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FROM ARCADIA TO BYZANTIUM: A STUDY OF  
THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY IN  
LIGHT OF WILDE'S CHANGING  
CONCEPT OF BEAUTY

BY

ADRIAN T. VAN DEN HOVEN

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the  
Department of English in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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of Windsor

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Approved: Eugene D. LeMire Ph.D.  
Eugene J. Pearson Ph.D.  
Ed. K. Brown

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## ABSTRACT

This study traces the transformation of Wilde's early religious idealism in the fairy tales to his deterministic estheticism in the novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray.

It analyses the great number of similarities that exist between the fairytales and the novel and demonstrates how the fairytales can be seen as embryonic forms of the novel.

It makes clear that the major difference between the fairytales and the novel resides in Wilde's changed attitude towards idealism. In the fairy tales, the heroes are redeemed because they cling to an ideal. In the novel, all ideals are seen as illusory; and, consequently, those who cling to them are destroyed by an illusion. By granting Dorian his wish that he may remain young and beautiful forever, Wilde can demonstrate at once the illusory nature of idealism and its inherent dangers and attractions. By giving reality to a dream, Wilde emphasizes the need for maintaining a sharp dividing line between reality and ideal. Lord Henry, the forerunner of the protagonists of the comedies, is aware of the need for a distinction. As a consequence he is the only one who is not destroyed by Dorian's beauty.

Lord Henry looks at life not from the romantic but from the scientific point of view. He does not expect his ideals to come true because he knows the limitations of life. Instead, he lives on the level of the imagination the lives

that reality forbids him to live.

His approach to life is calmer and more intellectual. His life is not as fascinating and tempestuous as Dorian's, but as a philosophy it provides a far more practical and realistic alternative.

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## INTRODUCTION

This study is the result of attempts to come to a better understanding of Wilde's novel The Picture of Dorian Gray. This work has received a great deal of criticism from the time of its publication, and it may seem that yet another study would simply have to be a repetition of what previous critics have said of the novel. He who tries to circumvent this charge will therefore have to place the novel in a new light. Previously, critics have approached the novel in a vacuum; that is to say, they have seen it as a work more or less unique and relatively unrelated to Wilde's earlier writings. Of course, this approach has its value because every work of art has a significance quite independent of whatever else the author may have said or written. In Wilde's case, however, there is a good argument for seeing his works not just as independent entities, as works that are totally self-sufficient, but as closely interlinked statements that are redefinitions of basic problems which beset Wilde as artist and man. For example, it does not take an expert's eye to see that Wilde's comedies are extremely similar to each other in the use of plot, character, and theatrical devices. The comedies represent Wilde's various attempts to define the role of the dandy in society. Seen together, these plays indicate many different facets

of a common concern. To understand the common concern, the reader must see them together. The novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, is also related to the comedies which came after: Lord Henry is the forerunner of the dandiacal heroes who dominate the comedies. But there is a far more important link between the earlier fairytales and the novel, because The Picture of Dorian Gray represents first the end of a development and then a new beginning.<sup>1</sup>

It is to this particular development which has its last phase in the novel that this study wishes to direct attention. Dorian Gray, the protagonist of the novel, is the last representative of the heroes who are sacrificed in the name of Beauty. Therefore, if the reader wants to come to an understanding of his function he will have to go back to the fairytales where Wilde first tried to outline his concept of Beauty. It is only after he has compared and contrasted Wilde's treatment of his concept of Beauty in the fairytales with the treatment of that concept in the novel that he can come to a more complete understanding of The Picture of Dorian Gray. It is only then that he can see in the work more than an ill-concealed autobiography, or a prime example of Wilde's "delectatio morbosa," or even "a curious reflection of... the French

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<sup>1</sup> For the history of publication of the works dealt with in this study see "Appendix: A Note on First Editions," pp. 58-69.

school "2 of Decadence. It is all of these things to a lesser or greater degree, but essentially the novel represents an artistic victory - a coming to grips with the paradoxical nature of Beauty. This victory allows Wilde a new point of view and a new way of approaching art as well as reality. In other words, a comparison of the fairytales and The Picture of Dorian Gray will lead the reader to see the novel as an improvement over the fairytales, because in the novel Wilde solves those problems which in the fairytales found an artistically incomplete and unsatisfying expression.

In the novel, art becomes the measure of all things. Wilde chooses art over life because it is only in art that Beauty can find permanence. Beauty is for Wilde the only thing worth striving for, and now that he has realized that Beauty resides in art he can solve the dilemma that has faced him in the fairytales. The pursuit of Beauty in life becomes no longer necessary, and, consequently, moral problems lose their significance. On the level of the imagination, everything can be and must be sacrificed to Beauty. This is why in The Picture of Dorian Gray, Dorian can be fascinated by evil and corruption. He is not real and therefore life cannot touch him. As the embodiment of an unreality, Dorian is not subject to the laws that govern man in society. At the same time, however, Dorian, because he has been made into a reality in the novel, is a

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2 Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (New York, 1956), pp. 304-344, 403.

terribly destructive force in the lives of others. Those who become enamoured of him discover at once the reality and the unreality of their ideals. The mere presence of Dorian is sufficient to raise their lives to the level of a romance. His unreality, of course, shatters not only the romance but also their idealism and, consequently, they lose all reason for existing and die tragic deaths. Beauty however, does not die. It remains the property of art which is untouched by life.

This is the conclusion to which Wilde has arrived when he writes The Picture of Dorian Gray, and for him as an artist it means the end of the conflict of beauty and morality. Now they are not real problems anymore because they have become aspects of a world that is essentially unreal, the world of the imagination, the world of art. Lord Henry, the new protagonist will see them in those terms. As he is the forerunner of the dandies of the comedies, the reader can see the significance of The Picture of Dorian Gray as a transitional work between the idealistic fairy tales and the farcical comedies.

The approach of this study will therefore fit in with what can be considered the artistic development of Wilde. By focusing on those elements of the fairytales that are similar to the novel, it will be possible to trace the central problem of The Picture of Dorian Gray, the paradoxical nature of Beauty, to its origin and demonstrate how Wilde solves the problem in such a way that it can become

the principle that fashions all of reality for the dandy,  
who will be the central figure of the comedies.

## CHAPTER I

### A COMPARISON OF THE FAIRY TALES AND THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

The purpose of this comparison is to reveal the esthetic ancestry of the novel and to show how the novel forms the logical continuation of the fairy tales as well as the rebuttal to them. The fairy tales, in other words, represent the novel in embryonic form; thematically they differ from the novel mainly because the earlier idealistic Wilde was unable and unwilling to see his concept of Beauty in realistic terms. The fairy tales present us with a "sunny" Wilde who believes that the love of Beauty, whatever the terrible consequences of it may be, is good because it will lead to an insight of the corrupt nature of man and therefore to a higher love, the love of mankind, of the soul, and of God. However, in spite of the fact that the fairy tales admonish the reader to be charitable, essentially they deal with the paradoxical nature of Beauty. The moral of the fairy tales is the result of Wilde's intense preoccupation with the conflict of man's desires for self-satisfaction and the need to preserve the purity of one's soul. The endings of the tales are unconvincing and unsatisfactory because they deny the desires of the flesh and therefore do not in any way provide a realistic alternative to Wilde's basic concept of Beauty.

This concept, which dominates the lives of the heroes

in the fairy tales as well as the life of Dorian Gray, is of course not original with Wilde. It is a romantic idea that is discernible in many nineteenth century writers (for example: Shelley, Keats, Novalis, Chateaubriand, Hugo, Baudelaire, and Flaubert). Praz defines this romantic idea of Beauty as follows: it is the "Beauty of the Medusa..., Beauty tainted with pain, corruption, and death..., [Beauty which] at the end of the century.. [will become] illumined with the smile of the Gioconda."<sup>3</sup>

This paradoxical notion of Beauty is the source of inspiration for the fairy tales and the novel. Because of the fact that it sees "evil at the very center of beauty...",<sup>4</sup> it is bound to lead to the physical or moral destruction of those who come in contact with it. In the fairy tales the emphasis is not, however, on the evil that is found in Beauty. The evil is only "vaguely sensed"<sup>5</sup> and the stress is on the heroic nature of the lovers of Beauty. They sacrifice physical beauty and life for a higher beauty that will redeem their souls. Unlike the Medusean Beauty that they seek first, this beauty carries the stamp of divine approval and consequently makes the loss of life and of material beauty justifiable in the eyes of Wilde. It may be said

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<sup>3</sup> Praz, p. 45, 50.

<sup>4</sup> William Gaunt, The Aesthetic Adventure (London, 1957), p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

therefore that in the fairy tales Wilde attempts to justify the love of Beauty by making it morally acceptable. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde will justify the love of Beauty by making it esthetically acceptable.

In the novel, Wilde allows an ideal to come true. He does this deliberately in order to illustrate the superiority of the life of the imagination over reality and to emphasize the necessity of maintaining the illusory nature of our dreams. The God of The Picture of Dorian Gray is the God of Determinism, and from its hereditary forces there is no escape possible in life. It is only on the level of the imagination that there is an escape possible. Only the imagination can give dramatic value to life. Seen from the imaginative point of view, life in all its beauty and all its hideousness is fascinating, colourful, and infinitely attractive. As long as people do not attempt to make their dreams come true, they can enjoy life to the full. The cultivation of the intellect and the imagination is all that is necessary for the creation of Heaven on Earth. It is no wonder then that Art is seen as the supreme refuge of man in The Picture of Dorian Gray. Art is a man-made Heaven which can be entered by simply living imaginatively the life that one would wish to lead in reality. In this utopian world, created by art and the imagination, the desires of the flesh and the spirit can be glorified, and it is not necessary to sacrifice any part of man.

It is in this sense that the fairy tales differ from the



novel. In the fairy tales, the heroes sacrifice themselves for a Heaven which is essentially religious. The beauty that they seek emanates from God, and this beauty is basically alien to art and life. In order to obtain entrance into this religious Arcadia, it is necessary to reject life and the love of worldly beauty. The heroes of the fairy tales share Dorian's desire for beauty, but they cannot reconcile themselves with the fact that in their search for beauty they may have to hurt others. Therefore, to avoid the consequences of their actions, they reject this world and seek refuge in the supernatural world. They become martyrs of love who find no satisfaction until they have given up all that is considered beautiful and valuable in this world. They do not seek a modus vivendi on this earth because everything that is of this world is corrupt to them. In this manner, they avoid tainting the purity of their souls but, of course, they have to pay a heavy price for their idealism. They have to deny their natures, and this means that they will have to suffer cruelly. In the name of the God of Love, they have to go against their natures, they have to deprive themselves of all the joys that life has in store for them, and they will have to suffer the ignominy of being misunderstood and rejected by this world. It may be said that the fates of these heroes are unintentionally ironic. The heart-breaking sacrifices that they have to endure point to an unresolved ambiguity in Wilde's attitude. Wilde's God of

Love is a cruel God. In the name of an ideal He forces the heroes of the fairy tales to be cruel to themselves. In order to save their souls, these heroes have to make their bodies hideous. Their dead bodies are no more edifying to the world than is the hideous, dead body of Dorian. Their idealism is in its consequences almost as destructive as is Dorian's mad desire for eternal youth and beauty.

The fairy tales are much less attractive than the novel insofar as they are supposed to be didactic. The novel is didactic also, but in a completely different sense. It warns the reader not to confuse reality with ideals and stresses the fact that only on the imaginative plane of art can man truly realize himself. In the novel, Art provides an alternative to the nemesis of Fate. In the fairy tales, there is no such alternative. The message of these tales is simple: if man wants to save himself, he has to reject this life, because the world will only corrupt him.

It has been stated that Wilde changes from a religious idealism in the fairy tales to estheticism in the novel. It will now be necessary to study the particular fairy tales to bring out their nature. In order to emphasize the prototypical character of the fairy tales, this study will concentrate on those aspects of the tales which are similar to the novel. The discussion of their dissimilar aspects will serve to indicate how Wilde at first attempts to circumvent the basic problems involved in his concept of Beauty by relegating the solution to the supernatural plane.

The hero of "The Young King" is the first prototype of Dorian that will be dealt with in this study. He possesses a characteristic that will be of great importance to the understanding of Dorian Gray. The origin of the young king is not to be found in reality; he is a stereotyped character found frequently in myth and romance. His ancestry is, so to speak, literary; and, although Dorian moves around in a typically Victorian world, his ancestry is also basically literary. This fact will make it all the easier for Wilde to transform Dorian into a creature of art: the groundwork has already been laid.

Another significant characteristic of "The Young King" (and this applies to all the Adonis figures in the fairy-tales) is that in background, appearance, and character the hero is nearly indistinguishable from Dorian. It may actually be said that all these creatures are one and that Wilde tackles the same problems again and again until he finally finds a satisfactory solution for them in the novel.

How similar the young king and Dorian are becomes clear when applicable quotations from the fairy tale and the novel are compared. Dorian is a "son of love and death" whose mother had run off "with a penniless young fellow... [who] was killed [murdered] in a duel at Spa a few months after the marriage." After the father's death the mother is returned to England where she bears her son, Dorian. She dies

"within a year."<sup>6</sup> Except for minor details, the young king's background is the same. He is the "child of the old king's daughter by a secret marriage with one much beneath her station...." The husband is murdered in the manner of Saint Sebastian; and the wife, after the child has been stolen away from her side, is poisoned. The young king is "given into the charge of a common peasant and his wife...."<sup>7</sup>

Both are, in other words, sons of love and death. Their backgrounds are full of passion, sinister actions, and romantic details. That they become subsequently enamoured of beauty is not surprising.

This introduces the second stage of development in the lives of these Adonises: their actual encounter with Beauty. Their childhoods are uneventful because they are brought up away from the world. Dorian passes his youth in Lord Kelso's home and spends most of his time in the attic playroom where later on he will hide the portrait. The young king spends his youth as a creature of the forest playfully assisting a goatherd. It is not until they are removed from their "idyllic" surroundings, when they come into contact with the

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<sup>6</sup> "The Picture of Dorian Gray," The Portable Oscar Wilde (New York, 1946), pp. 176, 180. All future references to the novel will be indicated by "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde.

<sup>7</sup> The Happy Prince And Other Stories, ed. M. Mac Liammoir (Harmondsworth, 1962), pp. 79-80. All future references to the fairy tales will be indicated by "Fairy tales," Penguin Books.

world, that their true nature becomes apparent. Then they undergo a revolutionary change: they lose their primeval innocence and become passionate lovers of Beauty. In both cases, Beauty seems to perform the same function: it reveals their true identity; it enslaves them to the worship of Beauty, their own as well as that of the world; and, finally it transforms them into Narcissus figures. They become the worshippers and also the victims of Beauty. In Dorian's case this occurs on the fateful day when Basil completes the portrait of him and when Lord Henry "reveal(s) him to himself."<sup>8</sup> The carpe diem philosophy of Lord Henry and Basil's portrait done in the realistic manner have a tremendous effect on Dorian as is evident from his reactions when he first views the painting:

A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized 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.<sup>9</sup>

From now on Dorian's life will follow the dictates of Art, of Beauty. He will no longer waste his time playing concerts for charity; he will ruthlessly pursue beauty in this world.

The young king undergoes a similar conversion. When he is removed from the forest and brought to the court, his

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<sup>8</sup> "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p.162.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

life undergoes a dramatic change. The artifice and the wealth that he finds there make out of him "the lonely worshipper of Beauty." Here he finds "a new world freshfashioned for his delight" and he immediately exchanges the innocent diversions of the forest for the narcissistic delights of the lover of Beauty. He wanders "from room to room, and corridor to corridor, like one who was seeking to find in beauty an anodyne from pain, a sort of restoration from sickness." He spends hours "gazing at the figure of Adonis" and is seen "pressing his warm lips to the marble brow of an antique statue...of Hadrian." Once he passes "a whole night in noting the effect of the moonlight on a silver image of Endymion." His days are occupied with the study of "rare and costly materials... which come to have a great fascination for him."<sup>10</sup> The hero of this fairy tale, which was written, according to one critic, "for everybody who is or who has ever been a child in the complete sense...,"<sup>11</sup> behaves precisely as Dorian does after he has seen the fateful portrait. In fact, up to this point, they lead similar lives. This same hero, who has all of Dorian's tendencies, does not, however, suffer Dorian's terrible fate.

It must be asked what caused this divergence in treatment? One explanation may be that the earlier and idealistic Wilde is able to solve the paradoxical problem of Beauty without

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<sup>10</sup> "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, pp. 80-82.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

causing the corruption and death of his protagonist. This is indeed what seems to have happened. At the end of the story, the young king is transformed by the divine love of God into a creature whose face is "like the face of an angel."<sup>12</sup> To all appearances, Wilde has been able to head off the ominous consequences of the worship of Beauty and transform its evil into a positive form. This, however, is a deception. In "The Young King," Wilde does not really solve the problem. Instead, he rejects the love of physical beauty outright and substitutes for it a higher beauty, the Beauty of Love (Divine Love). In the fairy tales, Wilde struggles with two points of view which may be called the egocentric and the theocentric. From the egocentric point of view, one's own beauty and the beauty of this world form the end of all our activities. From the theocentric point of view, all our actions should be motivated by charity. By identifying charity with a beauty that is not tainted or corrupt, Wilde attempts to resolve the conflicting demands that the love of physical beauty makes on his protagonists. Now, his heroes can remain lovers of beauty without suffering moral condemnation.

This is precisely what occurs in the case of the young king. Unlike Dorian, who finds out too late that his narcissistic preoccupation with beauty is corrupting his soul, the young king receives a timely warning. In three successive dreams, the terrible consequences of his hedonistic

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<sup>12</sup> "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, p. 95.

existence are depicted and three times the young king is told that his passion for artifice is the cause of great cruelty and suffering. These dreams, in other words, fulfill the same function as Dorian's portrait. The portrait reveals Dorian successively as a cruel man, a murderer, and a hypocrite. The dreams bring out the same evils but, fortunately for the young king, his fate has not already been determined. The "great terror" that these dreams induce in his heart causes him to reject the love of physical beauty. In the novel, however, the painting is a nightmare come true, and Dorian can only temporarily escape into more sins, into forgetfulness.

The discovery that evil "is at the center of Beauty" results in a radical change in the life of the young king. He immediately rejects the love of the body and of artificial beauty as vile and seeks a higher beauty that will not destroy his soul and the life of his subjects. Wilde manages this by allowing the young king to revert to his original station in life, that of a goatherd, and by making out of this idyllic existence a supernatural Arcadia approved of by God. Insofar as the young king's conflict is representative of a conflict in the mind of Wilde, this is clearly a retrograde step. Admittedly, in heaven, people may very well be leading this kind of life but this is not why the young king rejects hedonism. He remains a lover of beauty but circumvents the moral difficulties that the hedonistic position entails by choosing the beauty of another world.



The young king rejects this world because he does not know how to deal with it.

This point needs to be emphasized because in The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde turns against this attitude with a vengeance. In the novel, the point of view has become completely egocentric because its inspiration is completely esthetic. In it, no action is seen from the theocentric point of view; it is superseded by the esthetic point of view which provides the prime motivation for all action and by which all action is eventually judged. As a consequence, Dorian's attempts to be good turn out to be such dismal failures. The impartial God of the novel, Beauty, sees through good intentions as well as supreme sacrifices and uncovers the basic motivation every time. In Dorian's case, this happens to be self-satisfaction: egocentricity.

In the fairy tales, in which Wilde deals with the paradoxal nature of Beauty only in an exploratory fashion, there is still an escape possible from the potentially evil self. By recognizing the evil and rejecting it, one can at least return to the state of innocence. The fact that one has to deny one's own body, its basic inclinations, and revert to an unrealistic state, the idyllic world of Arcadia where God, man, and nature are in harmony and where sin does not exist, is, at the moment, preferable, to Wilde, than the acceptance of the terrifyingly realistic demands of Beauty. It may be said that in the fairy tales Wilde suffers a temporary failure of nerves. But even in the fairy tales Wilde is not able to sustain his belief in the superiority

of the higher beauty completely. In "The Young King," it is only because God intervenes and transforms the young king into an angel that the world comes to appreciate his supreme sacrifice. The people do not care for a king dressed as a shepherd and they are perfectly willing to pay the price of "Beauty." They consider luxury and riches as natural attributes of kingship; and, as far as they can see, a man who rejects physical beauty goes against the natural order.

Their opinion seems to be vindicated in "The Nightingale and the Rose." In this story, God does not intervene to make the world realize the supreme sacrifice of the nightingale and his death serves no purpose whatsoever (except to remind us once again of the callousness of this world.) This fact has a direct bearing on the understanding of Dorian Gray. Dorian cannot make a choice such as was made by the nightingale because Dorian cannot go against his own nature. He realizes this after he notices the first change in the picture: "Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for it - life, and his own infinite curiosity about life."<sup>13</sup> Also, it is interesting to note that, although seemingly the sacrificial life of the nightingale is far superior to the indulgent behaviour of Dorian, the result is in both cases quite similar. The nightingale's sacrifice produces a rose of great but momentary beauty. Dorian's attempt to destroy the hideous portrait results in his own

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13 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, pp. 257-258.

death and the restoration of the painting to its original beauty. Certainly, it cannot be said that the beautiful rose and the fascinating portrait of Dorian are worth the sacrifice of Dorian's and the nightingale's life. In reality it can only be stated that the God of Love, to whom the idealistic nightingale dedicated himself, and the God of Beauty, Dorian's guiding light, are equally cruel.

Actually, this tale illustrates most clearly that the ideal of Love is as much a figment of the imagination as is the ideal of Beauty. The nightingale, on hearing a young man pining for his loved one, decides quite arbitrarily that there is no greater ideal than love. The nightingale does not wait to find out if the young man's love is genuine because he is naturally to look upon "love... (as) a wonderful thing."<sup>14</sup> Traditionally, it has always been associated with love, and therefore it is not surprising to hear it proclaim that love is:

.....more precious than emeralds and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace.<sup>14</sup>

This ideal, although far more noble than Dorian's, leads both in a similar direction. Their <sup>Then</sup> desire for the unattainable makes them sacrifice their lives. The nightingale proclaims that "Love is better than life"<sup>15</sup> and willingly gives his body so that the student may be able to present his

<sup>14</sup> "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, pp. 69-70.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

girl with a beautiful red rose. Dorian utters that he "could give his soul"<sup>16</sup> for eternal youth and beauty, and as the story develops he discovers that he indeed has become a living but soulless embodiment of beauty. The irony of the fairy tale is that the nightingale sacrifices itself for an ideal that does not exist. The girl's only interests are pecuniary, and she quickly drops the student when a richer suitor comes along. After the student has been rejected, he callously discards the rose for which the nightingale gave its life and returns to his studies. The rose is crushed by a cartwheel. The nightingale has died in vain, his idealism has only illusory value. It is inherent in the nightingale's psychological make-up that it is such a ready victim to an illusion. But it is not alone in this! It may be inferred from this tale that as a general rule all Wilde's characters tend to perform their greatest deeds in the name of an illusion. This is especially true of The Picture of Dorian Gray. In it, Wilde seems to be saying that the only thing worth dying for is an illusion. Dorian owes the permanence of his youth to an illusion, a painting, and for the preservation of his youth he sacrifices his soul. When alive, he causes the death of a great many people who are fatefully attracted to this living embodiment of an illusion.

In this case of Dorian and the nightingale, it is literally true that people have their heart broken because they

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16 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 168.

dedicated themselves to an illusory ideal, In the fairy tale, however, Wilde still attaches a moral significance to such a sacrifice because he feels that such an action ought to be pleasing in the eyes of God. Consequently he creates a Heaven, an Arcadia, for the victims of Love in order that he may convince himself that the sacrifice was worth it. At this stage, Wilde has already recognized that man possesses an innate tendency to sacrifice and destroy himself in the name of an ideal, but he is as yet unable to come up with a completely satisfactory justification. The adoption of a religious point of view, of a supernatural determinism, solves the dilemma at least temporarily. At this time, Wilde sees only one alternative to idealism, and that is the love of physical beauty. Unfortunately for him, he sees this love as leading inevitably to egoism, corruption of one's soul and that of others. His fear of sin and of moral ugliness leads him to the denial of the body and of the value of physical life, Wilde sees the desires of the flesh as being in direct conflict with God's desires and, as a consequence, he has to applaud even the most anti-artistical and anti-natural behaviour. Art and artifice appeal to man's desires and, therefore, have to be condemned. In "The Happy Prince," for example, Wilde suggests that the greatest usefulness of a work of art, a statue in this case, lies in the fact that its precious metal and stones can serve to alleviate the sufferings of the poor.<sup>17</sup> This kind of charity will

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17 "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, pp. 22-23.

later on be ridiculed by Lord Henry in the novel.<sup>18</sup> But Lord Henry places life and pleasure far above the redemption of the soul and, as a result, he would not be able to understanding the magnanimity of the prince. The Wilde of the fairytales still sees man from a theocentric point of view and, seen in that light, the behaviour of the prince is very praiseworthy. From this point of view, stripping the statue of its beauty and making it an ugly unesthetic thing to look at becomes deserving of a place in Heaven. So stern is the God of Wilde and so rigid are His laws that Wilde feels that in addition to being able to forego the pleasures of art, one should also be able to deny one's natural instincts in order to serve the God of Love. The swallow who assists the happy prince in the distribution of his wealth foregoes its customary trip to Egypt so that it can help the prince complete his labour of love. When the prince has been stripped, winter has arrived and the swallow freezes to death.

The prince and the swallow have not always been so self-sacrificing. In real life the happy prince has led a life of pleasure and he has only become aware of the suffering in this world when he is placed high above the city as a statue. Away from his original surroundings, he realizes that his beauty is depriving the world of much needed food and he formulates his concept of the superiority of Love over physical, exterior beauty. Before the swallow meets the prince, its thoughts are only of the exotic pleasures

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18 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 156.

of the Orient. In other words, both prince and swallow are naturally inclined towards hedonism and exoticism. In this sense, they are prototypes of Dorian. They do not, however, become the sacrificial victims of Beauty as is the case with Dorian. They veer off in the opposite direction and sacrifice the pleasures of this life for a higher beauty; the love that emanates from God. Ironically enough, this love is also cruel in its demands. Love kills the swallow and ruins the beautiful statue. The death of the swallow causes the statue's heart to break, and eventually the dead swallow and the statue's cracked heart end up on the rubbish heap. Beyond the passing joy that the swallow and the prince have brought to the poor, few tangible benefits seem to have accrued from their actions. For the city fathers the dead swallow and the stripped statue have no value, and it seems that their sacrifice is without much meaning. The ending of the tale indicates that (for the conflicting demands of Love and Beauty) there is no solution in this world. Wilde circumvents the problem by having both swallow and prince redeemed by God. When Wilde ceases to believe in a supernatural Arcadia and starts to seek refuge in the limitless world of art and the imagination, as he does in The Picture of Dorian Gray, religious salvation will be replaced by the permanence of art.

The fact that for the devotees of Love of Beauty no compromise is possible has some very painful consequences, but it also has redeeming value. It makes heroic figures out

of them. The worshippers of Love and Beauty rise above the common, average person because they devote themselves to an ideal larger than life. Theirs is a divine madness which can only lead to death. However, their identification with an ideal will also stand them in good stead. The ideal transcends their lives and, after death, they will become the symbol of it. The heroes of the fairy tales, the devotees of Love, find in Heaven the reward that was denied them on earth. The dead swallow and the prince's cracked heart undergo a supernatural transformation and they will sing eternally the praises of Love. Dorian's love also transcends his life. It is characteristic that he is found with a knife in his heart. He pursued an ideal that his life could not encompass. The painting, restored to its original beauty, is the ironic reminder of his tragic and impossible love.

The protagonists of "The Young King," "The Nightingale and The Rose," and "The Happy Prince" have all been paragons of virtue. Throughout The Picture of Dorian Gray the stress is on sensual pleasures, physical beauty, and evil. Closer analogies to the life of Dorian may therefore very well be found in the lives of those fairy tale heroes who do actually indulge in evil. It will then be seen how the concept of evil that predominates in the novel finds its origins in these fairy tales. In addition, it will be seen how the artistic devices used in The Picture of Dorian Gray (the picture, for example) are first employed in these fairy tales.



In the novel, the picture serves to illustrate the magical powers of Art. It emphasizes the omnipotence of Art and the frailty of life which can only become glorious, if it is trapped by Art. In the fairy tales, the reader finds himself in a similar but slightly different world: the world of myth and romance. In this world he finds, not a conflict between Art and reality, but a conflict between the idyllic world of Arcadia and the hedonistic, exotic, and sinful world of Byzantium, the Orient. In this setting the function of the portrait is assumed by black or white magic. This happens, for example, in "The Star-Child," where another forerunner of Dorian is encountered. His skin is "as white as sawn ivory;" his curls are "like the rings of the daffodil"; and "his body is like the narcissus of a field where the mower comes not..." He is "enamoured of beauty;...mock[s] at the weakly and ill-favoured, and make[s] jest of them..." And, as happens to Dorian, his "beauty works him evil...for he [grows] proud, and cruel, and selfish...."<sup>19</sup> The love of beauty, especially of one's own beauty, creates a natural tendency towards evil. It makes the Narcissus figure egocentric and cruel. The Star-Child's first major crime is cruelty. He rejects his own mother because she seems ugly to him. In the novel, Dorian's first major misdeed is cruelty too, his cruel rejection of Sybil Vane. The Star-Child and Dorian receive similar punishments for their wrongdoing. Dorian discovers a change in the portrait which has suddenly acquired

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<sup>19</sup> "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, pp. 129-30.

"a touch of cruelty around the lips."<sup>20</sup> The Star-Child happens to look into a well and discovers that "his face (has become) as the face of a toad, and his body scaled like an adder...."<sup>21</sup> Obviously, he has incurred the wrath of God, or, as he concludes: "this has come upon me by reason of my sin. For I have denied my mother, and driven her away, and been proud, and cruel to her...."<sup>21</sup> According to Wilde, the dramatic transformation he undergoes illustrates clearly the terrible effects the love of beauty can have on one's life. It is destructive of the soul and, because in Wilde's mind the body and the soul are really identical, it leads directly to the corruption of the body. A separation of body and soul is, of course, possible in the fairy tales, but body and soul remain always directly inter-related, i.e. an evil soul makes the body evil and vice versa. It matters little if the hideousness of one's soul is there for everyone to see or if the soul is hidden away in the attic as is the case with Dorian - he who follows the dictates of his own nature will never be able to do good. The love of the body is vile, according to Wilde, and must eventually lead to the death of the soul. It is only by denying one's natural instincts, by rejecting the body that one can forego corruption, and then this is only possible in heaven. When

<sup>20</sup> "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 245.

<sup>21</sup> "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, p. 133.

the Star-Child proves willing to sacrifice his own life, he immediately regains his comeliness. He becomes so angelic that it is said of him that "there is none so beautiful in the whole world!"<sup>22</sup> The reason his beauty is so unique is because it is an otherworldly beauty infused by the God who rules in Wilde's arcadian heaven.

Once again, it is easy to see why Dorian suffers such a horrible death. He refuses to give up the joys of this world to save his soul. As a character in a realistic setting he does not have the option to renounce his past. When he wants to change, he discovers that he had made his choice a long time ago when he opted for the life of this world rather than that of the next world. After Dorian has made his fateful wish, all his actions become immoral because, as the physical embodiment of beauty, the mere fact that he exists creates an emptiness in the hearts of those whom he encounters. Their lives become meaningless after they have seen the ideal realized. In this world, beauty should remain an impossible ideal because, whenever its existence is physically or mentally realized, it automatically results in the corruption or degradation of those who become aware of it. This is literally the case with Dorian. It also applies to Sybil Vane: her talents as an actress dry up after she falls in love with Dorian. The downfall of Basil Hallward as a painter is also due to this. His talents seem to have exhausted themselves when he finishes the life-like portrait of Dorian.

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22 "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, p. 141.

In the novel, beauty is obviously a very potent and dangerous ideal. The fact that it is also an illusion, that it can only be created and recognized in art, makes it even more dangerous. Man, or so Wilde says, constantly aspires to the condition of art and, consequently, his goals are more often than not illusory. In the novel, the tragedy of life is that it allows its characters to obtain their goals. The discovery that they have lived for an illusion is usually sufficiently painful to make life not worth living. Wilde already senses this in the fairy tales. Admittedly, the Star-Child does not consider Love an illusion. He practises charity, mercy and justice and is considered by all a just king. But, apparently, Love is not a very viable principle in this world. First of all, it exhausts the Star-Child. He dies "after the space of three years, so great was his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing."<sup>23</sup> Secondly, with his death ends the reign of justice. His successor is a cruel tyrant. The trials and tribulations of the Star-Child hardly seem worth it. This world seems essentially evil, and clearly it remains largely unaffected by the charitable activities of the Star-Child. However great the significance of Love becomes to the Star-Child, one may as well say that as far as its effects on this world are concerned, they are illusory. Therefore, one can say that the devotion to Love has only aesthetic value in the real world.

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<sup>23</sup> "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, p. 133.

It has made out of the Star-Child a beautiful human being, pleasing not only to the eyes of men, but also to the eyes of God. His sacrifice has, however, no lasting utilitarian value. The pain and suffering he endures, kill him, and the beautiful example he sets <sup>can't</sup> is not emulated by his successor. Bearing the Star-Child's life in mind, it can be said that all love is quite useless. Wilde will, in reference to The Picture of Dorian Gray, say "All Art is quite useless."<sup>24</sup> The relationship between the fairy tales and novel is clear. Both illustrate Wilde's belief that the devotion to Love (actually to a higher kind of beauty) and the devotion to Art (to beauty that speaks to the senses) are eminently useless pursuits. They may have intrinsic value in that they illustrate how man should follow the laws of God or how man must inevitably follow the laws of his own nature (as is the case with Dorian), but they do not lead to everlasting happiness in this world. On the contrary, the fairy tales and the novel provide abundant illustrations to prove that both pursuits are ultimately very unrewarding. Both heroes are in a sense trapped by their ideals and both have to sacrifice themselves for their ideals.

A study of "The Star-Child" has revealed the paradoxical nature of religious idealism. It has also been seen that it is just as attractive and just as useless as Dorian's esthetic idealism. A study of "The Fisherman and his Soul" will illuminate even more clearly certain characteristics of the novel.

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24 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 159.

It is in this fairy tale that one encounters a hero whose body and soul lead a separate existence. As a doppelganger he is Dorian's closest parallel. The fisherman and Dorian sell their souls for similar reasons. Dorian desires the everlasting beauty and youth of the original painting, and the fisherman desires to live with the mermaid in an idyllic land (the bottom of the sea) where the laws of nature are suspended. Both gladly sacrifice their souls for an illusion. The fisherman wants to retreat from the real world to the harmonious world of myth and fairy tale, and Dorian wants to reject the real world for the harmony and beauty of the world of art. These idyllic worlds are the natural counterparts of heaven. Their joys and beauty are to the body, what the love of God is to the soul. The heart, which is the seal of the body, is naturally more inclined towards its fulfillment of the soul in heaven. The heart is more easily struck by the beauties of art, fauns, and goddesses especially when they take on a tangible form as is the case in this fairytale and in the novel. The fisherman, for example, wishes to return to the pre-Christian land of the mermaid. This world is the product of a pagan imagination, and, of course, the soul cannot enter into such a world. It seeks supernatural happiness, not "natural" bliss. With the aid of black magic, a knife furnished for him by a witch, the fisherman has to cut off his shadow which is "the body of his soul."<sup>25</sup> The soul begs the fisherman to also send

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25 "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, p. 161.

away his heart to protect him in "the cruel world."<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, the heart is already full of love for the mermaid and as a consequence the fisherman has to send the soul out alone into the world. The soul without a heart becomes cruel and corrupt just as the painting of Dorian becomes corrupt and vicious. In other words, it is the heart of man which decides his fate. If it tends towards the glorification of the body, the soul will be destroyed. A glorification of the soul will automatically lead to the destruction of the body.

However, in this fairy tale the solution is not all that simple. After the soul has been corrupted by the world it returns to the seashore where the fisherman and the mermaid reside and it entices the fisherman to leave the mermaid behind. By promising the fisherman a girl with 'real feet'<sup>27</sup>, the soul is able to lure the fisherman away from the innocent and idyllic world of romance. He introduces the fisherman to the exotic world of the Orient which is more appealing to the senses than the pure but sexless world of the mermaid. Fascinated by the richness of this world, the soul quickly forgets the mermaid and is easily seduced by his heartless soul into senseless acts of cruelty. It is only when he becomes aware of the hideousness of his crimes that he decides to return to the mermaid. When he finds her dead upon the shore he realizes the magnitude of his loss and

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26 "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, p. 161.

27 Ibid., p. 175.

dies of a broken heart. Apparently, so "great has been his love"<sup>28</sup> for the mermaid that his soul which desperately wishes to be re-united with his body cannot do so until the fisherman breaks his heart. The local priest, who has warned the fisherman against trafficking with the creatures of the sea, refuses him a Christian burial. But in the eyes of God the fisherman's great love for the mermaid has redeemed him. He transforms the barren Fullers' Field into a field of beautiful, fragrant flowers.

The lives of the fisherman and Dorian undergo in many ways a parallel development. Both are afflicted by l'amour de l'impossible. They sacrifice their souls respectively for the illusory permanence of art and the illusory harmony of romance. Both stray far from their ideals and die of a broken heart.

The fisherman is luckier, however. His soul has none of the concrete hideousness of Dorian's painting, it is simply his shadow. In addition, he is allowed to be inconsequential in a way Dorian never is. The fisherman's love for the mermaid is very inconstant. He thoughtlessly leaves her in the hope that he may find the girl with the 'real feet.' It is not until he is confronted with the horrors of evil that he thinks of her again. His great suffering over the death of the mermaid is actually the result of his realizing that he cannot face the implications of sensuality. The

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<sup>28</sup> "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, p. 184.



supernatural transformation, he undergoes serves in part to cover up the fact that he cannot face sin and corruption.

Dorian is never allowed to be inconsequential. After he has made his choice he cannot redeem himself again in the eyes of God. When he decides to be good and leave unharmed the girl he wishes to corrupt, the painting reveals that he has now become a hypocrite.

The fisherman can still have the best of two worlds: a prolonged excursion into the sensual, exotic Orient and, after death, a reunion with the mermaid and God. When Wilde writes The Picture of Dorian Gray he has realized that sensualism automatically destroys romance and that one must make a choice between this world and heaven. One cannot have both.

The moral twist that Wilde gives to "The Fisherman and his Soul" may give the impression that Wilde is especially interested in salvation. It is preferable to say that Wilde needs an emotional justification for his hero's contradictory behaviour. The fisherman is to a large extent the victim of his love. He sends away his soul with the best intentions in mind. He deserts the mermaid in the hope of finding a more satisfying love. He is not aware of the soul's evil purposes; and, even though he commits the crimes to which the soul inspires him, he cannot be called depraved. He, like Dorian, is in many ways the victim of the conflicting tendencies that inhabit man. They waver between romance and lust. What saves the fisherman in the eyes of Wilde is the intensity of his love and his desire to remain pure. The

God of Wilde can easily ignore his mistakes because the fisherman clings desperately to the law of Love. Dorian's romance with Art does not lead to the same happy conclusion, but the reasons for Wilde's fascination for him are similar. His amour de l'impossible is all encompassing and the purity of his beauty is unequalled. In addition, neither Dorian nor the fisherman act completely foolishly. They are characters who are acted upon by an ideal, such as beauty or love, and whose natures spontaneously respond to it. They simply act in accord with their nature and, what is more, they do so innocent of the consequences that their initial choice may have. They do not seek out their fate, they are confronted with it. Dorian's does not become conscious of his own beauty until he is confronted by it in Basil's painting. The happy Prince does not begin to care about the suffering of others until he is placed high above the city as a statue. One's nature has to become conscious of the ideal before one can start to act in accordance with it and even then it cannot be said that the element of choice is very great. Dorian, for example, does not make an actually conscious choice. Admittedly, he does wish to remain young and beautiful forever and capriciously offers his soul for that. But he is not really aware of all the consequences of his offer. His attempts to undo the evil that is so vividly portrayed on the painting indicate that, although his choice was a natural one (he was born a Narcissus figure), he might

not have wanted to act according to his nature had he been able to acquaint himself beforehand with all the consequences. Similarly, the fisherman does not wish to corrupt his soul, nor does he want to kill the mermaid. He is simply enchanted by her beauty and in exchange for that getting rid of his soul seems a small price to pay.

The capricious and fortuitous way in which beauty operates becomes especially clear in "The Birthday of the Infanta." This tale demonstrates how beauty can be destructive of innocence and therefore has special relevance to the novel. The victim in this story is a dwarf who is brought to the Spanish Court to entertain the Infanta. He is extremely ugly, but lighthearted and innocent. Unaware of his physical defects he has spent his life dancing and singing in the forest. He is another one of those idyllic creatures whose life will change dramatically after he has come into contact with the ideal. When he sees himself for the first time in a mirror, he suddenly realizes why people have been laughing at him: he is a monster. The realization that he is hideous is so painful to him that he dies of a broken heart. His innocent nature, his love for the Infanta, the pleasure his dancing brings him, nothing can save him. For the dwarf the mirror serves the same function as the painting does for Dorian. The mirror and the painting dramatically underline the shortcomings of life. Dorian cannot help destroying his own soul after he has fallen in love with his own beauty, and

neither can the dwarf help destroying his hideous body after he has seen the beautiful Infanta and has realized his own ugliness. In addition, the Infanta cannot help hurting the dwarf. She is very much like Dorian before he has seen Basil's portrait. Just as Dorian inspires in Basil a kind of "artistic idolatry"<sup>29</sup> that will cause the downfall of both, so does the Infanta bring an abrupt end to the life of the dwarf and her joy in his antics. She is a "natural" Narcissus who is petulant, and unwittingly "cruel" and who shares in the Spanish Court's "cultivated passion for the horrible."<sup>30</sup> They are destined to meet, just as Basil cannot help avoiding Dorian. It is in his search for her that the dwarf comes upon the fateful mirror. The Infanta's pleasure in the antics of the dwarf comes naturally to her. The death of the dwarf cannot be ascribed to her unwitting cruelty. The cause is to be found in the paradoxical nature of beauty which is at once absolutely desirable and completely unattainable in life. The dwarf is heartbroken for the same reason as is Dorian. They find that the gap between ideal and reality is too great to be bridged.

It has been shown that in many ways the fairy tales are figure the novel. The Narcissus figure, the painting, the recognition of beauty and its fateful attraction, the idealism

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29 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 151.

30 "Fairy tales," Penguin Books, pp. 102, 107.

and the exotic sensualism, all occur already in the fairy-tales. The essential difference between the fairy tales and the novel is to be found in Wilde's changed attitude towards evil. In the fairy tales, evil plays a significant role, but its heroes are only tempted by it. They do not succumb to it as does Dorian. It may be said that in the fairy tales, Wilde deals with evil only in an exploratory fashion because he has not come to grips with the problem personally. His religious idealism forbids him to see evil as a real force in life. He still hopes to find a satisfactory solution by constraining his heroes to become martyrs of love. When Wilde starts to write The Picture of Dorian Gray he has already rejected the ethereal joys of heaven for the real pleasures of this life. He has accepted evil as an intrinsic part of life and he has substituted estheticism for religious idealism. With the wholehearted acceptance of evil as part of life, and probably of homosexuality as part of his own life, Wilde adopts scientific determinism. In Dorian's life are relived all the secret hopes and desires of the bygone ages. In him, all that is beautiful and hideous in the world meet. His death becomes an object lesson to those who wish to escape their fate. The more violently Dorian clings to his ideal, the more hideous he becomes.

Wilde's loss of faith and his rejection of martyrdom cause him to adopt a new hero: the dandy. Lord Henry's attitude towards life is completely different from that of Dorian. He regards all ideals as illusions and finds sat-

isfaction only in the life of the imagination. For him, life is a finely tuned instrument, he plays with it just as God had, in the fairy tales, played with the lives of its heroes.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY:

#### RESOLUTION OF THE PARADOX OF BEAUTY

In the study of the fairy tales, it has already been seen how Wilde was for a long time preoccupied with the attractions and the dangers inherent in the cult of Beauty. It has also been shown how he could not accept "the evil that is found at the heart of Beauty" and how he attempted to redeem his heroes by making them choose a higher kind of beauty which would justify the pain and suffering that beauty inflicts on its lovers. Now it will have to be explained how Wilde finally acquiesces and is able to accept the negative as well as the positive effects of the love of Beauty.

Unlike the heroes of the fairy tales Dorian is not satisfied with the supernatural Arcadia that Wilde offers his precious devotees of Beauty. He realizes that to give up the desires of the body may be the ideal thing to do, but he cannot go against his nature. Wilde also expresses this new attitude in "The Critic as Artist":

It is to do nothing that the elect exist. Action is limited and relative. Unlimited and absolute is the vision of him who sits at ease and watches, who walks in loneliness and dreams. But we who are born at the close of this wonderful age

are at once too cultured and too critical, too intellectually subtle and too curious of exquisite pleasures, to accept any speculations about life in exchange for life itself. To us the città divina is colourless, and the fruitio Dei without meaning. Metaphysics do not satisfy our temperaments, and religious ecstasy is out of date.<sup>31</sup>

In the decadent and skeptical 'nineties it is obviously no longer possible to see the martyrdom and religious joys of the fairytale heroes as acceptable rewards for sacrificing the enjoyments of this life. The ethereal pleasures of Heaven are not satisfying to us, because "we desire the concrete, and nothing but the concrete can satisfy us."<sup>32</sup> This is the reason Dorian does not reject pleasure and the concomitant corruption of his soul. He is no longer a creature of the forest or a quaint fisherman. Dorian lives at the end of the nineteenth century and moves in London society. He is the hero of a novel, not of a fairy tale; and therefore he is closer to life. Of course, this novel must not be seen as a naturalistic portrayal of a man's life in the manner of Zola or de Goncourt. To paraphrase "The Critic as Artist", Wilde is not interested "in the sphere of practical or external life" precisely because heredity "has robbed energy of its freedom and activity of its choice..."<sup>33</sup> Wilde believes in "the scientific principle of Heredity" just as did Zola and de Goncourt, but because it reveals to him

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31 Intentions And Other Writings (New York, 1964). pp. 104-105. All future references to this edition will be indicated by "The Critic as Artist," Intentions.

32 Ibid., p. 105.

33 Ibid., p. 106.



"the absolute mechanism of all action" and shows "that we are never less free than when we try to act" he turns away from reality to the imagination, to the subjective sphere. It is here that "the soul is at work," and it is here the reader can see the effects of heredity upon us. Heredity, which "is simply concentrated race-experience..., has hemmed us around with the nets of the hunter, and written upon the wall the prophecy of our doom...." It is an invisible force within us which can only be seen "in a mirror that mirrors the soul..."<sup>34</sup> What is seen therefore in The Picture of Dorian Gray is the working out of the hereditary forces in Dorian's life. The painting provides Dorian with the "mirror that mirrors his soul" and allows the reader to see the forces of heredity at work. In the painting, Wilde does not wish to show the external life of Dorian; he shows us heredity which "is Nemesis without its mask. It is the last of the Fates, and the most terrible. It is the only one of the Gods whose real name we know...". This terrible force is not, however, without its benefits on the imaginative plane. There it can come to us;

This terrible shadow, with many gifts in its hands, gifts of strange temperaments and subtle susceptibilities, gifts of wild ardours and chill moods of indifference, complex multiform gifts of thoughts that are at variance with each other, and passions that war against themselves. And so it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individ-

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34 "The Critic as Artist," Intentions. p. 106.

ual, created for our service, and in ancient sepulchres has made its abode. It is sick with many maladies, and has memories of curious sins. It is wiser than we are, and its wisdom is bitter. It fills us with impossible desires, and makes us follow what we know we cannot gain.<sup>35</sup>

Wilde's concept of determinism leads him to seek refuge in the imagination where the collective unconscious of the race, of the entire Western civilization, can be made visible. Of course, the imagination is most creative in a work of art and therefore, it can be said that in The Picture of Dorian Gray, a record of man can be seen, a record not of his daily life but of his secret desires and struggles, of his hopes and disappointments, of his beauty and his hideousness. Art allows us to escape into a greater, a more fascinating world. The imagination which creates art:

can lead us away from surroundings whose beauty is dimmed to us by the mist of familiarity, or whose ignoble ugliness and sordid claims are marring the perfection of our development. It can help us to leave the age in which we were born, and to pass into other ages, and find ourselves not exiled from their air. It can teach us how to escape from our experience, and to realize the experiences of those who are greater than we are.<sup>36</sup>

Dorian Gray, the product of Wilde's imagination, should allow the reader to do that by working on the reader's imagination. Dorian should stir the reader's imagination, but, of course, Dorian should not induce the reader to action. Dorian, as a realistic character in a realistic setting stirs his own imagination in the above described fashion just as

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35 "The Critic as Artist," Intentions, p. 106.

36 Ibid., pp. 106-107.

he stirs the imagination of the other characters in the book. It is of extreme importance here to remember that The Picture of Dorian Gray is not a literal transcription of Wilde's own life. Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry reflect aspects of his personality which he had to realize in artistic form in order that he might come to know himself better and transcend their fates. The creation and fulfillment of their lives may have had therapeutic value for their creator. Or, as Gilbert says in "The Critic as Artist" of Shakespeare's characters:

They were elements of his nature to which he gave visible form, impulses that stirred so strongly within him that he had, as it were perforce, to suffer them to realize their energy, not on the lower plane of actual life, where they would have been trammelled and constrained and so made imperfect but on that imaginative plane of art where Love can indeed find in Death its rich fulfilment, where one can stab the eavesdropper behind the arras, and wrestle in a new-made grave, and make a guilty king drink his own hurt, and see one's father's spirit, beneath the glimpses of the moon, stalking in complete steel from misty wall to wall.<sup>37</sup>

The Narcissism of Dorian, the cynicism and dandyism of Lord Henry, and the artistic idolatry and moralism of Basil Hallward should be seen in the same light. They, as realistic creatures, react, after all, in the same manner. It is to the imagination of Basil and Lord Henry that Dorian appeals and it is to Dorian's imagination that Sybil appeals.

When Dorian is seen by Basil as a work of art that allows him to be more creative, he creates his greatest work

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37 "The Critic as Artist," Intentions, p. 112.

of art, and it is then that he "puts too much of himself into"<sup>38</sup> the work. Dorian, too, becomes most fascinating when he becomes a work of art. His fatal charm is due to the fact that he has been transformed into a work of art. The fantastic life of Dorian is especially revelatory in this context because in it Wilde realizes his own life more than he could have if he had actually tried to live Dorian's life. As Gilbert says of Shakespeare:

Action being limited would have left Shakespeare unsatisfied and unexpressed; and, just as it is because he did nothing that he has been able to achieve everything, so it is because he never speaks to us of himself in his plays that his plays reveal him to us absolutely....<sup>39</sup>

Expression in art expresses life better for Wilde because it reveals to him the effects of hereditary forces working on his soul. These forces can never be completely and satisfactorily expressed in life.

This brings us to the true nature of Dorian. First of all, he is a creation of Wilde's imagination. Not only is he unreal because he is found in the novel and can therefore not be an exact replica of a living person, but also he is before that a product of the "concentrated race-experience"<sup>40</sup> which makes up Wilde's imagination. As such, his antecedents go back to the Greek myths. He is a Narcissus

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38 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 151.

39 "The Critic as Artist," Intentions, p. 112.

40 Ibid., p. 107.

and an Adonis placed by Wilde in a realistic, nineteenth century setting. In other words, when the novel begins the reader must be aware of the fact that Dorian is already twice removed from reality. He has been recreated from Greek myth, not from real life. In the novel, Dorian becomes even further removed from life. When his wish that he may remain young and beautiful forever becomes true, he is thrice removed from life because he becomes the living embodiment of a work of art. At the same time, of course, Dorian grows in significance. The more he becomes a product of the imagination, the more he becomes a work of art, and the better his credentials will be for revealing to the reader the innermost secrets of the soul.

Dorian's life as a product of the imagination will serve best to reveal to the reader "the countless lives" that the soul has lived, to reveal to the reader his "concentrated race-experience"<sup>41</sup> It can be seen why it was necessary for Wilde to make Dorian as "unreal" as possible. Had Wilde created a person whose character and whose activities were very similar to those of a real person, it would not have been possible to enter into "the subjective sphere, where the soul is at work."<sup>42</sup> Wilde would have been limited to the revelations of "the absolute mechanism"<sup>43</sup> of all action, a dull and uninspiring task. By making Dorian the living embodiment of a work of art, Wilde could reveal both

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41 "The Critic as Artist," Intentions, p. 107.

42 Ibid., p. 106.

43 Ibid., p. 106.

"surface and symbol"<sup>44</sup> and he could allow Dorian to descend to 'the Inferno of his soul' without having to sacrifice his superficial physical beauty. As a work of art, Dorian can transcend the conventional limitations placed on man and become greater than himself. Because Dorian is also a human being in the novel, he too, is at the mercy of an ideal and he cannot help destroying himself. Therefore, it is seen that Dorian does not live on in the novel as a human being, but as a work of art. As was the case in the fairytales, human life is seen as really inferior to the ideal and therefore it has to be sacrificed to the ideal.

Wilde's new approach to the concept of Beauty can best be summed up by saying that he found a new Arcadia in Art. In Art, in the works of the imagination, the effects of the hereditary forces that work upon man are best revealed, and because Art can reveal man's innermost being it is also the highest reality. By making out of his protagonist a work of art, Wilde depicts the paradoxal nature of Beauty within the character himself. Because he is a work of art, Dorian stirs up the fatal desire for Beauty in those who come to adore him; at the same time Dorian's desires are proving fatal to himself. By this new concept of beauty in art Wilde overcomes in the novel the one major problem that he faced in the fairytales. His notion that people gladly sacrifice their lives and souls for an ideal, he demonstrated clearly in the fairy tales. But the world of the fairy tales

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<sup>44</sup> "Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray." The Portable Wilde, p. 139.

is too remote from reality to make his concept applicable to England of the 1890's. The world of The Picture of Dorian Gray is, externally at least, representative of Victorian England; and, therefore, it is much easier to see Dorian's life as a significant explanation of the relation of art to life.

In the novel, Wilde revealed at once the absolute superiority of art over life and the terrible limitations that Fate places on the artful, esthetic enjoyment of life. Dorian, the concrete manifestation of Beauty, illustrates in his life the attractions and the perils of the pursuit of Beauty. Since he is a beautiful illusion himself, he becomes a fateful influence on those who are attracted to him. Encounters with him create a void in the lives of his admirers because he exposes their idealism as a painful deception. He destroys the reality of the ideal exactly because ideals are not concrete, are not realizable in this world and the encounter with the ideal drains life of its value. In other words, as the concretization of ideal beauty, Dorian cannot help but be cruel to people. At the same time, he also cannot help destroying himself. He suffers from the same weakness as his admirers. As a Narcissist he does not only seek beauty in the world, but he also wants to preserve his own ideal beauty. Beauty, however, can only be preserved under the illusion of art and, consequently, the more desperately he clings to it in life the less real it becomes. When Dorian attempts to destroy the picture, he really de-

stroys his own reality as the concretization of Beauty. After all, his reality and his enjoyment of the beauty of reality depended on the illusion of Art that was created by the picture. If one can speak of a moral in this novel, it is that The Picture of Dorian Gray illustrates the impossibility of realizing Beauty in the active and practical sphere of life. At the same time, the novel illustrates the necessity of realizing Beauty on the imaginative plane where life finds its complete fulfilment.

It is important now to go back to the beginning of the novel and retrace carefully Dorian's steps in order to establish exactly how his life illustrates the paradoxal nature of Beauty.

It has been shown already that Dorian is in background and personality no different from the heroes of the fairy-tales. He is a latent Narcissus who is "the son of love and death"<sup>45</sup> and who spends his youth as an orphan, obscure and innocent. His life does not undergo any significant changes until he is removed from his idyllic surroundings and introduced into the world. Here his true nature is revealed to him and Dorian becomes a conscious Narcissist.

Up to this point, Dorian's life falls in the same pattern as that of the fairy tale heroes. The reason that Dorian's life has such a different outcome is that Dorian cannot reject his own nature and redeem himself in Heaven.

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45 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 180.



In the novel, Dorian is treated as a real character in spite of the fact that he is the product of myth and romance. As a consequence, Dorian will have to realize his nature and not reject it. His fate is bound up with his nature and his nature realizes itself as a matter of course. In his life will be revealed "the absolute mechanism" of all action. Being by nature a Narcissist, a lover of his own beauty, he will discover its attractions as well as its perils. Moreover, through him, of course, others will discover the nature of Beauty. His first encounter with Basil bears this out. This is how Basil describes his meeting with Dorian:

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 someone 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.<sup>46</sup>

Unwittingly Dorian has created "a form of divine madness" in Basil. Fate has brought Basil into contact with beauty and now it will inspire him to do his greatest work of art. Basil stresses the inevitability of their meeting:

"Suddenly I found myself face to face with the young man whose personality had so strangely stirred me.... It [the encounter] was simply inevitable... He, too, felt that we were destined to know each other."<sup>47</sup>

The accidental nature of their introduction and the immediate effect that Dorian has on Basil reveals clearly how

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46 "Dorian Gray", The Portable Wilde, p. 146.

47 Ibid., p. 147.

Beauty operates in this world. It transforms those who recognize it from free and independent agents into victims and martyrs. When Basil allows Dorian to absorb his soul, he seals his own fate as a man and as an artist. In due time, he decides to paint a portrait of Dorian which will capture the beauty of Dorian on canvas. He will try to realize Dorian's beauty in art; and, thus, he will exhaust himself as an artist. Undone of the illusion of beauty, of its reality, he can only deteriorate as an artist. Basil will reveal his soul in his art, sell, as a matter of fact, his soul for an illusion. This is how Basil describes what happens to him after he comes under Dorian's influence:

Weeks and weeks went on, and I grew more and more absorbed in you. Then came a new development. I had drawn you as Paris in dainty armour, and as Adonis with huntsman's cloak and polished boar spear... And it had all been what art should be, unconscious, ideal, and remote. One day, a fatal day I sometimes think, I determined to paint a wonderful portrait of you as you actually are, not in the costume of dead ages, but in your own dress and in your own time. Whether it was the realism of the method of the mere wonder of your own personality, thus directly presented to me without mist or veil, I cannot tell. But I know that as I worked at it, every flake and film of colour seemed to me to reveal my own secret.<sup>48</sup> I grew afraid that others would know of my idolatry.

Basil has made beauty into a conscious and real presence and destroyed the illusions of Beauty. By giving a tangible form to an ideal, an unreality, he has made Beauty into a destructive force. It will fill its devotees with "l'amour de l'impossible"<sup>49</sup> and cause the destruction of life. This is exactly the effect that the painting has on Dorian. Art

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48 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 268.

49 "The Critic as Artist," Intentions, p. 91.

makes him wish for the impossible. Not only does he want to possess the external youth and beauty of the picture, he also wants to taste life to the full. In life, however, Beauty cannot be realized with impunity. When people act they are subject to the scientific forces of heredity and, because these forces control their nature, man will always act out of self interest, according to Wilde. Egocentric behavior even if it seems justified by the best intentions is always destructive of the life of others. In Dorian's case it is also destructive of his own life because what he looks for in life is only realizable in art. Dorian will become the victim of his nature. The moment Dorian sees that beauty is perishable, he will try to cling to it desperately. This happens when Lord Henry "reveal(s) him to himself. there...(is) in his low, languid voice that...(which is) absolutely fascinating...." It is the musicality, the artfulness of Lord Henry's voice that discloses "to him life's mystery..." The "subtle magic" of his voice gives "a plastic form to formless things" and "suddenly awakens him.<sup>50</sup> All that is necessary now it that he become aware of his own physical beauty. When he sees the finished portrait, a "look of joy...[comes] into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time...(and) the sense of his own beauty.. [comes] on him like a revelation..."<sup>51</sup> At the same time, off

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50 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 160.

51 Ibid., p. 167.

course, he realizes for the first time the corruptibility of beauty in this world:

2 = C Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. The scarlet would pass away from his lips, and the gold steal from his hair. The life that was to make his soul would mar his body.<sup>52</sup>

Dorian suddenly finds himself in the same tragic predicament that the heroes of the fairy tales found themselves. When they had sacrificed their body for an ideal, they found no reward in this world. The nightingale dies for an illusion and the product of his sacrifice, the red rose, is trampled upon by this world. Similarly, Dorian dies for an illusion, the reality of beauty, and it is noted that what he wanted to preserve most in life, his body, has become the most hideous after death. Dorian, of course, in accordance with Wilde's concept of human nature, cannot help sacrificing himself for an illusion. The point for the reader is, however, that he realizes not only that what Dorian does, comes natural to man but also that in order to be able to do it one must have attained the status of a work of art. The irony of The Picture of Dorian Gray lies in the fact that the illusory nature of Beauty can only be grasped if one accepts the reality of the illusion, and to accept that one has to become an illusion. This is what happens to Dorian. He becomes the

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52 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 167.

living embodiment of a work of art,<sup>53</sup> and as such his actions always imply the denial of Life. He, and all those who adore him, are at the mercy of an illusion. Sibyl Vane discovers this when she falls in love with him. She can only please him when she is a stage character, when she has attained the status of a work of art. Dorian does not and cannot love her as a cheap third-rate actress. She has to be "Imogen" or "Juliet", she can never be herself, she can "never ... [be] Sybil Vane..."<sup>54</sup> As a work of art Dorian cannot allow her to be real because the real Sibyl Vane is embarrassingly inferior to the actress and therefore she will destroy the illusion of romance, the illusion of art. By positing the condition of art as the highest reality, Wilde has bereft the more mundane forms of reality of all significance for Dorian. Consequently, when Sibyl stops mimicking and becomes real she loses all her fascination. His cruel rejection of her is the rejection of life by art. Sibyl is a terrible disappointment to him because she reveals to him that life without a mask is banal. Dorian, in turn, is a heartbreaking disappointment to her in that she finds in life, beauty is a sham. The latter is clearly revealed when Sibyl explains why she decided to cease acting:

before I knew you, acting was the only reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived.

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<sup>53</sup> It is not accidental that Lord Henry refers to him as a "real work of art". ("Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 204.

<sup>54</sup> "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 200.

I thought that it was all true. I was Rosar Lind, and Portia the other....I believed in everything... I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real.. You taught me what reality really is. Tonight, for the first time of my life, I saw through the hol- lowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pag- eant in which I had always played....<sup>55</sup>

Sibyl is simply substituting one illusion for another and illustrating that beauty, if it were real, would, because of its overpowering presence, destroy all that is happiness in ordinary life. When Sibyl commits suicide, she becomes the novel's first victim of Beauty. As Dorian remarks to Basil after he has found out about her death:

It is one of the great romantic tragedies of the age....She lived her finest tragedy....The last night she played- the night you saw her- she acted badly, because she had known the reality of love. When she knew its unreality, she died, as Juliet might have died. She passed again late the sphere of art... Her youth has all the pathetic uselessness of martyrdom, all its wasted beauty....<sup>56</sup>

Sibyl's life illustrates the necessity of keeping Beauty un- real. It also illustrates what happens (what could happen) if one would attain one's ideals as Dorian can.

For Dorian the death of Sibyl has also another signifi- cance. Her death leads him to discover the paradoxal nature of Art, of Beauty. When he looks again at the portrait he finds out that it is "conscious of the events of life as they occur...."<sup>57</sup> In Art, apparently, "the body is the soul"<sup>58</sup> and,

55 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 236.

56 Ibid., p. 262.

57 Ibid., p. 257.

58 "The Critic as Artist," Intentions, p. 122. See also Lord Henry's remark: "I thought of telling the prophet that art had a soul, but that man had not." (The Portable Wilde, p. 381) ✓

therefore, the painting can "take cognizance of what passes within the soul..."<sup>59</sup> And as he surmises: "The vicious cruelty that marred the fine lines of the mouth had, no doubt, appeared at the very moment that the girl had drunk the poison, whatever it was...."<sup>60</sup> Dorian learns, in spite of himself, the function of art. Art is "the most magical of mirrors", because it reveals the innermost working of the soul: "As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul...."<sup>61</sup> Dorian, who is the living embodiment of Beauty, discovers firsthand that "Art is at once surface and symbol" and that those "who go beneath the surface do so at their peril...."<sup>62</sup>

Dorian is also in the peculiar position of being both "the actor and the spectator"<sup>63</sup> of his own tragedy. His unreality as a human being allows him the immunity of art against "the sordid claims"<sup>64</sup> of life; it also allows him to watch and to enjoy the terrible reality of Art. He can now "leave the age"<sup>65</sup> in which he was born and pass into other ages. The "yellow book" that Lord Henry gives him performs for him

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59 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 257.

60 Ibid., p. 257.

61 Ibid., p. 259.

62 "The Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 139.

63 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 252.

64 Ibid., p. 252.

65 Ibid., p. 252.

exactly this function. He does not simply "like it," it "fascinates" him.<sup>66</sup> The "influence of the book" on him is overpowering, and, of course, he does not seek "to free himself from it...."<sup>67</sup> The hero of this book is "a kind of prefiguring type of himself," a literary ancestor of Dorian. But this hero is not the only ancestor of Dorian:

To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead.<sup>68</sup>

In "the subjective sphere, where the soul is at work," all the hereditary forces of his race, one may even say, the entire collective unconscious of Western civilization, come to light. The reason for the fact that the hero of "the yellow book" has a more direct influence on him is because as Dorian concludes, one is "more absolutely con-~~scious~~"<sup>69</sup> of the influence of art.

The fantastic experiences that Dorian reads about in "the yellow book" are in nature not any different from those of the heroes of the fairytales. The exoticism, the sensualism, and the decadence that mark the pages of "this poisonous book," derived by Wilde from a variety of sources,<sup>70</sup> have,

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66 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, pp. 281-82.

67 Ibid., p. 282

68 Ibid., p. 300.

69 Ibid., p. 302.

70 See The Romantic Agony, p. 403. See also "Introduction" R. Aldington. The Portable Wilde, pp. 26-27.



however, a different effect on Dorian. Unreal as he is, he does not have to shy away from it because his body remains unaffected by the corruption of his soul. The book, in other words, can complete his education, because he is an imaginary character. He can familiarize himself with:

all the passions and modes of thought that ...  
 (belongs) to every century except his own, and...  
 sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods,<sup>71</sup>  
 through which the world-spirit...ever passed....

His extraordinary luck even allows him to enjoy the suffering of the book's hero who, because he was not a work of art, lost the beauty of his youth. From the aesthetic point of view, ugliness also has its attractions. Just as the sorrows of Hamlet can be pleasurable to the theatregoer, so the sufferings of the hero of "the yellow book" actually become enjoyable to Dorian. The advantage that Dorian enjoys over him becomes a source of cruel joy to Dorian:

He [Dorian] never knew- never, indeed, had any cause to know- that somewhat grotesque dread of mirrors, and polished metal surfaces, and still water, which came upon the young Parisian so early in his life, and was occasioned by the sudden decay of a beauty that had once, apparently, been so remarkable. It was with an almost cruel joy- and perhaps in nearly every joy, as certainly in every pleasure, cruelty has its place- that he used to read the latter part of the book, with its really tragic, if somewhat overemphasized, account of the sorrow and despair of one who had himself lost what in others, and in the world, he had most dearly valued.<sup>72</sup>

Dorian can exploit his advantage over this young man because

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71 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 280.

72 Ibid., p. 283.

his beauty remains untouched by life. The real pain and suffering of this hero contains little enjoyment for that hero, but because Dorian is unreal, he can treat life as a pageant.

Dorian can treat his own life in the same way. The hideousness of his soul is contained in the painting and cannot contaminate the beauty of his own body. As a consequence he can grow "more and more enamoured of his own beauty...., [and, at the same time become] more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul...."<sup>73</sup> Apparently, the further one is removed from life, the greater its esthetic value becomes. Because Dorian is immune to the ravaging effects of life, "life itself" can become "the first, the greatest, of the arts, and for it all the other arts... [seem] to be but a preparation...."<sup>74</sup>

This immunity against "the absolute mechanism" of life allows Dorian to lead the life of a character in a play. As his luck will have it, he also escapes the consequences of his actions. He causes Sibyl's death by destroying her ideals, but he is not punished for the crime, at least not in society. Sibyl's death is attributed to suicide and, because he is only known as Prince Charming to her, he is not even called on as a witness at the inquest, and in this way a public scandal is avoided. When he murders Basil, he

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73 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 283.

74 Ibid., p. 285.

blackmails an old friend into destroying the body. The mystery surrounding Basil's death is never cleared up. In other words, as a work of art, Dorian's power over life is absolute. He is above the laws of society and can even commit the perfect crime.

Basil's death, however, also has another significance. Basil's portrait had originally evoked Dorian's amour de l'impossible and Basil can therefore be considered to have committed an aesthetic crime. His realization of Dorian's beauty has made "a normal life" impossible for Dorian; Basil's death, therefore, can be poetically justified. At the same time, it cannot be said that the loss of Basil's life was aesthetically of great significance. At first, the relationship that Basil and Dorian had had was ideal:

✓The love that he [Basil] bore him- for it was really love- had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual. It was not that mere physical admiration of beauty that is born of the senses, and that dies when the senses tire. It was such love as Michelangelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winkelmann, and Shakespeare himself.<sup>75</sup>

It is out of this love that the fatal portrait is born. It is for this love that Basil reveals too much of his soul by trying to give reality to Beauty. After Basil realized his ideal, however, he deteriorates as an artist. Artistically, he has nothing to live for anymore. As Lord Henry explains after Basil's death:

his painting had quite gone off. It seemed to me to have lost something. It had lost an ideal.... It [Dorian's portrait] belonged to Basil's best

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75 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 273.

period. Since then, his work was that curious mixture of bad painting and good intentions that always entitles a man to be called a representative British artist....<sup>76</sup>

Just as Dorian sacrifices his soul for eternal youth and beauty, so Basil gives away his soul for a painting. When Dorian takes him upstairs to show him his handiwork, he acquaints him with his ideal: "with the face of... [Dorian's] soul." The moral is clear: this is to what the worship of beauty in this world leads. The desire for the realization of beauty in this world destroys man. In this context, it is not so surprising that Dorian's hatred for Basil, which causes him to kill Basil, is "suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips...."<sup>77</sup> Basil has enabled Dorian to fulfill his wish, and Dorian has profited greatly from it, but only because Dorian is a work of art. Dorian knows that his success in life is due to his unreality. The inversion of life and art has also, however, caused "all his misery."<sup>78</sup> He cannot help but continue to deceive others and himself. The Dorian that the world sees is in reality:

Like the painting of a sorrow,  
A face without a heart.<sup>79</sup>

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76 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 380

77 Ibid., p. 317.

78 Ibid., p. 317.

79 Ibid., p. 381.

He leaves a vacuum in the lives of those who encounter him and destroys their ideals. The living embodiment of beauty is always cruel because it destroys the reason for living. This is clearly illustrated in the case of Hetty Morton, a girl to whom Dorian tries to be good and kind. He suddenly determines "to leave her as flowerlike as....[he] had found her."<sup>80</sup> He tries, in other words to act contrary to his nature. Lord Henry, however, quickly undeceives him:

I should think the novelty of the emotion must have given you a thrill of real pleasure, Dorian...But I can finish your idyll for you. You gave her good advice, and broke her heart....[The] fact of having met you, and loved you, will teach her to despise her [future] husband, and she will be wretched. From a moral point of view, I cannot say that I think much of your great renunciation....Besides, how do you know that Hetty isn't floating at the present moment in some starlit millpond, with lovely water-lilies round her, like Ophelia?<sup>81</sup>

The portrait bears out Lord Henry's statement. From the moral point of view, this "little bit of sacrifice...is really a sort of sin...." When he inspects the portrait to see if his decision "never again (to) tempt innocence"<sup>82</sup> has had any effect on the painting, he is cruelly disappointed. It has revealed his true motivation:

He could see no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite....<sup>83</sup>

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80 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 376.

81 Ibid., p. 377.

82 Ibid., p. 388.

83 Ibid., p. 389.

In the "mirror that mirrors the soul," Dorian sees written "the prophecy of ... [his] doom...."<sup>84</sup>

When Dorian attempts to destroy the painting that embodies his soul, he ends up destroying himself. His beauty, after all, is dependent on art. When, in his youth, he desires the everlasting beauty of art, he wants an ideal to come alive. With the realization of this ideal comes, of course, also the realization of the "innermost workings of the soul." The beauty and the hideousness of life can find complete expression only in art. The effect of Dorian's attempt to destroy the "reality" of art serves to reaffirm one of the basic tenets of Wilde's estheticism: if one wants to live life, one should try to realize his ideals in life. Art and the imagination exist especially to allow man to live life without being hurt by life. The "splendid portrait.... hanging on the wall..." emphasizes the need for living life on the plane of the imagination, while "the withered, wrinkled, and loathsome...dead man...lying on the floor..."<sup>85</sup> is a terrible warning to those who would try to find in life what can be found safely only in art. The Picture of Dorian Gray, can be seen therefore, as an admonition as well as a celebration of a way of life. Dorian succeeds to the extent that he is real.

The fact that Dorian fails, however, does not mean that

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<sup>84</sup> "The Critic as Artist," Intentions, p. 106.

<sup>85</sup> "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 391.

the novel is a failure. It was written especially to point out the necessity of enjoying life on the imaginative plane. As a determinant, Wilde knew that life was not worth living:

Don't let us go to life for our fulfilment or our experience. It is a thing narrowed by circumstances, incoherent in its utterance, and without that fine correspondence of form and spirit which is the only thing that can satisfy the artistic and critical temperament. It makes us pay too high a price for its wares, and we purchase the meanest of its secrets at a cost that is monstrous and infinite.<sup>86</sup>

Lord Henry, the prototype of the dandies that dominate the comedies, operates on the basis of this principle. He does not seek for beauty in life because he has found it on the imaginative plane. He does not have to act out his innermost desires in life. He does not have to stoop to "crime" and "vulgarity"<sup>87</sup> because he has cultivated his intellect to such an extent that art is for him "simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations."<sup>88</sup>

Lord Henry's approach represents a new point of view in the works of Wilde. Unlike Dorian, whose death only vindicates this new point of view, Lord Henry triumphs by it, he has come to terms with life. He already knows its limitations and consequently he has managed to escape them. As he says, and here he echoes Wilde's point of view on life:

Life is not governed by will or intention. Life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams.<sup>89</sup>

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86 "The Critic as Artist," Intentions, p. 103.

87 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 379.

88 Ibid., p. 379.

89 Ibid., p. 383.

Lord Henry's deterministic interpretation of life has robbed it of its illusions and allowed him to make use of life in a practical and much less dangerous manner than Dorian. His attitude to life is scientific and intellectual. For Lord Henry "the great events of the world take place in the brain... [and for him] it is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also."<sup>90</sup>

Of course, Lord Henry is not a saint simply because he does not commit murders. He knows that "all influence is immoral - immoral from the scientific point of view,"<sup>91</sup> and he deliberately influences Dorian. But Lord Henry is a pragmatic sinner. He knows that man can not control life and that, therefore, human beings cannot help influencing each other. What one can do, however, is manipulate life and the emotions and order both intellectually. For him life is a game; there are no absolute truths in it. The only way in which one can come closest to discovering its mystery is by juggling the given data:

Well, the way of paradoxes is the way of truth.  
To test reality we must see it on the tight-rope.  
When the verities become acrobats we can judge  
them.<sup>92</sup>

Dorian is no more than a guinea pig to Lord Henry. As he realizes: "To a large extent the lad was his own creation." It is, in other words, through the persona of Lord Henry that Wilde, in turn, manipulates the life of Dorian to reveal the nature of Beauty. Lord Henry represents the Wilde

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<sup>90</sup> "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 159.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 183.



who has outgrown Dorian and, analogously, one might say that "the experimental method"<sup>93</sup> that Lord Henry uses on Dorian is the method Wilde uses to reveal the complex nature of Beauty. By positing Dorian as the living embodiment of Beauty and by allowing Lord Henry to experiment with Dorian on the intellectual plane, Wilde could observe both dispassionately and draw his own conclusions.

It seems that, although, at one time, Wilde was terribly attracted to the Dorian Type, he had also realized the dangers of that position and that, consequently, he chose Lord Henry's approach as a safer and more practical way of dealing with life in Victorian society. The agonies and joys of Lord Henry are mental and if he destroys an enemy he does so with words. His fascination with life is psychological, not emotional, and his defeats and triumphs take place in the brain (he has "made it into his heart"<sup>94</sup>), in the imagination. He does not want to impose the perfection of art on life. Instead, he extracts from life that which the imagination can transform into art and so escapes the fate of Dorian.

The outlook of Lord Henry is far more tempered and reasoned, and it cannot be said that he is as fascinating a figure as Dorian. But it must not be forgotten that it took the kind of mind that Lord Henry possesses to create Dorian in the first place and that therefore, they are not

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93 "Dorian Gray," The Portable Wilde, p. 381.

94 Ibid., p. 381.

to be compared or contrasted. It can only be said that to enjoy the highly fantastic and imaginative life of Dorian, it is necessary to have Lord Henry's intellect and insight. To assume that there is a choice, and that Dorian's life could possibly be an alternative, is to accept an illusion as real, and such a belief would only destroy it.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to establish the pivotal significance of The Picture of Dorian Gray in the artistic development of Wilde.

A comparison of the fairy tales and the novel revealed that The Picture of Dorian Gray represents the last stage in Wilde's struggle to reconcile his arcadian idealism and his byzantine worldliness. In the novel he sums up all the idealistic attitudes presented in the fairy tales, and in the figure of Dorian he reveals at once the fascination these attitudes hold for him and the hopeless contradictions they embody.

The death of Dorian signalizes the end of Wilde's idealism and a coming to terms with his own worldliness.

Lord Henry, the prototype of the dandies who will dominate the comedies, is the embodiment of the new Wilde. He lacks all interest in the soul, salvation, and the supernatural. His eyes are firmly on this world. He sees it as his task to live life most artfully and to disguise most cleverly the fact that ugliness and death await everyone.

APPENDIX

A NOTE ON FIRST EDITIONS

The purpose of this appendix is to indicate exactly when the fairy tales and the novel were first written and published. The publication in bookform of some of the fairy tales in 1892 may otherwise create the erroneous impression that they were written after the novel rather than before it.

The Happy Prince and Other Tales. London: David Nutt, 1888.

Contents: The Happy Prince .....p.1.  
The Nightingale and the Rose.....p.25.  
The Selfish Giant.....p.43.  
The Devoted Friend.....p.57.  
The Remarkable Rocket.....p.87.

"The Young King" The Lady's Pictorial (Christmas Number, 1888).

"The Birthday of the Infanta" Paris Illustré (March 30, 1889).

"The Fisherman and his Soul." Not published until 1891. However, in a letter dated Dec. 17, 1889,<sup>95</sup> Wilde makes the following significant remark: "I have just finished a story better than 'The Fisherman and his Soul'". This story, The Picture of Dorian Gray, was begun at approximately the same time as the fairy tale but it was not finished until some months later. The closeness of the dates seem to reinforce my contention that the fairy tale represents an embryonic version of the novel.

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<sup>95</sup> The Letters of Oscar Wilde. Edited by Rupert Hart-Davis. London, 1962, p. 251.

"The Star-Child." Not published until 1891. First referred to in a letter dated Dec. 12, 1887.<sup>96</sup>

The four above-mentioned fairy tales were published in bookform under the title of :

A House of Pomegranates, London: James R. Osgood/ McIlvaine and Co., Nov. 1891.

<sup>96</sup> The Letters of Oscar Wilde. Edited by Rupert Hart-Davis. London, 1962, p. 213.

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VITA AUCTORIS

1963 Honours B.A. from Assumption University of Windsor

1966 M.A. in Modern Languages from University of Windsor.