosexuality was not viewed negatively by Wilde, as long as it was not in the open. Sinfield says, "The book should be viewed not as the cunning masking of an already-known queerness, but as reaching out towards formulations of same-sex experience that were, we keep observing, as yet nameless" (102-03). The homosexuality was nameless, but it was still "dirty" enough for Wilde to *have* to keep it secret, to cunningly mask it.

But, one can't limit Wilde's works to one theme. *Dorian* is not just about homosexuality, or the sexuality that had not been termed yet. Dennis W. Allen says,

> To read the novel's secret as 'homosexuality' is finally to underestimate the implications of Wilde's narrative. Wilde's refusal of closure, his denial of a final answer, does not merely suggest that homoerotic desire cannot be directly articulated in a homophobic culture or that all sexuality is finally unspeakable in the sense that it is chaotically unavailable to any narrativization. Finally, in typically paradoxical fashion, Wilde reverses the ideological grounding of the representation of the sexual in the

> Victorian novel, the sense that sex and sexuality cannot be spoken but that they must nonetheless enter discourse. Rather, Wilde suggests, the sexual can be spoken (indeed, as we have seen, the Victorian novel always produces or enacts it), but it *should not* be articulated. Breaking the rules of stories, which provide narrative closure by explaining everything, Wilde thus leaves one mystery, implying that sexuality has no clear meaning, no answer (135).

Allen's view shows the reason why it is hard to limit Wilde's novel to just a queer reading. Homosexuality was not discussed at the time and was written in veiled terms for works such as *Dorian*. And, the homosexual readings of the novel are valid, but there is more to analyze in the novel. Here, we see Basil's attraction to Dorian as homosexual, but Wilde was also commenting on Basil's aesthetics.

The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.

The Preface, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Basil's admiration and worship of Dorian serve as the catalyst of Dorian's downfall. It is Basil's responsibility to realize and obey the idea, as Wilde says in "The Critic As Artist," "that the beauty of the visible arts is, as the beauty of music, impressive primarily, and that it may be marred, and indeed often is so, by any excess of intellectual intention on the part of the artist. For when the work is finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say" (1029). Basil views Dorian as a work of art and tries to own his beauty by painting his portrait. Basil does put too much of his idolatry into the painting.

And Dorian, as spectator, humanizes the painting. Both men have given the picture too much meaning. It is soon after the reader is given Basil's declaration "I have put too much of myself into it," (Wilde, *Dorian* 19) that he or she is made aware of another problem with Basil—his physical adoration of Dorian.

Basil has a secret; he is in love with Dorian, or better still, he is in love with Dorian's image. Basil tells Lord Henry about his first encounter with Dorian: "I turned half-way round, and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself" (Wilde, *Dorian* 21). This act of worship on Basil's part is internal and, therefore, not effective on Dorian. But, it is important to note that Basil takes this worship even farther—into the portrait he paints of Dorian. Basil is absorbed by the sight of Dorian (as I mentioned, Dorian, the man, is treated as art by Basil). Here, Basil lets the "art" become more than just an object, or in this case, a being. Basil's artistic mistake is put into the painting, thus attaching more meaning than should be. Basil should have just painted the external beauty of Dorian and allowed that beauty to exist for itself.

Many artists worship the subjects of their paintings. But, Basil damagingly makes the painting part of his idolization of Dorian. Not only does Basil paint what he sees, he paints what is in his heart. It is true that this process is part of an artist's work, but Basil takes his reverence to the highest extreme. To Basil, the portrait is no longer just a means of showcasing Dorian's beauty, but also a way to express, at first unconsciously, his at-

once Hellenic, yet increasingly homoerotic love of Dorian. Once Basil realizes the danger of his art's self-inclusion, he exclaims,

> An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Some day I will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray (Wilde 25).

The painting is Basil's autobiography. He feels that Dorian gives him more artistic power by just being by Basil as he paints. So, carrying his idolatry into the portrait, even painting the portrait given his feelings, Basil does more than just let the Beauty exist. Given the similarity between Basil's exclamation and Wilde's tenets in The Preface, it is easy to argue that Basil's words are Wilde's in this novel.

Richard Ellmann states in his biography of Oscar, "Wilde saw the three characters as refractions of his own image. He explained to a correspondent, 'Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian is what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps'" (319). If one is to believe that Basil's words above are Wilde's, then there are a couple of ideas being presented by Wilde the novelist. He is again affirming his belief that art should proffer beauty, not try to explain beauty. Also, the artist should believe this idea, which will help him or her to exercise self-exclusion in the work of art. Wilde is commenting on the loss of beauty and a return to the Renaissance during the Victorian Age, to a means of gaining pleasure by *just* beholding beauty.

Beauty is to be a thing beheld. Beauty is not to be explored, explained or deconstructed. Beauty is to simply exist as a superior thing. Gilbert says in "The Critic As Artist," "Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world" (1030). Basil does not merely behold Dorian's beauty; Dorian becomes the epitome of Beauty for Basil—"the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream" (Wilde, *Dorian* 93). Already, Basil has attached too much meaning to the beauty in front of him. And, it is these feelings, and "the homosexual tastes of Basil Hallward" (Ellmann 313), that lead him to declare: "The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul" (Wilde, *Dorian* 21). But, Julia Prewitt Brown argues: "Hallward, the artist who painted the picture, has a less intimate or less intense relation to it. He produces it and gives it out, separating it from himself, and in the end he is the least responsible for the damage it causes" (79). Yet, Basil is responsible for the worship and meaning he attaches, verbally and not, to the portrait. Brown misses Wilde's argument on art being just an object. Like Dorian, Basil humanizes art. He treats Dorian like a piece of art and in turn lets his feelings for Dorian come through the painting. Basil, at first, only reveals his "secret" to Lord Henry, but later he reveals all of his feelings and what went into making the portrait to Dorian (Wilde, *Dorian*, 93-4). Basil's canvas takes on life. It is upon this canvas which Dorian's impressionable, precocious mind and his Faustian pact have been thrust, thus presenting a peculiar juxtaposition of subject and object.

Basil sets up the unveiling of the finished work by saying, "This is going to be my masterpiece" (Wilde, *Dorian* 30). Expectations are high at this point. Also, Lord Henry does much to influence Dorian's mind with compliments of Dorian's beauty and warnings such as "we never get back our youth" (Wilde, *Dorian* 32). Already, Dorian is somewhat biased by Lord Henry and Basil's opinions. But, it is his first glimpse of the painting which pushes Dorian even further than Basil and Lord Henry:

> Dorian made no answer, but passed listlessly in front of his picture, and turned towards it. When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognised himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before. (Wilde, *Dorian* 33-4).

Dorian's initial obsession mirrors Basil's reaction to meeting Dorian for the first time. They both are encompassed by "art" and seek to capture it.

Both Basil and Dorian go farther than the first "moment of pleasure" and come to worship the thing in front of them. It is in this similarity that both men put themselves in danger of being consumed by art and beauty. Brown states, "Whoever enters into relation with a work of art, whoever gives himself or herself over to it, is then subject to the new life springing from it. Literally, the work of art does not come to life until it is appreciated or 're-cognized,' as it were. Those who take it up with an open mind fall under its spell" (79). Basil dangerously believes the man Dorian is a work of art and is consumed by his sexual and aesthetic attraction to Dorian. Basil, Lord Henry and

Dorian's minds are to receive beauty, but each man, especially Dorian, at once opens his mind to and closes it around the portrait so that the object is the center of his being. And, then, there is Dorian's curse upon himself. And, here we *must* analyze more in the novel, Wilde's aesthetics and the reasons for his beliefs.

The vulgarized art in England provided an opposition to and catalyst for Wilde's views on art. Since art had been deemed as marketable, Wilde wanted to reclaim the notion that Beauty exists for pleasure. But, did he believe in art as education, as intellectual and social advancement, a belief similar to Hellenic Greece? So much of what Wilde preached involved Art existing as a thing of beauty, providing a means of enjoyment for the observer. It was through this enjoyment that the soul of man would improve and the plainer aspect of the Victorian setting would turn towards the beautiful. These beliefs are more than evident within Wilde's works, but there is even more going on with Wilde.

In his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, added after the first publication, Wilde boldly challenges the formal Victorian attitude with his lessons on art. Art is to be simply art, not a commodity, nor a reflection of strict codes of manners, politics and religion. Even within the novel, Wilde provides a lesson through the major characters, Dorian, Lord Henry and Basil on the dangers of making art useful, of putting an agenda behind art. And, it is clear that Wilde means for the novel to be a work of art as well. So, then why did Wilde write a novel that was meant to influence the Victorians? Doesn't this make the art useful?

All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

The Preface, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Wilde believed in a rebirth of aestheticism for the Victorians. This rebirth would involve knowing that art is art, and while it embraces the beautiful, art is still just an object to behold. Gilbert says in "The Critic As Artist," " . . . there is in us a beauty-sense, separate from the other senses and above them, separate from the reason and of nobler import, separate from the soul and of equal value—a sense that leads some to create, and others, the finer spirits as I think, to contemplate merely" (1049). Thus, Wilde felt that art should not involve the rules of politics or religion in its presentation and/or justification. This process would mean that the art is being used for other means besides presenting Beauty. Indeed, there should be no justification of the beautiful. Victorian England, like Basil, and later Dorian, had placed too much meaning on art. The Victorians' investment dealt more with art as a commodity, where Dorian's placement deals more with a selfish narcissism.

Dorian dangerously makes a pact, curses himself, so that he will not grow old while the painting does. It is here that Dorian personifies the portrait, holding it up as an ideal, yet equating it with his human experience. Dorian fatefully exclaims:

> How sad it is! 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! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole

> world I would not give! I would give my soul for that! (Wilde, *Dorian* 34).

It is perilous for Dorian to wish to change places with the painting, and even more so to utter these wishes. Yet, Dorian goes even further. He places his soul into the pact as well, making it a true Faustian agreement.

Dorian allows the painting to become not only a part of his life, but life itself, not only the object, but the subject as well. Tom Lloyd writes, "While the cyclical changes of nature, as well as the ravages of immoral conduct, are projected onto that which should be useless, that is, bereft of an end, Dorian inserts into life itself the artistry that should remain separate from life" (163). For Dorian, the painting is more than just his image on a canvas—it is now a friend, an ideal and a rival. Just as Basil "grew jealous of every one to whom you [Dorian] spoke," (Wilde, *Dorian* 93) Dorian becomes "jealous of everything whose beauty does not die . . . jealous of the portrait" (Wilde, *Dorian* 35). Here, again, we have a parallel between human and art, both being the object of envy for two obsessed men. And, Basil and Lord Henry attribute too much meaning to the portrait, give it too much of life so that it dangerously violates Wilde's belief in art only as an object to behold for its Beauty. When Basil tells Lord Henry not to say sinful things in front of Dorian, Lord Henry asks "Before which Dorian? The one who is pouring out tea for us or the one in the picture?" to which Basil replies, "Before either" (Wilde, *Dorian* 36). The painting and Dorian are now equal in all the men's eyes. They have all found a *use* for the art, a usage that leads to corruption, murder and suicide.

The portrait and Dorian switch identities completely. The painting becomes the person and Dorian becomes the work of art, although Basil had already made Dorian a

work of art. Wilde takes his warning of using art for anything besides pleasure through understanding Beauty's power to an extreme example—one who uses art and is consumed entirely. The consuming of Dorian, more extremely though, parallels Basil's. As Dorian looks at the painting and sees how it is changing in front of his eyes, "His own soul was looking out at him from the canvas and calling him to judgment" (Wilde, *Dorian* 97). With this description, Dorian is no longer a human; he is just a vessel, an object as the painting was. He gives the painting life with his Faustian pact, and he humanizes the painting by giving away his soul, by living his life (or lack thereof) with the belief that his soul is truly gone into the portrait. So, Dorian becomes the thing to be beheld.

Having forfeited his soul to the painting, Dorian is just a walking statue. For years, he is wondered at and admired for his unbelievably eternal beauty, like a painting restored. Everyone marvels at him:

> His little dinners, in the settling of which Lord Henry always assisted him, were noted for the careful selection and placing of those invited, as for the exquisite taste shown in the decoration of the table, with its subtle symphonic arrangements of exotic flowers, and embroidered cloths, and antique plate of gold and silver. Indeed, there were many, especially among the very young men, who saw, or fancied that they saw, in Dorian Gray, the true realisation of a type of which they had often dreamed in Eaton or Oxford days, a type that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world. To them he seemed to be of the company of

> those whom Dante describes as having sought to 'make themselves perfect by the worship of beauty.' Like Gautier, he was one for whom 'the visible world existed' (Wilde, *Dorian* 103).

Much is going on in this passage. Dorian becomes the perfect host, presenting the finest accoutrements to his guests. Wilde is commenting on the paradoxical formality and uselessness of the society's rituals. Yet, Dorian exemplifies dandyism, a lifestyle approved by Wilde. The description of Dorian's dinners is juxtaposed with Dorian himself. The attention to detail and the presentation itself makes the dinners and Dorian both works of art, and nothing more. There is no substance to either, no emotion, just a visual commentary. But, isn't that what Wilde wants, a beauty that just exists? Yes, but this beauty should move one to understand that it exists to show an ideal, not to be used as a claim for status. In the passage, Wilde does use decriptives such as "scholar" and "the company of those whom Dante describes," thus making Dorian representative of the educated/educator of the Renaissance ideal. Yet, looking closer, before these descriptives, Wilde uses counter-descriptives such as "or fancied that they saw" and "seemed to be" respectively. The public isn't sure what Dorian is; worse, Dorian is not truly the Hellenic or Renaissance example: he is just a facade.

In an attempt to better himself through art, Dorian does study works of art from the book that Lord Henry gives him from jewels to tapestries (Wilde, *Dorian* 102-15). But, it is too late. Dorian has misunderstood the meaning in art and he has become a work of art himself. He gains nothing now from these studies and believes them all, especially the book, to be poisonous. So, then, he must turn his back upon the people who have influenced him because the search for his soul is unsuccessful. He must place

the blame, somewhat correctly, on Basil and Lord Henry. Dorian tells Basil shortly before murdering him, " 'Years ago, when I was a boy . . . you met me, flattered me, and taught me to be vain of my good looks. One day you introduced me to a friend of yours, who explained to me the wonder of youth, and you finished the portrait of me that revealed to me the wonder of beauty'" (Wilde, *Dorian* 121). Basil is indeed the catalyst, but Dorian doesn't realize Basil's true fault is having put too much of himself into the portrait. Dorian believes now that his downfall is all due to Basil and Lord Henry revealing art to him. Dorian, in his ignorance, is misguided by his vain beliefs. It is Dorian's own fault of trying to encompass that "wonder of beauty." And, this act fails Dorian.

So, there is no other way for Dorian to go except down a path that abandons art. He begins to lead a sordid life and take opium in order to expunge the beauty from his life, punish yet teach himself, and gain back his soul. He blames Art and the artists for his own selfish curse that leads to his demise, for his own misunderstanding of the lessons to be taught by art. Beauty is now his enemy: "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" (Wilde, *Dorian* 141). Dorian relishes "ugly" hazardous activities while abandoning beauty, ignorantly believing that this will lead to his redemption. Dorian's mistake is in his substitution of physical for emotional and intellectual sensations. The Beauty that is to be relished in art is supposed to make

one wonder how a thing can be so beautiful. This questioning involves seeing that Beauty does exist on its own as a supreme power, thus giving the spectator feelings of elation and knowledge of a higher realm where Beauty resides. And, the Beauty can't be captured for one's own property. Remember, Basil tries to show Dorian's beauty, and ends up revealing his own idolatry in a portrait, instead of just letting Dorian exist.

Since Dorian relinquishes beauty, his forays into the underworld don't help him in his education of life. Therefore, Dorian is left in the middle between beauty and vulgarity. In his fear, Dorian tries to destroy the painting: "As it (the knife) had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that meant" (Wilde, *Dorian* 167). Thus, Dorian is killing himself because the painting is what is alive. Brown says,

> The story of Dorian's relation to his own portrait is an intricately worked parable of the process of both depletion and expansion that can occur when we give ourselves to a work of art, the increase in our vulnerability to experience, the coming-to-life of the work of art, and the different ways we may react to and against art when all of this happens. In short, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is about the dangers and opportunities that had arisen in a world in which art is no longer dependent on ritual. In this disenchanted world, the art object has achieved a life of its own, a nonritualized, nontraditional, magic that demands its human victims as once upon a time the ancient cult had done (77).

Thus, Dorian dies. The painting should never have taken on so much meaning, so much life. Brown's argument on ritual does imply the danger of possibly stripping the religious influence on art. Art, though, can be beautiful with religious themes, not with religious

rules of formality. So, the loss of ritual can be a comment on the loss of theme, the loss of religion's beauty reflected. The painting can only reveal through what is seen on the canvas, so it should remain as only a visual object of beauty. Gilbert says, "The painter is so far limited that it is only through the mask of the body that he can show us the mystery of the soul; only through conventional images that he can handle ideas" (Wilde, *Critic* 1030). So, it is through books, the written language giving more to be questioned, that art also becomes an educator. And *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a work of art.

All art is quite useless.

The Preface, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Walter Pater was admired, even to the lengths of plagiarism, by Wilde.[1] They both beheld an England that had withdrawn from the aesthetic. Victorian society was overseen by "religious tradition" (Dowling 18) and politics. Though not everyone followed them, rules of morality and manners were favored, especially by influential persons of power—the upper and middle classes. Most of the art reflected this formalized characteristic while abandoning any ornamentation. The Italian Renaissance had produced many works of art with religious themes, but these works of art (including the architecture) displayed the beauty in religion, as well as art itself. The Victorians' art did not celebrate the beauty in religion—rather, religion was a code of ethics which was reflected in the art. This is not to say that Victorian art was ugly; it was just plainer, less decorative than the ideal Beauty of its predecessors. No longer was the "art" in the

[1] It has been noted in many sources that Wilde took direct quotes and ideas from Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. For another reference, one could also compare the direct similarities of Wilde's "The Duchess of Padua" to Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

religious art celebrated, but the reflected formality of modern beliefs. Dowling states, "During their long cultural isolation, Dissenters had created a world centered in chapel going, tea drinking, and tract reading and focused exclusively, as it seemed, on two ends, making an earthly fortune and winning a heavenly reward. It was, said Arnold, an illiberal, dismal life" (18). And, art was no longer viewed for its beauty. It was viewed for its value instead. Art had become a commodity. If it was marketable, it was either sold, or held as a piece of property to establish status in the home, business and/or church. Most works of art became undecorative objects to own. It was against this formalization and commodification of art that Wilde would struggle. In "The Critic As Artist," Gilbert represents Wilde, and Ernest represents the questioning Victorian public. Gilbert says that "the critic should be able to recognise that the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate. When they are confused, Chaos has come again. They are too often confused in England now, and though our modern Puritans cannot destroy a beautiful thing, yet, by means of their extraordinary prurience, they can almost taint beauty for a moment" (1048). Wilde saw the politicization and theologizing (in the sense of being used to display rules and ideals) of art as very dangerous.

Wilde's struggle would be to re-establish Aestheticism. Richard Ellmann, in his biography *Oscar Wilde* states, "The nineties began in 1889 and ended in 1895. At least the Wildean nineties did so, and without Wilde the decade could not have found its character. These were years in which aestheticism was revised and perfected" (305). So, Wilde was one of the rebels who fought against the stricture of Victorian social rules. Dowling claims, " . . . Aestheticism reveals its truest nature as a denial or retreat from

history" (ix). Wilde and Pater observed that art, particularly in England, had lost its embellishment to the modern, the formal beliefs of Victorian religion and politics.

Art had lost the beauty of the Renaissance and the Hellenic ideal. In "The Critic As Artist," Gilbert says, "It is always more difficult to destroy than it is to create, and when what one has to destroy is vulgarity and stupidity, the task of destruction needs not merely courage but also contempt . . . We have got rid of what was bad. We have now to make what is beautiful . . . there is no reason why in future years this strange Renaissance should not become almost as mighty in its way as was that new birth of Art that woke many centuries ago in the cities of Italy" (1050). And in *Dorian*, Basil describes Dorian to Lord Henry, "Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body—how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void" (Wilde, *Dorian* 24). Here, Wilde speaks frankly to and of the Victorian upper and middle classes. Ellmann says,

> In the eighties, aestheticism had been less a movement than an expostulation with the lack of one. Yet its influence, and the influence of the movement of which it was a part—that propaganda for art and artist against 'factification' and 'getting-on'—grew stronger. The claims of action over art were challenged by the idea that artistic creation, related to that contemplative life celebrated by Plato, was the highest form of action (306).

The state of art at the time resulted in aestheticism gaining an agenda of fighting "factification," fighting the need to show and explain meaning in art.

What Wilde and Pater established was an Aesthetic Movement away from the oppressive ennui of the state of Victorian art. Dowling agrees by stating: " . . . we only understand Pater's emergent and Wilde's wholly developed aesthetic elitism when we have seen its relation to a suddenly perceived need to rescue art from the degradations of a mass society—Morris's nightmare landscape of modern ugliness now glimpsed as history itself" (xiii). Yet, Wilde's call for aestheticism would go even further than Pater's vision of a re-Renaissance.

Wilde most certainly intended for *Dorian* to be a work of art. In "The Critic As Artist," Gilbert claims, "that the ultimate art is literature, and the finest and fullest medium that of words" (Wilde, *Critic* 1047). Wilde's only novel, *Dorian*, was to be his ultimate art. The novel was to represent a concept of beauty that had been abandoned in England, an aestheticism that called for the Hellenic rebirth of education through art. The book was to exist as a cautionary ideal, one that taught by showing the dangers of using art to exemplify the regulations of politics and religion, which in turn stagnated society. After his artistic education from Gilbert, Ernest claims, "it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world that will be more marvelous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon, and through which common natures seek to realise their perfection" (Wilde, *Critic* 1026). This claim is the lesson of art—beauty reveals a realm that exists beyond our world.

Through language, a novel can attempt to create a world that reveals beauty, a world that represents the ideal in aestheticism—a beauty so supreme that its mere

existence is more than sufficient to teach society of its power. This idea parallels what was called the sublime in art and literature from Plato to Kant to Dante to Goethe to Pater. And Wilde would have felt that his novel and his essays provided the tools for realizing the paramount of ideals, for believing in the peril of submerging oneself into the sublime when the sublime is an existence unto itself that can't be achieved by the human. Not even the artist can truly achieve the sublime; he or she can only present art as a reflection of the sublime. Did Wilde vainly believe that he was the fount of knowledge and his novel is the ultimate achievement?

The Picture of Dorian Gray is not the sublime though, it is not the ideal. It is a work of art speaking to the Victorian public. Brown states, " . . . in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the romantic idea of criticism is at last fulfilled: a work of criticism becomes an autonomous work of art" (77). While the novel's content is on art criticism, its quips on morality speak to the Victorian public. The novel is a lesson to Wilde's society, a way to show the public's blindness due to its commitment to formalized art. Gilbert comments, "And if we grow tired of an antique time, and desire to realise our own age in all its weariness and sin, are there not books that can make us live more in one single hour than life can make us live in a score of shameful years?" (Wilde, *Critic* 1037). The novel is like the painting in that they are both works of art to be beheld—the painting through sight alone, the novel through being read. Yet, the novel can reveal much more than the painting. The painting can show the existence of the highest beauty. But, the novel can create a whole sense of beauty while commenting on a world that has lost this sense of beauty. It is the creation of the picture on the canvas and the world in the novel that is art, the beautiful. Guy Willoughby says, "Wilde the writer, like Basil, is engaged

through his work in an uneven attempt to reconcile Hebraic realities with a Hellenistic ideal, and to piece together the strands of an aesthetic that takes account of the more unpalatable aspects of experience. He also seeks to discover whether art, in completing the artist, offers contradictory messages to its various spectators" (74). And, Wilde's novel does include contradiction.

There are two reasons for Wilde's contradiction. First, a novel is going to spark more questions and criticism because of the characteristics of its medium. When considering a painting, it is easier to understand Wilde's belief in "All art is quite useless." There isn't but so much meaning to attach to a work of visual art, so the painting can stand alone as art. Even if spectators have many different views as to the painter's intent, the painting is just a work of art, a beautiful thing. But, a novel contains much more. It is more intricate because a reader can speculate many different meanings in the words presented to him or her. Hence, *Dorian* can be analyzed queerly and aesthetically. The reader can question the writer's ideas, the character's ideas, the editor's ideas. And then, one must consider the possibility of the novel commenting on its world, its time, whether it is inside or outside the novel (fiction or reality), whether it's the past, present or future. And this explanation leads to the second. The rules of spectatorship have to change for a novel. If one were to truly equate Wilde's explanation of how to view a painting to reading a novel, then one would have to treat the novel as just an object. The novel would be beautiful in the sense of how it is bound, the cover art, the type of paper used. The meaning would go no further and the book would not have to be read. The beauty in a novel goes further than its physical characteristics—the

beauty is in the words. Yet, there is still a problem. Wilde could have meant that the words themselves are beautiful without meaning and that the reader attaches the meaning.

Wilde lived a life of high decadence and immorality. This belief in immorality was, of course, in response to the high moralistic standards of the Victorian middle and upper classes. And, the life of the dandy was one of pure laziness with an attitude bound by a spendthrift characteristic (decadence). The more that one did not do or did spend meant advancement of the self. Self-indulgence was of the highest attribute. This dandiacal life became a way to mask his homosexual acts and his acts of yielding to pleasure which he championed in *Dorian* and some of his other works. But, the mass audience was not privy to Wilde's masking of beliefs until *Dorian* was available to them. Once his trials started, Wilde's works were seen to reveal homosexual themes. The focus shifted from the playful humor that entertained so much of his audience to a disgust and disdain for what they believed to be immoral. Wilde's claim for aestheticism was then minimized to his dandy persona. Hence, the focus of criticism leans heavily upon the queer nature of his works. But, Wilde was also crying out against the loss of beauty in art.

Wilde praised the dandy in his works. He glorified the lazy and foppish life of dandies, such as Dorian and Lord Henry who could sit around all day and go out all night or give dinner parties. And, the celebration of beauty can be linked to the beauty of dandyism. The narrator says, "And, certainly to him [Dorian] Life itself was the first, the greatest, of the arts, and for it all the other arts seemed to be but a preparation. Fashion, by which what is really fantastic becomes for a moment universal, and Dandyism, which, in its own way, is an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of beauty, had, of course,

their fascination for him" (Wilde, *Dorian* 103). But, the celebration fails and becomes only a justification for his dandyism. Attaching the dandy's activities and preferences to his argument on Beauty, Wilde is attempting to make dandyism an ideal while ignoring the negative qualities such as laziness and lust for extravagance. During and after his trials, dandyism would be linked to the homosexual, thus making the justification involve homosexuality as well. Either way, again, Wilde is making art useful. But, that is the genius of Wilde. He presents many beliefs while knowing that the Victorian public will focus only on what they see as important to (or against) their beliefs.

There is always (at least now there is) so much occurring in Wilde's works, including an argument for aestheticism and a masking of the homosexual. What should be applauded is his ability to incorporate all of these ideas into one work, no matter if he plagiarized others and contradicted himself. And, again, he makes his art useful, as an agenda, to his own aims. Wilde is showing the complexity of the novel and still rendering it as a work of art. That is what is beautiful about Wilde's works—that he can incorporate so many ideas, whether contradictory or not, in his writing. What is limiting is what the reader or society chooses to take from the novel. This limitation is not Wilde's (or any writer's) fault.

Wilde's plays were immensely popular during the late Victorian age. Much of the public found in these plays humor based on class, marriage and manners. But, many did not truly see what Wilde was doing. Not only was he establishing a name for himself with the public, but he had already started working on his technique of masking homosexual themes and his views on art. Some of the audiences only heard the jokes put before them, while others who were closer to Wilde and knew his *other* life, found more

at the core of his works. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde did not completely mask his views. The novel creatively reflected the views in his essays—works whose structure would not rely on fiction and symbol. It was time to use a work of art, the novel, as a new medium to present his ideas and to try to influence the Victorian populace.

The novel's reception in the Victorian period was mixed. Joyce Carol Oates says, "Wilde's genius was disfigured by his talent: he always sounds much more flippant, far more superficial, than he really is. So one is always saying about *Dorian*, with an air of surprise, that the novel is exceptionally good after all—and anyone who has read it recently replies, with the same air of faint incredulity, yes, it *is* exceptionally good—one of the strongest and most haunting of English novels, in fact. Yet its reputation remains questionable" (5). The reviews of the book were very mixed, from praise to scorn.

There were some, probably Wilde's friends, who commended *Dorian* while others felt it was disgusting and boring. Stuart Mason, in his book, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Morality*, collects all of the reviews and reactions to Wilde's novel. To show the novel's interruption of Victorian manners, Mason says, "The Puritans and the Philistines, who scented veiled improprieties in its paradoxes, were shocked; but it delighted the connoisseur and the artist, wearied as they were with the humdrum accounts of afternoon tea-parties and the love affairs of the curate" (15). It would have been the artists, and Wilde's friends, who would have understood his aims at discussing Beauty.

The novel was also extremely popular abroad, especially in France—a place the English labeled as vulgar and sinful. Wilde, of course, loved France and the reception of his work there, having on occasion written in French for such works as *Salomé*. Mason states, "It is said to be given as a text-book for students of English in French schools. A

few years ago Sir Herbert Tree spoke of three versions of the story 'dramatically neglected on this side of the Channel' being in preparation for the stage in Germany, 'where the three great dramatists to-day are Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde.' Mrs Arthur Sidgwick in 'Home Life in Germany' (Methuen, 1908) says, 'Ruskin and Oscar Wilde are the two popular modern authors,' one of the two novels which are most read in Germany to-day [sic] being 'Dorian Gray'" (24-5). But, the popularity of Wilde's novel abroad would not be duplicated fully in England.

Even before the novel was released in bound form, there were some reviews that were not hesitant to show their dislike of this rebellious writer. There was a review in *The St James's Gazette* "four days after the publication of the story in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*" which was titled " 'A Study in Puppydom'" (Mason 27). The review states,

> The puzzle is that a young man of decent parts, who enjoyed (when he was at Oxford) the opportunity of associating with gentlemen, should put his name (such as it is) to so stupid and vulgar a piece of work. Let nobody read it in the hope of finding witty paradox or racy wickedness. The writer airs his cheap research among the garbage of the French *Décadents* like any drivelling [sic] pedant, and he bores you unmercifully with his prosy rigmarole about the beauty of the Body and the corruption of the Soul (Mason 28).

He then goes on to call the book "dull and nasty" and "a very lame story" (Mason 31-2). Even when the trials had past, a reviewer of Wilde's collected works in 1908 said, "In that horrible book all the imagination, the power, the ingenuity of the short stories, are

perverted to deplorable uses" (Mason 200-01). And, Mr. F.G. Bettany says that same year, " 'Dorian Grey' [*sic*] is but a *tour de force* in morbidity, interesting mainly because it gave a forecast to some extent of Oscar Wilde's own eclipse" (Mason 201). One can see how the negative reviewers represented the Victorian public against which Wilde was arguing. Once they read a work from Wilde that went against their beliefs, he was shunned. But, like Wilde's novel, the reviews themselves are contradictory.

I mentioned earlier that Wilde would have to mean for the book itself, its bindings, pages, etc. to be beautiful to continue the argument on the beauty of art. Surprisingly enough, when the book edition (the book had been published before in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*) was released with the newly added Preface, the announcement included two review clips that commented on art as well as the physical appearance: " 'A work of serious art, strong and fascinating.'—*Speaker*" and " 'The book, with its unique and piquant binding and lettering, its characteristic title-page and yet more characteristic preface, is a delight to eye and hand.'—*Glasgow Herald*" (Mason 20). So, it seems that Wilde would receive praise not only for his beautiful writing, but also for his beautiful book.

I have also suggested that it is impossible to ignore the homoerotic qualities of Wilde's works. But, this homoeroticism was not revealed, or better yet, named, until the trial of the Marquis of Queensberry against Wilde for libel. It was at this trial that *Dorian* would be labeled a work of "a love that dare not speak its name," later termed homosexuality. Mason says, "At the trial of Lord Queensberry at the Old Bailey on April 3, 1895, Sir Edward Clarke, in his opening speech for the prosecution, referred to what he called 'an extremely curious count at the end of the plea,' namely, that in July 1890, Mr

Wilde published, or caused to be published, with his name upon the title-page, 'a certain immoral and obscene work, with the title of 'The Picture of Dorian Gray,' which was intended to be understood by the readers to describe the relations, intimacies, and passions of certain persons guilty of unnatural practices'" (203-04). So, the immorality of the book had moved from Dorian's excursions into the underworld to homosexual practices. The Victorian public would agree with Sir Edward Clarke and chastise Wilde for his shameful works of homosexual desire.

But, not all of the Victorian society would agree with Sir Edward Clarke. Some would even state their support of Wilde publicly:

> Robert Buchanan, the well-known writer, in a letter dated April 23, 1895, expressed his own views on 'Dorian Gray' in the columns of *The Star*. Referring to an anonymous correspondent in the same newspaper who had accused Wilde of 'pagan viciousness'—this was more than a month before a verdict of 'Guilty' had been returned against him—Mr Buchanan asked:-- 'Has even a writer like this no sense of humour? Does he seriously contend that the paradoxes and absurdities with which Mr Wilde once amused us were meant as serious attacks on public morality? Two-thirds of all Mr Wilde has written is purely ironical, and it is only because they are now told that the write is a wicked man that people begin to consider his writings wicked. I think I am as well acquainted as most people with Mr Wilde's works, and I fearlessly assert that they are, for the most part, as innocent as a naked baby. As for the much misunderstood 'Dorian Gray,' it would be easy to show that it is a work of

> the highest morality, since its whole purpose is to point out the effect of selfish indulgence and sensuality in destroying the character of a beautiful human soul. But it is useless to discuss these questions with people who are colour-blind [sic]. I cordially echo the cry that, failing a little knowledge of literature, a little Christian charity is sorely wanted' (Mason 218-19).

Again, contradictions abound. Mr. Buchanan argues at once that the novel is to not be taken seriously, yet later, says that it does teach a lesson on morality. Even when writing about Wilde's works, the contradictions come alive.

Even Wilde's comments on his work and intentions tend to contradict themselves, as his works themselves do. During the Queensberry trial, Sir Edward Clarke asks Wilde, "Then a well-written book putting forward perverted moral views may be a good book?" to which Wilde replies, "No work of art ever puts forward views. Views belong to people who are not artists" (Mason 206). So, one hears Wilde's claims of the uselessness of art. His novel is to be a beautiful work of art with no intentions behind it, even though just the claims themselves make the art useful. Later in the same questioning, Wilde states, "I have a great passion to civilise the community" (Mason 211). And, this contradiction would forever claim hold of Wilde's works and his defense of them.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a complex novel. Wilde must have intended for it to be so. Given the mindset of the Victorian reader, plagued with a formal politicized and theologized influence, the novel would not be received well. Yet, there would be those who would understand and applaud Wilde's efforts. The novel argues primarily for the

uselessness of art. It echoes Wilde's call for a return of Aestheticism, the Hellenic ideal and the Italian Renaissance. Art should just exist. There should be no intention attached to it or behind it. Art should be beheld as something that proves that there exists a higher form, a higher being. But, Wilde's claim would not be this easy. Having written the novel, there was definitely some intent behind it, one of civilizing Victorian society through his beliefs and revealing his hidden pleasures. His art was made useful, thus contradictory. The novel represents Wilde's brilliant didactic anti-didacticism, his creativity and his struggle to reinvent aestheticism.

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