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Warring Discourses in The Picture of Dorian Gray

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Warring Discourses in The Picture of Dorian Gray

by Joseph T. Appleby

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English of the
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MASTER OF ARTS

2006

Warring Discourses in The Picture of Dorian Gray

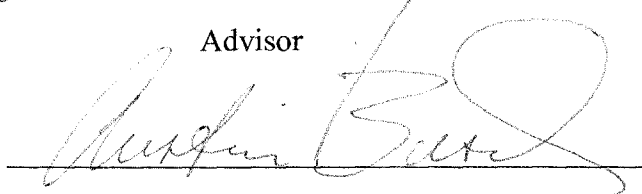
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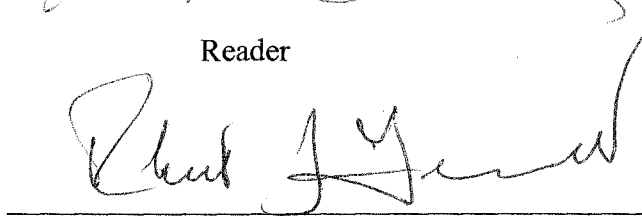
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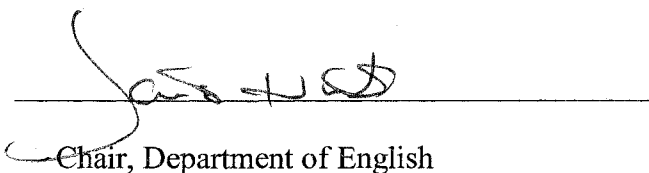
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Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray has enjoyed a myriad of critical treatment since its first publication. Much of this is due to the paradoxical nature of Wilde's style. In this novel, there is a tension and unique interplay between the discourses of ethics and Decadence as applied to the artistic life. Wilde's attraction to Catholicism also plays a prominent role in his treatment of characters. Although the author's intent remains ambiguous, the course of the novel leads one to the conclusion that there exists a fundamental incompatibility between Decadent and Catholic thought. The purpose of this thesis is to explore this incompatibility in all of its complexity.

This thesis utilizes those works that have influenced Wilde, particularly the writings of Huysmans and Pater. Furthermore, it references Catholic writings and how they may apply to the ethical considerations put forth. Also, Wilde's life, as expressed through his letters, is brought to bear upon the analysis of the novel. Several critical writings on The Picture of Dorian Gray are also examined for their relevance and as a means to demonstrate the complex nature of the work and the possibility of a wide variety of interpretations.

The thesis concludes with the notion that Wilde's novel cannot be seen as having one central discourse. Art and ethics have a certain interdependence despite conflicts between their fundamental propositions. Finally, the thesis proposes that the lack of resolution in The Picture of Dorian Gray stems from Wilde's developing understanding that would deepen with his profound experiences in the face of imprisonment and mortality.

Introduction

Oscar Wilde told Coulson Kernahan that his greatest dream was to be remembered “as the man who re clothed the sublimest conception which the world has ever known – the Salvation of Humanity, the Sacrifice of Himself upon the Cross by Christ – with new and burning words, with new and illuminating symbols” (Knox xvii). Wilde never fully realized this dream, with the possible exception of the letter he wrote (his last prose work) to Lord Alfred Douglas, De Profundis.

Perhaps Wilde’s failure to reach his dream stems from his multiple attempts to reconcile religious thought with his fiercely held aesthetic principles. Like many Decadents, he saw similarities between the two and, like Walter Pater, wished to lift humanity, through art, to a more inclusive understanding of Christianity, or more specifically, Catholicism.

For the purposes of clarity and consistency, I chose Catholicism as a means of comparison with the Aesthetic movement. It is still unclear among scholars to which denomination of Christianity Wilde most closely aligned himself. The two main possibilities would be the Established Church and the Catholic Church. However, it is quite clear in his works and letters that Wilde was in a constant struggle to reconcile himself with the Catholic Church.

In his days at Oxford, Wilde would wax paradoxically, in his characteristic style, about Catholic writers and saints. In one letter to William Ward, Wilde speaks regretfully of John Henry Newman’s conversion from the Anglican Church to Roman Catholicism: “I think that his higher emotions revolted against Rome but that he was

swept on by Logic to accept it as the only rational form of Christianity. His life is a terrible tragedy” (20). In a letter that follows to Ward, he advises: “you are bound to account ... for S. Bernard, and S. Augustine and S. Philip Neri – and even in our day for Liddon and Newman - as being good philosophers and good Christians”

(26). Wilde was likely unaware that Newman’s dilemma would play itself out in his own works and life. Wilde’s attraction to these “higher emotions” (of whose integral role in Catholic tradition he was unaware) would drive his aesthetic activity; but the “Logic” of reason (also a necessity in the life of a Catholic), would prove inescapable in his attempt to create coherent works as well as navigate his way through a life beset with numerous temptations, perils, and trials.

Wilde would make light of his Catholic readings and leanings. After reading Thomas à Kempis, the Flemish mystic, he remarked of the benefits of “warping of the inner mind daily” (21). When swimming, he felt “slightly heretical when good Roman Catholic boys enter the water with little amulets and crosses round their necks “ (21). Yet under his classically flippant pose, he was reconciling himself with a difficult decision that would come at a great price. Wilde’s father, staunchly anti-Catholic, threatened to cut him out of his will if he converted: “to go over to Rome would be to sacrifice and give up my two great gods ‘Money and Ambition’” (CL 39). As much as people found fault with his vacillation over conversion, he knew the price he paid: “still I have suffered very much for my Roman fever in mind and *pocket* and happiness” (CL 57).

When faced with imprisonment, Wilde was forced to come to terms with his mortality; he no longer had a place to escape to, no masks to wear, no poses to strike. Facing his conscience, like Dorian with his portrait, brought him to terms with suffering and its value. De Profundis shows a changed Wilde, more sober in his realization of the darker side of life where humiliation, suffering, remorse, and pain can bring one also to the realization of truth and beauty.

Yet so many of Wilde's Catholic sentiments (in his writings) are equally matched and contradicted by those thoughts born of his aesthetic viewpoint. Wilde blames himself for "the entire ethical degradation [he] allowed [Bosie] to bring on [him]" (CL 689). His awareness of sin is evident: "Sins of the flesh are nothing ... sins of the soul alone are shameful" (714). Yet Wilde is unwilling to admit that his appetite for pleasure was in anyway harmful to his soul or to others: "I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure" (739). His perception of Christ is still cast in the shadow of his own worldview: "Christ is the most supreme of Individualists. Humility, like the artistic acceptance of all experiences, is merely a mode of manifestation" (744). This humanistic view of Christ and artistic conception of humility leads one away from the simple Catholic truths that Christ is not simply an individual human being, but God incarnate; humility is not present in the world for the sake of sensation, but for the simple fact that humans have manifold weaknesses and are a drop in the ocean of God's consciousness.

It is Wilde's apparent conversion on his deathbed that indicates what the man carried in his heart, but was unable to reconcile until he had no alternatives.

According to Joseph Pearce, Wilde, at a time near his death, admitted to a writer for the Daily Chronicle: “much of my moral obliquity is due to the fact that my father would not allow me to become a Catholic ... I intend to be received before long” (287). Soon after, Wilde would be on his deathbed. With the help of his friend, Robert Ross, and a priest, Father Cuthbert Dunne, Wilde consented to receive the sacraments necessary to be received into the Catholic Church. Fr. Dunne declared, “From the signs he gave as well as from his attempted words, I was satisfied as to his full consent” (Pearce 288). Although this is a commonly held belief of Wilde’s death, there are also accounts to the contrary.

To many, attempting reconciliation between Catholicism and Decadence seems paradoxical, very Wildean. Catholicism’s aim, as defined by St. Thomas Aquinas, is to strive for the happiness that can only be achieved by union with God in Christ: “For happiness is the perfect good [which] is to be found, not in any creature, but in God alone; because every creature has goodness by participation. Wherefore God alone can satisfy the will of man ... Therefore God alone constitutes man’s happiness” (II, I, Q2, Article 8). Wilde rarely overtly talked about his love for God, but mostly of his attraction to the Church. It seems he spent much of his life perceiving the Church as aesthetically impressive, and distanced himself from its other more fundamental aspects.

Decadence, although having a variety of credos and manifestations, can be justly defined by a “founding father,” Walter Pater. Pater proposes that “not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” and “to burn always with this hard,

gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (236). To Pater, artists should be considered “the wisest, at least among ‘the children of the world’” and “art comes to you proposing nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (238-9). This quote, while having noble goals, is fundamentally incompatible with Catholicism. Surely, to live fully each moment of our existence makes for enlightened living. But to live only for those moments negates the quest for transcendence. It remains clear that Decadence, in its aim for self-actualization through experience, is in contrast with a religion that proposes self-abnegation in order for Christ to become one’s all. If Pater’s statement stands for Aesthetics, then the aim of this particular movement is the epitome of temporality. It has no consideration for the afterlife or the notion of eternity.

Additionally, Pater seems to take direct aim at Aquinas with his short criticism of habits (a fundamental aspect of Aquinas’s discourse on the exercise of virtues): “In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world” (xiv). Habit, according to Aquinas, can be compared to a virtue: “first because it confers aptness in doing good; secondly, because besides aptness, it confers the right use of it” (II, I, Q57, Article1).

What separates the philosophies of the two men in this respect is that Pater claims to see little value in the use of foresight or exercising the right use of reason in human endeavors. Strangely enough, Pater’s The Renaissance is the result of the utilization of tremendous amounts of reason, circumspection and deliberation. Additionally, what Pater fails to recognize, is that habits, according to St. Thomas,

remove those obstacles that get in our way of perceiving most clearly each moment of our existence. Pater sees the conscience as an obstacle to realizing certain extreme sensations and experiences. St. Thomas sees certain activities that ignore the habit of prudence as being destructive to the soul. They are destructive because they blind the soul, making it turn in on itself in self-indulgence.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a sparring ground between the two discourses of Catholicism and Decadence. It might appear to be an attempt to meld the two, but in a backhanded sort of way. Dorian's life is a quest that aspires but fails to reach a greater understanding and reconciliation of the life of the flesh and the life of the spirit. He fails in his understanding of Catholicism and Decadence for a variety of reasons, and this leads to his demise. Perhaps Dorian's models for Decadence and Catholicism have flawed viewpoints: Lord Henry in his Decadent voice, and Basil in his voice of morality and aesthetics. Neither man could be considered a complete "success" in any reasonable application of the term.

It is important to remember, too, that this novel is a work of art and not a philosophical treatise. In staying true to his characters and artistic considerations, Wilde does not compromise aesthetic effect for a predisposed outcome. At the same time, Wilde's never having devised a tale that perfectly conjoins Catholicism and Decadence does make us ask if they are incompatible and therefore not able to perfectly coexist in one person. Wilde's life gives ample evidence to this notion.

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to demonstrate that The Picture of Dorian Gray portrays the incompatibility of Decadent thought and Christianity

(primarily Catholicism because of some critics' assumed pluralism between Decadence and Catholicism). This incompatibility leads inevitably to Dorian's destruction, a storyline eerily close to that of the author's life. Yet, is this "incompatibility" fully played out in the text? It would seem not. In truth, if Wilde has a point to prove, it must stem from his comment in the *St. James Gazetteer*: "the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment" (qtd. in PDG 339). Wilde's statement has to do with the danger of exclusivity: there is a danger in living a life that adheres to Catholic principles without the consideration of aesthetics. Also, a life devoted to Decadence, or aesthetics, to the exclusion of the right use of morals is deadly. The fact that Wilde embraced both ideologies simultaneously must lead one to believe that he wished to fashion the combination of the two into his own ideological system.

Wilde's primary method for connecting Decadence with Catholicism is by way of paradox. He claims, through his novel, that paradoxes are "the way of truth" (36). Paradoxes can take manifold forms and serve different purposes. For instance, biblical paradoxes are used to explain those truths difficult or impossible to explain through normal modes of reasoning. Jesus claimed that one must lose his life in order to find it.

Yet Wilde uses paradoxes to inflame, or at least to provoke thought. His paradoxes were akin to controversial sentiments, fueled by Walter Pater and J.-K. Huysmans, in opposition to commonly held Catholic thought. They are aimed, perhaps, at suspending our long held, accepted beliefs so that we might see new

possibilities in light of contemporary thought of Wilde's time. The Picture of Dorian Gray portrays a man who cannot reconcile his aesthetically induced desires with his conscience, which sees the moral repercussions of his actions. He is, much like Wilde in his life, destroyed by the paradox. I will further explore the notion of paradox, and how it is utilized in the novel.

Determining the genre of The Picture of Dorian Gray is difficult, but essential to the understanding of this complex and contradictory text. Its paradoxical nature requires, possibly, the assignment of multiple genres. Nils Clausson's excellent discussion of genre in "'Culture and Corruption': Paterian Self-Development *versus* Gothic Degeneration in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" may lead us closer to a framework by which we may examine those contradictory discourses present within the text.

Clausson rightly claims "*what* a text means is inseparable from *how* it is read, and since we must always read a text *as something*, genre often asserts itself as a set of instructions, implicit or explicit, on how to read a text" (339). On the surface, this statement certainly holds true for texts that can be clearly identified in terms of genre (e.g., mystery); however, The Picture of Dorian Gray forces the reader to suspend an application of genre until after finishing and digesting the novel. If this is right, then the use of genre for the purposes of analysis is necessary only after the novel has been read and analysis begins. Consequently, genre may change with each successive pass at the text, depending on the deepening level of insight into it.

To stamp Wilde's novel with a single genre is to oversimplify it, often for the sake of advancing one's own ideologies. Many critics have labeled the story as a parable. As Clausson points out, Joseph Pearce claims "the plot of the novel unfurls like a parable, illuminating the grave spiritual dangers involved in a life of immoral action and experiment" (Pearce 164). Yet Pearce (although one might agree with the moral premise put forward) glosses over the subversive nature of the text (which does clearly make a moral point) in which Puritan ideals are skewered for their hypocrisy and one-sided claims.

Clausson references Shelton Waldrep as one who sees "Dorian Gray as a realist novel: 'Wilde had to work within the confines of some specific variation on the theme of realism'" (qtd. in Clausson 341-2). Waldrep, it seems, has decided to ignore the Gothic and magical elements of the text in order to simplify his claims. It is either a testament to the strength or the weakness of Wilde's novel that it defies simple genre naming. For the sake of this thesis, we will call it a Decadent parable, because, while touting the strengths of these two systems of thought, it refuses to adhere to one or the other exclusively.

While the novel enjoys a certain paradoxical bent, its resolution does not. The storyline in The Picture of Dorian Gray leads to a logical conclusion to events and actions in a universe governed by moral laws. It disproves the belief in "having your cake and eating it too." Yet it also warns against misinterpreting ideologies or following the dictates and personal philosophies of others. Wilde seems to be attempting to leave behind, or at least expose the weaknesses in the viewpoints of

those men he held in such high esteem: Pater and Ruskin. Richard Ellman echoes this sentiment, with regard to Pater: “Dorian Gray is the aesthetic novel *par excellence*, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers.” (315). Yet this statement cannot completely contain the spirit of the novel, for it also exhibits some enthusiasm for an aesthetic appreciation of art and artists.

For the purpose of comparison, I will be utilizing the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, particularly the Summa Theologica. Although written in the 13th century, this work provides a comprehensive and clear-sighted view into the most fundamental Catholic questions around human activity. In order better to understand Wilde’s principles of aesthetics and Decadent thought expounded upon in his novel, I will also be looking at the writings of Pater and Huysman, notable influences on his philosophy. By comparing and contrasting these two systems of thought, I hope to recognize overlapping principles, but more importantly, the fact that they diverge in the most fundamental ways. The Picture of Dorian Gray demonstrates precisely this tension between convergence and divergence.

The contrasting views of the three central characters provide various modes of comparison of belief systems. Wilde’s letters demonstrate that his thoughts are made manifest in all of them, as well as the intrusive narrator, but, as Ellman points out, “Wilde is larger than his three characters together: they represent distortions or narrowing of his personality, none of them reproducing his generosity of spirit or his sense of fun or his full creativeness” (320).

This thesis also derives from biographical information, correspondence, recent scholarly treatment of the novel, and Catholic writings. Finally, De Profundis is another useful means of comparison. This work of Wilde's shows a more mature, sober view of Christianity than does The Picture of Dorian Gray. Wilde's time spent in prison afforded him an *experiential* knowledge of Christianity rather than just an *intellectual* one. His situation allowed him no place to escape from the life he created for himself.

Chapter One: Influential Modes of Decadent and Christian Thought

J.K. Huysmans's A Rebours doubtless played a major role in Wilde's formation of a Decadent aesthetic viewpoint. Wilde encountered the work while on his honeymoon in Paris in 1884 and found it "one of the best [he had] ever seen" (Pearce 120). In fact, A Rebours was the prototype for the "yellow book" that catalyzes Dorian Gray's downward spiral into a world of decadence and moral depravity. Joseph Pearce claims, "Huysmans's novel would prove to be one of the most potent and poisonous influences on Wilde's future life" (120). And yet, the book's ending portrays a glimmer of hope that extends beyond all the "experiential" sludge Des Esseintes puts himself through. Maybe Wilde wasn't ready at the time to accept the truth discovered by a disconsolate Des Esseintes and by the book's author who would choose to eventually join the Roman Catholic Church.

Although Huysmans would become a Roman Catholic, his perceptions of the relationship between good and evil had a questionable, clearly non-Catholic bent. In fact, they retained some sentiments that pertain to the heretical aspect of Decadence, placing evil on the same plane as goodness. Ellis Hanson misinterprets Huysmans's mystical philosophy as "not about the triumph of good over evil, or the triumph of the spirit over the body, but their eternal struggle, the dialectical opposition by which one seems to be disappearing into the other" (40). Contrary to Hanson, and using his same quote for an example, Huysmans, using Wagner as a model, explains the *reconciliation* of these opposing elements as the soul abandons itself to the Divine: "in the Glory of Redemption, the Body and the Spirit are intermingled, Evil and Good

are reconciled, Lust and Purity are knit together by the two motifs that wind around ... the hymn of the kneeling soul as it celebrates its final submission, its unshakeable stability in the bosom of the deity” (41). It is not the struggle of the two opposites, as Hanson claims, that Huysmans believes to be the end of all man’s desires. It is rather being subsumed within the “bosom of the Deity.”

Although Huysmans valued the same ends as Catholicism (happiness in the full presence of God), he had a false (from a Catholic point of view) idea of the Catholic doctrine of the nature of the struggle between good and evil. He saw Catholics as having “this belief that man is an irresolute creature, a being torn between two forces of equal strength, alternately victorious and vanquished in the battle for his soul” (41). This is nothing else but the false doctrine of Manichaeism, which “sees God and Satan as coeval and engaged in an eternal struggle ... that also takes place in individuals” (Harmon 298). Catholic teaching has always proclaimed God as “the only and the true Creator and Ruler of the universe” (Augustine 53). Humanity struggles more as a result of its fallen nature that has become weakened from turning away from God. Our free will may always choose the good, but is often tempted by those contrary forces that remain.

What Huysmans appeared to be doing, though, is much the same as Wilde, in his own style of decadent philosophizing: seeing sin as an integral part of salvation. It is as if Wilde and Huysmans disbelieved in man’s ability to overcome sin and evil through the accepted Catholic means of repentance, sacrament, and grace. They fostered an aesthetic attraction to sin that it made it difficult to release themselves

from. Perhaps, at the time, purity was a concept they felt (wrongly) to be a manifestation of Philistinism. While one can only speculate, Catholic doctrine acknowledges the idea that the more one sins, the more one “hates the light” and “loves the darkness.” Hence, those individuals who are not living consistently Christian lives will still carry within them more of an inclination toward sinful things than others, resulting in “warring discourses” within themselves.

There lie many parallels between À Rebours and Dorian Gray with regard to aesthetic experience, ideals, and controversial Catholic thought. Like Dorian, Des Esseintes attempts to find freedom and new visions through the sensual exploitation and distortion of the finite things of the world. À Rebours is a definitive work in terms of its ability to delineate those human activities and sentiments considered Decadent. It is rich in its depiction of that intense experience through the senses touted in Pater’s conclusion to his study of the Renaissance. It also demonstrates the very decadent, and Catholic, notion that pursuing these activities will lead to the individual’s degradation and destruction.

A major thrust of protagonist Des Esseintes’s (and Huysmans’s) developing philosophy stems from his desire to abandon Naturalism in order to seek new experiences through the prism of artifice (Huysmans 22). Des Esseintes’s desire to explore this life (driven by his ennui) can only be accomplished by a person of great material means. Time and money are available to him, and he squanders it by living a solitary, insular life dedicated to experiencing those “false, fictitious pleasures every whit as good as the true” (21). The protagonist’s admission that what he was seeking

or experiencing could be “false” or “fictitious” raises questions as to his belief in absolute truth. Was he flouting conventional belief in absolute truth by putting the true and the artificial on the same level? Or was he admitting that the pleasure he derived from these activities somehow stemmed from knowledge of their innate tendency toward evil?

The decadents, paradoxically, wouldn't give up on the notion of good or evil; to do so would remove the point of reference from which they would rebel and find their ethical and aesthetic identities. Ellis Hanson, in Decadence and Catholicism, claims “the decadents cultivated a fascination with all that was commonly perceived as unnatural or degenerate, with sexual perversity, nervous illness, crime, and disease, all presented in a highly aestheticized context calculated to subvert or, at any rate, to shock conventional morality” (3). In their attempts to subvert or shock the prevailing morality, decadents were, from a certain perspective, reinforcing what Catholics believed to be true: that people are born with the defect of original sin, are capable of falling into deeper sin because of certain forces present in the world, and that only through grace do they have the ability to rise above their flawed natures and lead a life pleasing to God. St. Thomas Aquinas's comments on the destruction of habits, or virtues, shed some light on the circumstances by which this “degeneration” takes place:

Consequently all habits that are gradually undermined by contrary agencies which need to be counteracted by acts proceeding from those habits, are

diminished or even destroyed altogether by long cessations from act, as is clearly seen in the case both of science and art. (II, I, Q53, A 3)

It could be said, then, that three factors may contribute to the state of degeneration achieved by the Decadents. First, by way of ennui, do they neglect to practice those activities that keep the soul healthy and free from sin. Ennui, as coined by the decadents, could be conjoined with the Catholic term for the sin of laziness: sloth. Another source of degeneration of the soul would be sins of omission, whereby a person fails to exercise a virtue or right action when circumstances call for it. The third factor leading to degeneration is active, willful sin. A person, possessing full knowledge of his or her options, decides to pursue an activity that they know is harmful to their soul. This appears to be the case for Des Esseintes and Dorian. They are fully cognizant of the destructiveness of their acts; this, though, generally does not deter their acts, but makes them more attractive because of the experiential “fruits” they produce.

Des Esseintes’s range of experiments is vast. He bejewels a turtle in order to place it on a rug to match the thread colors. The turtle dies as a result of the weight of the jewels: “it had not been able to support the dazzling splendor imposed on it” (49). He imports flowers that mirror his taste in people: “he reserved, in fact, for the full and perfect delectation of his eyes, rare plants of high bred type” (84). Moreover, he keeps only those species that display a distorted, unnatural, grotesque formation and color: “It was the Anthurium ... with long black stalks seamed with scars, like a negro’s limbs after a thrashing” (86). His anti-bourgeois mindset is misguided. He

thinks he is involved in important aesthetic experiments, but they show themselves to be destructive exercises in self-indulgence. He, like the bourgeois, is a mere consumer. There is no creativity or innovation in what he does. All Des Esseintes accomplishes is an unnatural flooding of the senses that drains him of the power to act and create. His activities give birth to ennui. The harm he causes is either to the natural world he exploits or to his own mind, reinforcing the pompous and negative perception he holds of others he considers inferior.

In addition to visual stimulation, Des Esseintes turns to alcohol to create multiple moods and sensations. The various liquors are applied to his tongue in drops, “thus playing symphonies on his internal economy, producing on his palate a series of sensations analogous to those wherewith music gratifies the ear” (44). These sensual experiments will prove inadequate, though, as also are his experiments in the sphere of human activity.

Des Esseintes’s excursions into these aforementioned journeys into the senses have a violent and destructive nature to them, leading him further into to the void of self-indulgence. They do nothing to lead him to any depth of understanding about himself or the world. In fact, he becomes increasingly more sick, weak, and disillusioned. They merely make him hunger for other, more extreme experiences, often at the expense of individuals.

His attitude towards people is particularly insular. He views his servants from a distanced, cold eye: “[he] made every possible disposition so as not to avoid the obligation of seeing them or speaking to them more often than was absolutely

indispensable” (17). They are only present in order to set up his experiments. His perception of the common man in general reflects his aristocratic perspective that sees the bourgeois as the downfall of developed society: “The result of [the bourgeois’s] rise to power had been the destruction of all intelligence, the negation of all honesty, the death of all art” (205). Des Esseintes’s thoughts have an absolute quality to them (“all intelligence ... all honesty ... all art”) that seem to distance him from Huysmans. His ignorance of humanity is pronounced. Likewise, his inability to see the possibility that art and truth and intelligence are capable of springing from the minds of anyone at any time shows his narrow-mindedness and insularity.

Des Esseintes’s forays into sexual misadventures are another aspect of Decadence in which he has indulged himself. He finds himself “sick and satiated with this pretense of pleasure ... plunged into the nether depths ... to stimulate his exhausted senses by the very foulness of the filth and beastliness of low-bred vice” (7). His tryst with a female circus acrobat demonstrates his desire not for human love, but strangeness and perversion. He uses the acrobat’s powers of ventriloquism to set up a strange scenario with a carved sphinx and a chimaera. The woman speaks through the chimaera: “I seek new perfumes, ampler blossoms, untried pleasures” (102). But this does nothing but drain Des Esseintes of his strength as “his feebleness grew more pronounced” (102). His final attempt at sexual excitement is through the emotion of fear, as the ventriloquist throws her voice to portray a jilted male lover outside the chamber door. This failure, in turn, leads to disillusionment and finality for the two lovers.

These episodes, again, reinforce that Des Esseintes is seeking fulfillment in situations that will always end in disappointment. From a Catholic perspective, his experimentation with lust and concupiscence lead him further down avenues of greater perversion, regret and self-loathing. Like Dorian, his attempts to heal his transgressions by way of diversions only drive him deeper to the edge of despair. It also is a marked contrast with Lord Henry's (and possibly Wilde's) belief regarding the benefits of sin: "The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification ... the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing ..." (20). This speech by Lord Henry, swallowed whole by Dorian, plays itself out in Dorian's life (Lord Henry's experiment). But Dorian, we learned, does not extricate himself from the negative consequences of sin. The portrait keeps a record of his soul, and his attempt to thwart its story is destroyed. It is his attempt to kill his conscience that kills him.

Thomas À Kempis speaks of the war between nature and grace, and the necessity of grace to overcome the inclination towards degeneration: "Thus the nature which You created good and upright has now become the very symbol of corruption and weakness, for *when left to itself*, it leans towards evil and base things" (172). Des Esseintes's fault is seeking these sensations, as Pater suggested, as ends in themselves. When the soul attempts to find rest and satisfaction in temporal things, it, as Thomas À Kempis says, "will not be established in true joy, nor uplifted in heart, but will be hindered and frustrated in countless ways" (105). His lack of remorse and

self-knowledge about the origin of his frustrations leaves him one alternative: to escape them via other, more intense distractions of the senses.

Besides the exploitation of females, Des Esseintes sets out to perform a wicked human experiment with a young boy, Auguste, as his subject. Finding the young boy on the street, Des Esseintes convinces him to visit a brothel free of charge: “come now, make your choice, it’s my treat” (Huysmans 67). Des Esseintes does not, paradoxically, want some pleasure in seeing the young boy lose his virginity, but rather is “simply trying to train a murderer” (68). He wants to facilitate his ruination by providing him with this service until he is hooked, and then remove the means for him to procure these women. It is Des Essientes’s wish that Auguste consequently turn to a life of crime in order to pay for what he has become accustomed to. It bears a striking parallel to the experiment set up by Lord Henry in using Dorian as a human experiment. The ends they pursue are the voyeuristic type in which they find a twisted pleasure in another’s destruction.

Lord Henry, ironically, preaches the idea of the destructiveness of influence. He tells Dorian that all influence is “immoral from the scientific point of view ... Because to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with the natural passions” (19). Yet Lord Henry does just the thing he condemns; he influences Dorian to live a life free of remorse or conscience. While he attempts to emulate Pater in word (“The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for for”), he butchers this philosophy with his actions (in the form of words) and

intentions. There is no visible sign of self-development or striving for perfection in the man.

Des Essientes's choice of literature is predicated on his "[sensitivity] to none but superfine sensations and the doubts raised by Catholicism and sensual phenomena" (178). He demonstrates a penchant for writers like Poe and Baudelaire who show a bent toward the decadent. In Baudelaire, he finds one who "possessed the wondrous power of defining with a strange sanity of phrase the most fleeting, the most evanescent of the morbid conditions of broken spirits and disheartened souls" (135). Like Dorian, he takes delight in these morbid, dark conditions. He does not endure them for the sake of realizing truth; rather, he tries to turn them to his enjoyment. This type of delectation is where Decadence and Catholicism split: Decadence enjoys sin and perversion while Catholicism sees the necessity of resisting them (often a painful experience) in order to live on a more purified plane of existence.

Edgar Allan Poe, "that Master of Induction," played to Des Esseintes's desire to pursue the long, twisted alleys of obsession and strangeness. He sees Poe as one who would "explore those irresistible impulses which the will submits to... the depressing influence of fear acting on the will... the effects of this moral poison" (178). One must wonder, however, if it is not the conscience of Poe's protagonists, after loss or some transgression, which renders the greatest power over the soul. This "moral poison" is nothing but a character's inability to escape the moral flow of a

universe that drives men to reckon with their inborn dispositions towards right and wrong.

Perhaps it is Des Esseintes's conceptions of Catholicism that held the greatest sway over Wilde. Des Esseintes continually attempts to take Catholicism and use it as a sort of commodity. In his attempt to escape the shambles of his past, he decides to "contrive a bed-chamber to resemble a monk's cell in a Religious House" (62). He is not interested in partaking in the monk's life, only enjoying the artifice of its appearance: "he refused absolutely to endure for his personal occupation the austere ugliness that marks such refuges for penitence and prayer" (62). There were times in Wilde's life when his interest in Catholicism seemed limited only to the outward signs. And Dorian as well, in his quest for aesthetic impressions, turns to Catholic artifacts for their effect: "He had a special passion, also, for ecclesiastical vestments ... of the Bride of Christ, who must wear purple and jewels and fine linen that she may hide the purple macerated body that is worn by the suffering that she seeks for, and wounded by self-inflicted pain" (108). But these items don't foster devotion in Dorian; they "were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape" (109).

Of course, Des Esseintes's superficial attempt to derive some satisfaction from the external signs of the religious life will inevitably end in failure. He wishes to "fit up a Trappist's cell that should have the look of the genuine article, and yet of course be nothing of the sort" (62). This type of paradoxical thinking and scheming holds a striking resemblance to the life of Wilde, who spent much of his life

enamored with the outward beauty of the Church while denying the doctrines of the faith. Des Esseintes believes he is enjoying some aspects of the monk's life ("he was ripe for solitude"), but the ends he pursues are far from those of a monk. His "warm, luxurious bedchamber" is a nothing like the "hardship or incommmodity" and "irksome restraint" of a monk's cell. Des Essientes is seeking self-satisfaction while a monk is attempting to strip himself in order to experience the touch of the Divine.

Des Esseintes, formerly being immersed in Catholic doctrine as a youth, has a faith that ebbs and flows according to his whims. Although he was schooled under the tutelage of erudite Jesuits, his "temperament, recalcitrant and stubborn, carping and critical, eager to argue out every proposition," kept him from conceding to their influence. He felt the experience "fortified his spirit of independence and increased his distrust in any and every form of belief" (73). Wilde surely must have felt some sympathy with the mindset of the protagonist. He, too, would struggle to reconcile his supple and fruitful mind with a religion that, at times, appeared too rigid for him. He would remark to friends, in letters, that he could not conform to Catholicism or Christianity: "I cannot stand Christians because they are never Catholics, and I cannot stand Catholics because they are never Christians" (831). Rather, he could not stand any orthodoxy that wasn't in conformity with his view of right religion.

And yet, what his natural reason tells him cannot be, Des Esseintes's instincts and unconscious betray: "For a brief moment he was a believer, an instinctive convert to religion; then, after the shortest interval of reflection, all his attraction towards the Faith would evaporate" (73). Perhaps Des Esseintes's inability to embrace a life of

devout Catholicism stems from those indulgences that leave him tethered to the pleasures of his senses. He is not unwilling to admit his moral preferences, if not weaknesses: “he could never have the humility and contrition of a truly Christian soul [because] he experienced none of the craving for prayer and mortification without which ... no conversion is possible” (73-4). Des Essintes leans too heavily on desire to inspire him to act. He does not follow his reason in pursuing the good.

Numerous Catholic saints have addressed desire, and the lack thereof, in the life of devotion. Part of the life of faith is a mysterious absence of desire, a dryness that leaves one feeling left to one’s own faculties without the grace of God. It was believed by Catholic mystics that this dryness is a form of mortification of the soul in which the necessary activity of purgation may occur. Only in this way may the soul, in its newfound purity, be ready to accept the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. St. John of the Cross addresses this situation: “They who are bent on sensible sweetness, labour also under another very great imperfection: excessive weakness and remissness on the rugged road of the cross; for the soul that is given to sweetness naturally sets its face against all the pain of self-denial” (28). Des Esseintes would not willingly accept hardship and austerity until he had completely exhausted all experiments of the senses.

This sentiment addresses an essential element at the crux of this thesis. There will always be an adversarial relationship between Decadence and Catholicism because, without the necessary pain of repentance, the fallen man cannot begin to be healed by God. The Decadent man, who places pleasure and the life of the senses at

the forefront of his philosophy, sees not the reason for self-denial. Wilde (following Ruskin), in his statement about the uselessness of renunciation, makes himself incapable of conversion with this denial. Dorian, likewise, feels repentant, but his attachment to desire keeps pulling him back from reconciliation.

It is not that Des Esseintes is unwilling to suffer; on the contrary. He suffers plenty, but from his misguided attempts at melding sadism with genuine Christian suffering. The “morose pleasures” he recalls from a tryst with a young man he utilizes as part of his new “theology” (104). This “leaven of insanity that can torment a brain overstimulated by nervous excitation was fermenting within him” (104). But Des Esseintes goes beyond this “overstimulation.” His “old doings of shame, he combined with the physical visions, spiritual ardours roused by his former readings of the casuists” (104). This combination of “shameful” memories and imaginings with spiritual matters is a defining moment in Huysman’s reputation as a Decadent writer and likely inspired Wilde to use this model to create Dorian’s attempted “mixed” life and as a model for his (Wilde’s) own life. It is significant that Des Esseintes, Dorian, and Wilde (eventually) failed in their endeavors to reconcile these two discourses.

Here we have Des Esseintes’s manifesto of all he could surmise from the pinnacle of his experiences with life and his senses:

While giving birth to an extra-human ideal in this soul ..., Religion had at the same time roused an illegitimate ideal of licentious pleasures; libertine and mystic obsessions haunted, in an inextricable union, his brain that thirsted

with an obstinate craving to escape the vulgarities of life. (104)

The narrator's notion of "escape" seems to be a defining motivation for the protagonist. He is not conjoining with things in order to become part of some higher understanding or good. He is simply trying to get away from the harsh realities of a world with which he cannot be reconciled. Des Esseintes finds no happiness, no enlightenment from these escapades. He finds no new analogues to beauty or intimations of the truth: "as a matter of fact, he issued from these reveries utterly exhausted, half-dying" (14).

It is, in the end, Des Esseintes's exile from the world of men and women that drives him to his sickness and despair. Those things he most detested and avoided were perhaps the only means for him to understand himself and the common condition of humanity. It is only through the ultimatum of his doctor that he must choose either life in the general world, or death.

Des Esseintes, of course protests this prescription for health. He still believes in his "experiments" but more than likely desires exile. Although Des Esseintes lends credence to the "decadence of literature ... sensitive only to the whims of curiosity that torment a fever patient, and yet eager in its expiring hours to express every thought and fancy," he chooses, rather, life, if even a lowly one, instead of the "dying spasm" of decadence (186-7). Once having taken to Parisian life, he finds it in physical and moral disrepair. Even the monasteries have taken to generating income from the sale of goods to the public. Yet, in spite of his disgust, Des Esseintes

discovers faith and the prayer of the hopeless, having nowhere else to turn, as he enters his new public life:

Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the skeptic who would fain believe, on the galley slave who puts out to sea alone, in the darkness of night, beneath a firmament illumined no longer by the consoling beacon-fires of the ancient hope. (206)

This prayer, seemingly ironic in its disbelieving tones, bears a striking resemblance to the sentiments of the mystic, St. John of the Cross. St. John of the Cross likened the path of a Christian soul to one who enters a dark night. It is only in this spiritual darkness that the soul can be purged of its sinful state and renewed by God. But to the soul, it seems as if all is truly lost: “God thus leaves them in darkness so great that they know not wither to betake themselves with their imaginations and reflections of sense” (33). These words were said by a man who would become a “beacon-fire of ancient hope” to many individuals who would pass through the dark night into the illuminating light of divine love.

This final prayer of Des Esseintes, being the last lines from the book, indicates a walking away from his former life and an immersion into turmoil and the unknown. Unlike Dorian, he does not try to kill his conscience, but rather attempts, at all costs, to reconcile himself with a world he holds in great disdain. The parallels and departures that lie between À Rebours and The Picture of Dorian Gray will be discussed later in more detail.

Walter Pater's The Renaissance is another classic text that played an integral role in Wilde's formation of a decadent viewpoint, as well as providing fodder for the mind and speech of Lord Henry Wotton in The Picture of Dorian Gray. Whether the book had a lasting and final impact over Wilde is up to debate as he refers to it, in his later years, as "that book which has had such a strange influence over my life" (Pearce 36). He seems, in his mature years, to have a keener, distanced view of this text.

It seems Pater's intention, in writing The Renaissance, was to subvert the prevailing commonly held beliefs about those artists closely connected to the Renaissance. Much of the art of the Renaissance had traditional Catholic imagery, from Christ to the Madonna. One would surmise Renaissance art reinforced traditional religious beliefs through the medium of art. Not so Pater. Pater's appreciation of the Renaissance is his perception of its ends, and is common with Wilde's aim in much of his writing: "that movement which, in various ways, the human mind wins for itself a new kingdom of feeling and sensation and thought, not opposed to but only beyond and independent of the spiritual system then actually realized" (7). Those two words "beyond" and "independent" seem to downplay the discourse and propositions put forth elsewhere in the book: The portrayal of Christian artists and the sentiments/effects of their work attempts to shake the foundations of the religion to which these artists claimed to pay homage.

Pater's retelling of the French story of two male companions, Amis and Amile, illustrates Pater's desire to bring to light those aspects of the Renaissance

movement that cultivated “the desire for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life” (2). Pater sees this type of story as a prototype of works that exemplify “the divination of fresh sources thereof - new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art” (2). The story of Amis and Amile pushes the bounds of what is acceptable (to the Catholic Church) in terms of human sexuality, but only by implication. Their implied romantic connection is physically made manifest in their appearance as being twinlike: “an outward token of the inward similitude of their souls” (9). Their relationship reaches a “passionate exultation” and is “more than faithful unto death” (8). This allusion to Christ’s being faithful unto death for the salvation of humanity is a hyperbolic expression of their affections for each other; but also makes an attempt to minimize the commonly held Christian belief that Christ made the supreme sacrifice by his death on the cross. It calls into question, and perhaps attempts to shock the reader’s long held assumptions about traditional human love and Christianity.

It is Amis’s self-sacrifice for Amile in a dangerous tournament and Amile’s acceptance of the leprous Amis that sets the stage for their unconditional love for each other and their blessings from God through His angel, Raphael. Moreover, the story clearly attempts to undermine the notion of family as an essential human organization. Amis’s violent rejection, by his wife, after his contraction of leprosy, exemplifies the one woman’s lack of unconditional love for her husband. Amile’s willingness to carry out the murder of his two children (upon the request of the angel

Raphael) in order to heal Amis shows a willingness to sacrifice family for human friendship, or love.

Ellis Hanson reveals the “dialectic - that between birth and death, artistic creativity and cultural disintegration ... but also his “strange’ use of “the romantic, even decadent, shadow of death that passes over virtually every representation of love he ever described” (170). This characterization of Pater’s work could well apply to The Picture of Dorian Gray. Death is always at the elbow of every character with the Exception of Lord Henry. Sybal Vane, Basil, James Vane, and Dorian all go to their deaths as a result of contact with art, degeneration, and vanity.

What could be the author’s intent for writing this story? Why would Pater be inclined to include it in his study of the Renaissance? It seems that inversion for the sake of “the desire for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life” is at work. The presence of a uranian love is not explicit, but implied: “Amis and Amile lay in one chamber without other companions” (11). The fact that the two children were miraculously restored to life after having their heads chopped off indicates a divine test, and approbation of an intense love between two men. Wilde, likewise, pushed the bounds of “conventional” love primarily by way of Basil’s feelings towards Dorian. It is obvious Basil’s feelings have a romantic side to them, bordering on an obsessive love that attempts to keep Dorian as his own possession.

Even the biblical story of Abraham (to which this story alludes) pales in its ability to shock people in its intent. Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own son demonstrates the traditional hierarchy of allegiance to which Christians adhere: God,

then man. Yet the story of Amis and Amile subverts this order, placing love between men above God and family. Perhaps the author's intent, in the end, was to bring to light the possibility that love between men (and between women) is an overlooked, if not shunned, yet integral part of God's plan for humanity. And perhaps the author (as well as Amile), in his or her willingness to portray the sacrifice of children to this end, shows the vehemence he and others have for proving the worthiness of loves such as these. Wilde, throughout his life, never denied the legitimacy of uranian love. At times, he touted it as the most beautiful form of human love.

In his treatment of Michelangelo, Pater is anxious to portray the master in two lights. First, he wishes that readers would see Michelangelo as one of a conflicted and controversial nature. Pater attempts, through biographical information and through Michelangelo's own writing, to paint him in what would be considered a scandalous light as seen by the Catholic Church.

Michelangelo's personality is seen, by Pater, as possessing greatness that is often associated with a rebellious nature. His lack of deference to the Pope, his "harsh, untempered incidents," and the "vehemence of [his youth's] passions" set the scene for his accomplishments. The story of his life implies homosexual activity: "the thought again and again arises that he is one of those who incur the judgment of Dante, as having 'wilfully lived in sadness'" (80). Pater assigns the task of "judgement" to Dante, when, in fact, Dante, in his writings, was merely recapitulating the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

Secondly, Pater wants to impress on us that Michelangelo took little part in the traditional beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. He sees Michelangelo as one who has risen above the “stale” conventions of the Church and is living on a higher plane of understanding than those devoted to its traditions. Pater places Michelangelo in the category of those in the Renaissance who were forming the “new Catholicism,” for “the Roman Church had passed beyond him, and he was a stranger to it” (89). But we can see countless incidences in his art and his writings a profound love for and belief in Christ.

Michelangelo’s work is characterized, by Pater, as having “sweetness and strength” and a “lovely strangeness” (73). His power as an artist is thought to go beyond “merely moral or spiritual greatness,” as if these traits should be placed in deference to an artist’s aesthetic capabilities. Michelangelo, according to Pater, is a great portrayer of creation, and he places man, as created, as one resurrected, but “always in strong contrast with the rough-hewn mass in which [creation} is kindled” (76).

Perhaps the master’s intent was to place man far above the natural world in which he found himself. But Pater, reaffirming Michelangelo’s work as possessing that brand of “strangeness,” sees man as usually portrayed without the adornment of gold, but with Michelangelo’s austerity, simplicity, and natural hues of nature. Nevertheless, Pater spends far too little time discussing the visual works of art of Michelangelo, choosing instead to focus on his poetry.

Pater's turning to Michelangelo's poetry shows an attempt to extract something of the true nature of the man and artist. Yet, in his perusal of the writings of Michaelangelo, Pater is hard pressed to find evidence of anything other than the traditional love he shares with Vittoria Colonna, an elderly widow and a growing tutelage under the immense influence of Dante. From Dante he learns "that for lovers, the surfeiting of desire ... is a state less happy than poverty with an abundance of hope" (88).

Yet Pater fails to point out that much of Michelangelo's poetry is a preoccupation with sin and redemption through the blood of Christ. The artist is always willing to place his talents and worldly cares in a subordinate position to his Christian faith:

Cause me to hate the value of the world
 And what I admired and honored in its beauty,
 So before death to taste eternal life. (161)

His final word on the value of art in relation to the divine is beautifully spoken here:

There's no painting or sculpture now that quiets
 The soul that's pointed toward that holy Love
 That on the cross opened Its arms to take us. (159)

Wilde must have felt some parallel feelings with Pater and, even Michelangelo. He too, had a propensity for "strangeness" in his art. Wilde pushed the bounds of conventional morality, while never denying the beauty of the world, of creation. Wilde, like Michelangelo struggled to expand the horizon of his genius

through art, while leaving behind Philistine ideals that hindered the free play of his imagination. Genius often coupled with rebellion; that is the seed of innovation, of individuality, and, many times, freedom. Yet, if Wilde was sympathetic to Pater's view of Michelangelo, he would nevertheless recognize this brand of "freedom" to be problematic.

Chapter Two: Beauty

Beauty holds a prominent position in the worlds of Catholicism and aesthetics. Catholic teaching has always displayed a sharp distinction between earthly and divine beauty. It often portrays earthly beauty as transient and imperfect. Earthly beauty can, however, lead one to think about the Divine beauty. St. Thomas claims the “Beauty of anything created is nothing else than a similarity of divine beauty participated in by things ... the existence of all things derives from divine beauty” (qtd. in Maritain 163). St. Louis De Montfort claims Christ’s “beauty and meekness surpass all that is lovely and gentle in heaven and on earth” (69). In fact, the scope of beauty, in all its manifold forms, enjoys a wide berth in Catholicism. The “ugly,” the humble, the outcast, death itself, all participate in the beauty of creation and truth. In fact, truth, from a Catholic standpoint, is the measuring stick by which the relative beauty of things is measured. Like Keats, the Church proclaims “truth is beauty and beauty truth.” They are inseparable because they participate in the divine activity. The relative degree of “truthfulness” in a person or object coincides with its beauty because it conforms more closely to the source of all truth.

The aesthetic movement “rested on the credo of ‘art for art’s sake’” (Harmon 7). Artists such as Gautier, Poe, and Baudelaire certainly showed a “reverence for beauty,” but “insisted on the separation of art and morality” (7). This separation placed the concept of beauty in a sort of insular position, away from any relation to the Catholic concept of the transcendental. Jacques Maritain, a Catholic philosopher, claims “when it comes to aesthetic beauty, we have to do with a province of beauty in

which senses and sense perception play an essential part, and in which, as a result, not all things are beautiful ... in the eyes of God, all things are beautiful" (164). This refusal to see the relation between God and beauty bears a certain resemblance to Dorian's destruction as a result of his own beauty and his perception of its purpose.

Beauty held a lofty position in Wilde's worldview and informed his determination to influence society at the fin de siècle. A brief look at the preface to his novel will give us a basis to examine Wilde's view of beauty and determine how it plays out in the book. With the sharp criticism aimed at his original version of The Picture of Dorian Gray published in Lippincott's, Wilde felt compelled to add a preface to clarify the intentions of his revised work (Wilde x). The preface, consisting of 23 aphorisms, begins with the deep connections between art and beauty: "The artist is the creator of beautiful things" (3). He holds in high esteem those who connect the beautiful with the divine: "They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty" (3). This thought alludes to Wilde's non-Decadent viewpoint of the function of beauty in art. Art, for Wilde, is not for its own sake, as the Decadents would have it, but a participation in the beauty of the Divine.

And yet, some critics see Wilde as one under the sway of the devil, his art a celebration of evil. Christopher Nassar, in Into the Demon Universe. A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde, says of Wilde: "he elevated the demonic to the status of a religion and tried to terminate the nineteenth century with a religion of evil, unholy worship of evil beauty" (74). This statement, though, contradicts Wilde's edicts on beauty. Furthermore, it overlooks the degenerative nature of Dorian's fall into self-

destruction that can be perceived as anything but beautiful, or as arising from a true appreciation of beauty. The novel doesn't so much glorify evil, but treats satirically those people who misunderstand and mishandle beauty. Beauty, as seen by Wilde, is ever-present, but fully elaborated in the novel; it holds its rightful place in the realm of mystery.

The concept of beauty is a driving force in The Picture of Dorian Gray. It wears manifold hats and has many uses. It is a commodity, is utilized for persuasion, is a means of obsession and a prime motivation for murder. But as I just stated, it is ultimately the lack of, or twisted perception of beauty that is at work. The three main characters test the truth and usefulness of beauty through their individual motivations, actions, indecision, and inaction. But the novel leaves open the question of what true beauty consists. The omniscient narrator should be heeded, for the narrator's exquisite eye for detail and impressions is evident. It (most of the time) holds a disinterested view of art that leaves it free to explore beauty's realm without self-seeking or bias.

Basil's views on beauty should be important for us; he is, after all, the only creator in the story. His role as artist naturally binds him to Wilde. In his letters, Wilde sees Basil as an extension of himself: "Basil Hallward is what I think I am" (Letters 352). As an artist, if he is true (and we must believe Basil is true in Wilde's eyes), he must, of all the main characters, hold the purest image and conception of what beauty consists. Norbert Kohl reiterates and expands on this idea in Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel: "The frequent substitution of the word

'painter' for the proper name, and the omission of various details from Hallward's life, show that Wilde's concern was to accentuate his status as an artist" (142).

Likewise, if Basil is truly the artist of the story, his life will naturally deprive him of other faculties, such as shrewdness. His creative innocence is, in a sense, martyred in the wake of greed, underhandedness, and self-indulgence.

Beauty, for Basil, is embodied to a high degree, in the person of Dorian Gray. His discovery of Dorian has changed his whole viewpoint on art: "he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passions of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek" (14). Ruskin's advocacy for the Romantic school and Pater's preference for the Greek influence are both at work in Basil (14). The beauty that is personified in Dorian, seems to exemplify what Wilde held as beautiful for much of his life. Dorian's innocence, initially, seemed to add to his charm, the beauty of his youth. Ironically, Lord Henry's advice to Dorian that he hold fast to his youth and exhaust all of it through experience makes Dorian lose his innocence in the end.

If Basil sees, in Dorian, a marvelous combination of schools, he, in his apprehension, also realizes the bitter war that these two discourses of ethics and aesthetics will play out in him. In this sense, he is like Wilde, ever trying to justify this amalgam that is present to his conscience. Ruskin had an unmistakable vision of the purpose of art. According to Joseph Pearce, "for Ruskin aestheticism in art was inseparable from morality which, in the case of Florentine art, had its roots in the

moral foundations of medieval Christendom” (33). But Ruskin’s affiliation with denominations of Christianity was ambiguous.

Ruskin’s relationship to Catholicism was tenuous. He spent time in monasteries, living with various orders of Catholic monks. He praised the monks who, being “the few feeble or reasonable persons left... who desired quiet, safety, and kind fellowship, got into cloisters” (Batchelor 208-9). But, like Wilde, he was mistrustful of the ascetic aspect of Catholicism, thinking it a perversion of the original Christian intent toward simple goodness. His sentiments were of a decidedly protestant turn. He bemoaned the Catholic concepts of Heaven and Hell, stating “there’s no measuring the poisoned influence of that notion of future reward on the mind of Christian Europe, in the early ages” (208). Perhaps Ruskin’s evangelical background was a source of his resentment of the Catholic faith.

It is possible that Ruskin’s early influence on Wilde caused him to theorize that renunciation is destructive. And yet, it is hard to imagine any form of Christianity that does not require some form of self-denial. Christ spoke of its indispensability. Through his suffering and death, He lived it. Those close to Him were forced to die for what they believed was the truth. These ideas fostered by Ruskin may have actually given Wilde an excuse to pursue further his compulsion to eschew self-denial and blindly follow experience for its own sake. Basil though, unlike Wilde, did not fall at the hands of temptation; he fell, being a moralist, to the hands of the tempted.

Basil’s new discovery presents a principal conflict between his life and his art. Dorian’s beauty and influence pose a stumbling block for Basil, as if dividing the

man from the artist. Upon first meeting Dorian, Basil feels a “curious sensation of terror” and a prescience that “Fate had in store for [him] exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows” (11). The ‘exquisite joys’ likely represent those joys implicit in the creation of art and the experience of love. “Exquisite sorrows” evoke a decadent mood in which Basil is claiming to be willing to suffer for the beauty he has discovered in Dorian. But more importantly, and along more decadent lines, Basil will find something exquisite, more beautiful in his suffering. Wilde foreshadows his own suffering and the effect it would have on him while in prison. Suffering became for Wilde a great source of aesthetic inspiration and perhaps even joy.

It is readily apparent that Basil’s affection for Dorian speaks quite strongly of a uranian love. Basil’s desire to “hide” his discovery of the man and his apprehension at the idea of showing the work “he put too much of himself into” resonates with Wilde’s characterization of homosexuality as “the love that dare not speak its name.” Basil further reiterates his secret feelings for Dorian: “without intending it, I have put into it some expression of all this curious idolatry of which, of course, I have never cared to speak to him” (15). Basil’s unquestioning assumption that he should not reveal the idolatry he holds for Dorian says something about his approach to art and life. First, the obligation he owes to his art supercedes any desires he may possess that could affect his art. Secondly, he seems to feel a moral responsibility to conceal his feelings for Dorian because he assumes they’re wrong, or, at least, they are unacceptable in his contemporary society.

Wilde's characterization of Basil as such may, ironically, speak of Wilde's repulsion by the Philistine attitude of the times. Basil's flaw, according to Wilde, may be his unwillingness to speak frankly about his feelings or more so, to act on them. Pater says we should "pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy" (236). Basil, like Lord Henry, "sins" by not acting on one of his strongest impulses. Wilde criticized Pater for these same sins of omission. But Basil's self-criticism is based equally on aesthetic grounds as on moral ones. Basil condemns himself based on what he, as an artist, knows about beauty:

An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Some day I will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray. (15)

It is difficult to ascertain Basil's true motivation for rejecting art that makes an autobiographical statement. For an artist, this is often an innate and necessary condition of his work. Subjectivity has contributed to the most profound works of art. Basil's anxiety about his feelings for Dorian must play some part. Perhaps he sees his love for Dorian as something outside the realm of beauty. It does not fit into his "abstract sense of beauty." He seems to be taking a moral stand against his work of art. He may be speaking for Wilde and his (Wilde's) continual anxiety and struggle to reconcile his art, morality, and feelings about men. Basil seems more conservative

than Pater in this respect, and Kohl would tend to agree: "In his view of life and art, Basil Hallward is a moralist and an idealist, whose values are essentially middle-class, consisting as they do of such criteria as 'honor' ... 'goodness' [and] 'purity'" (154). At the story's end, we do see Basil as a changed man, wishing to share his work, but, by this time, it had been destroyed by Dorian's own sins.

Cohen sees Basil's life as one that suffers from a fracture of personality, life and art (132). This disunity is precisely what is prescribed by Decadents: division between art and morality. Yet this division is the one thing that kills Basil in the end. It would seem that Wilde is trying to reiterate the fact that this separation, which Decadents have recommended, is deadly when practiced in reality. It forces the artist, a purveyor of beauty, to disregard an element of consciousness that is inextricably woven into the imagination of people. Part of Wilde's genius and legacy was his boldness in confronting taboo subjects in order to give birth to a manifestation of beauty in a new form; but he likely wasn't free of the anxiety and self-doubt surrounding it. Basil, though, like Pater, was hemmed in by his fears and reluctance to act in light of the threatening climate of the times.

Lord Henry Wotton has a more one-dimensional view of beauty. It is connected to youth, a very Hellenistic ideal: "Youth is the one thing worth having" (22). Yet Lord Henry gives little credence to the idea of beauty, placing it in a pigeon-hole with romantic connotations, unable to see the universality of it, but perceiving it as something intellectuals of his kind may exploit: "Genius lasts longer than Beauty. That accounts for the fact that we all take such pains to over-educate ourselves" (15).

His cynical nature tells Basil that he will soon tire of his interest in Dorian. Basil's is a "romance of art one might call it, and the worst of having a romance of any kind is that it leaves one so unromantic" (16). Lord Henry's dismissal of romance leaves him "free" but exiled. His is the sin of inactivity, of the dreadful deadness that ensues from cowardice in the face of life that perpetuates the Decadent "virtue" of ennui.

In this sense, Lord Henry's flippant attitude toward beauty makes him a caricature of Pater, a misguided disciple who confuses the law with the spirit. The misunderstood notion, by readers, that Lord Henry is the spokesman for Decadence proves Wilde's contention that art judges the reader. Those readers who hold Lord Henry up as a model of Decadence do not understand Pater and his ideas. In The Breviary of the Decadence, G.A. Cevalco quotes the negative criticism (although there was much praise) Pater offered on Dorian Gray: "A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism,' Pater carped. 'To lose the moral sense... the sense of sin and righteousness, as Mr. Wilde's heroes are bent on doing so speedily, as completely as they can, is to lose, or lower, organization, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development'" (78). The three main "heroes" of the novel do possess impressive and significant powers: Basil has artistic sensibilities, Lord Henry possesses intellectual prowess, and Dorian has physical beauty and a strong personality. Why is it that none of them has the ability to approach that ideal self-development that Pater prescribes? A Catholic response would be: the lack of grace through Christ that is necessary to overcome the moral defects of our nature. Without being explicit, Wilde is criticizing

Pater's aesthetic system because Epicureanism diminishes the concept of the weakness of humanity while touting the self-development that must be obtained by human effort.

In his satirical treatment of Wotton, Wilde shows that he had already moved beyond the precepts of Pater in order to synthesize his own aesthetic system of thought. Wilde, no doubt, held a certain respect for Pater's understanding of beauty, but stops at Pater's writings. He would later criticize the man for his unwillingness to live his life based on his aesthetic principles. This novel could be an attempt by Wilde to answer the question: What would be the outcome of carrying out the aesthetic thoughts put forward by Pater in The Renaissance?

Lord Henry goes beyond misunderstanding the Decadent aesthetic; he uses it for malicious purposes. Unlike Basil, he does not place what talents he possesses at the service of beauty, but rather mishandles them for his own gains: "He was so unlike Basil. They made a delightful contrast" (19). Lord Henry's is not a disinterested view of aesthetics; he uses his knowledge to influence Basil with cynicism, and Dorian, with flattery. He is even willing to reverse his epigram on Beauty and Genius to capture Dorian's impressionable mind: "You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr. Gray" ... "And Beauty is a form of Genius - is higher, indeed, than Genius as it needs no explanation"... "it has its divine right of sovereignty" (23).

Lord Henry's exposition on beauty is hedonistic at best, leaving no room for the perception or awareness of transcendental beauty that Dorian would most profit

from. It turns Dorian in upon himself, making him panic at the thought of possessing a type of beauty that is transient and short-lived: "You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it" ... "you will suffer horribly" (23). Lord Henry's statements cause the opposite of their intended effect. With Dorian's new knowledge, the innocence of the youth he might have enjoyed is lost. This episode has parallels with the story of Eden: a young man, at the prompting of another, loses his innocence in favor of some dark knowledge: "The moment I met you I saw that you were quite unconscious of what you really are" (23).

Lord Henry's influence sparks Dorian's "self-revelation," leading him to a narcissistic view of himself and a contempt for any beauty that transcends ordinary life: "I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die" (26). This statement has a nihilistic sentiment to it, anti-Catholic, anti-Christian. To seal his fate, Dorian makes somewhat of an anti-prayer, or pact with the devil, an incantation. After feeling that the painting will, in the future, "mock" him, Dorian makes his pact: "The hot tears welled into his eyes; he tore his hand away, and, flinging himself onto the divan, he buried his face in the cushion, as though praying" (26). We know later what prayer it is that Dorian makes. He wishes the painting, art, a representation of beauty, to bear the burden, the punishment of his sins. He inverts the purposes of art and life. Dorian wants art to be responsible for his sins while he retains the "artifice" of beauty that hides the true nature of his soul.

Dorian's concept of beauty is further convoluted by his influence at the hands of the "yellow book" which some critics believe to be patterned after À Reboours. In fact, Wilde mentions the book in response to questions surrounding the inspiration for the yellow book: "The book in Dorian Gray is one of the many books I have never written, but it is partly suggested by Huysmans's À Reboours, which you will get at any French bookseller's" (Letters 313). Wilde places the discovery of the book, sent to Dorian by Lord Henry, at the same time Dorian receives the newspaper containing the death notice of Sybil Vane. This concurrence of events signify Lord Henry's attempts to divert Dorian's attention from the moral implications of his actions. Now Dorian can relieve himself from responsibility by viewing people and occurrences from a merely aesthetic viewpoint.

Here, Dorian discovers, with great excitement, the strange combination of the decadent and the divine: "It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him" (97). The writer's style is florid and enchanting, mesmerizing Dorian with its suggestive prose that attempts to mix beauty, degeneration and belief: "The life of the senses was described in the terms of mystical philosophy. One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some mediaeval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner. It was a poisonous book" (98).

This section relates, in a very concrete manner, to A Reboours, with Des Essientes's excitement at the combination of shame and piety. It is difficult to determine Wilde's intent with his often-used term, poison. The word, when

referencing this combination of two apparent opposites, must belong to the paradoxical sphere which Wilde used as his forum to simultaneously affirm and question binaries whose elements he had not completely reconciled.

Richard Pine argues, “paradox ... is of necessity baffling and provocative, because it denies the existence of a shared referential context” (25). But sin and virtue do actually share a definite context: they both belong to the discourse of morality. St. Thomas says, “The relation of sin to virtue is that of an evil act to a good habit” and “in voluntary events sin always involves the corruption of the power of the soul” (v25, 71, 4). Wilde’s intent, in utilizing paradox in this context, though, could be to question whether those activities traditionally labeled “sinful” are really harmful to the person and others. Along with shame, Wilde attempts to deconstruct “poison,” stripping it of the impact of its meaning, or even reversing it to connote a sort of balm or solution. He humors the Philistine obsession with unchanging rules pertaining to right and wrong while sending a wink and a nod to those who desire an expanded view of those things that may partake in beauty.

And yet, Dorian’s beauty remains, while the protagonist in the “yellow book” has a “sudden decay of a beauty that had once, apparently, been so remarkable” (99). Ironically, Des Esseintes, of A Reboours, does not meet destruction at the story’s end. He embarks on a new life with the courage, and prayer, to make a new start. Dorian, regardless of his ageless beauty, ends up destroying himself because of his misuse of beauty.

James Sloan Allen, in "The Use and Abuse of Aestheticism," provides a compelling depiction of the progression of aesthetic thought, from Gautier to Pater to Wilde. These three men are considered responsible for the concept that art and morality should not, do not, live together in the sphere of art. Like Wilde, Gautier "was writing a manifesto against the new, acquisitive, moralistic, and to him tasteless middle class and so he needed to resort to outlandish assertions" (24). Sloan claims "Pater believed that nothing makes [the] flame of consciousness burn more brightly than the 'sensations' or 'impressions' of beauty and that nothing gives us more of these than art" (24). These two men undoubtedly were driving home the "art for art's sake" argument.

Conversely, according to Sloan, Wilde was claiming, through his novel, that aesthetics had usurped the place of ethics, to its own demise. This is perhaps because of the divergent influences at work in Wilde's work and world views: "Oscar Wilde learned to revere art from the moralistic Victorian art critic John Ruskin as well as from the amoral aesthetes Pater and Gautier" (25).

He calls The Picture of Dorian Gray "the classic cautionary tale, laced with Wilde's usual scintillating irreverent wit" (25). As we already know, Dorian obtains his aesthetic ideals from the "cynical Lord Henry Wotton, philosopher, aesthete, and wag." Lord Henry places beauty above morals, and this is part of Sloan's main argument. Sloan claims Lord Henry, when referencing beauty, "means the ripe physical beauty of visual 'appearances' because, he says, 'the true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible'" (26) This view of beauty, as stated before,

would be, according to the Catholic faith, the most primary, most superficial view of beauty.

Furthermore, Sloan rightly argues that “Dorian Gray’s portrait does not decay from age alone. It decays from Dorian’s corrupting love of beauty and pleasure” (25). While beauty has its rightful place in man’s enjoyment of the world, it can be destructive if placed above morals and reason. Sloan sees the moral of Wilde’s novel as “quite conventional – namely that evil acts corrupt the soul, as in Dante’s Hell. But Dorian did not succumb to evil for conventional reasons. At Lord Henry’s urging, he had acted on a high-minded ideal – the love of beauty” (26). Finally, Sloan’s main point is “about the love of beauty and art as the moral life itself.” He feels “this means it is about how aesthetics can become ethics” (26). This “religion of art” is the trap which ensnared Wilde. Even when he wrote De Profundis, his most overtly Christian work, he portrayed Christ more as a poet/artist than a divine person.

I would challenge Sloan’s point that it is really not purely Dorian’s “love of beauty” that destroys him, but, rather, his wrongful, or misguided love of beauty that brings him to his demise. Dorian’s idea of beauty is corrupted by Lord Henry, by the idolatry of Basil, and by his own narcissistic self-love. The idea of transcendental love is not really touched upon to any great length in the novel. Beauty is a fundamental attribute of the Divine, but Dorian, in all his exposure to aesthetics, seems to have gleaned nothing in the way of appreciation of transcendental beauty. Maybe the obvious absence of this type of beauty, which Wilde was surely accustomed to, speaks for itself.

In a letter to the editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, Wilde (like Basil) gives us a clue to the type of beauty an artist pursues: “The artist seeks to realize in a certain material his immaterial idea of beauty, and thus to transform an idea into an ideal (CL 503). Also, “the artist has no other object in making things” (302). This philosophy is really in opposition to Dorian’s and Lord Henry’s views of beauty. For Dorian, beauty is an attribute to be bargained with, for Lord Henry, a commodity to be pursued and exploited.

Could this be Wilde’s rejection of Pater’s representation of beauty? It would appear so. Pater speaks of a certain wisdom: “Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most” (239). Pater, like Dorian and Lord Henry, has placed aesthetics in the place of ethics. Wilde’s prerequisite “immaterial *idea* of beauty” comes from a consciousness far removed and more contemplative than Pater’s “moments as they pass.” Wilde himself said, “There is nothing sane about the worship of beauty” (Brown 45).

Jacques Maritain’s portrayal of the relationship between art and beauty comes closer to Wilde’s idea of this “immaterial idea of beauty.” Maritain sees beauty as something above and beyond the realm of art, but something to which the artist still aspires. It is not dependent on experience, or encapsulated in its entirety in art. Maritain relates poetry (used in the general sense as the innate activity of the artist) “to the free (nonconceptual) life of the intellect and the free creativity of the spirit” (168). Beauty transcends all thought, impression, passion. It is the “necessary *correlative and end beyond any end of poetry*” (170).

Wilde, being a great artist, had a sense for the beautiful. But his pursuit of it was done more by elimination than affirmation. It was not entirely discovered in the perfect rendering of a painting or a wonderfully written lyrical verse. At this point in his artistic development, he was incapable of grasping it fully. Rather, by way of the foolishness of Lord Henry, the gullible avarice of Dorian, and the selfishness of Basil, Wilde provides for his readers a perspective of where beauty does *not* lie, so that we may travel with him beyond the ruins he has left behind and pursue truth in unknown lands.

Chapter Three: Art and Ethics

Wilde's love for art and his preoccupation with ethics is what set the unstable scene for the troubling dichotomy in his work, The Picture of Dorian Gray. Wilde's vacillation between the importance, or lack thereof, of ethics in relation to art, would change throughout his life. It seems, judging from his works, that ethics, in fact, played a more integral role in his later works, particularly in De Profundis. At the time of Dorian Gray, though, Wilde was still religiously ambiguous, or, rather, willing to eschew norms of morality in favor of discovering new experiences at the risk of moral treachery. His "youthful indiscretions" would find justification in the works of Pater and Huysman. The placement of aesthetics at the pinnacle of human activity by these men made it easy for Wilde to postpone the moral repercussions of his actions because he was still experimenting with the his life as art.

After his time at Oxford, Wilde took a decidedly public turn away from Ruskin and his deep connection to art and ethics: "We of the younger school have made a departure from the teachings of Mr. Ruskin, - a departure definite and different and decisive ... for the keystone of his aesthetic system is ethical always" (Nassaar 64). As much as Wilde attempted to separate himself from Ruskin, he was unable to remove the ethical from his own work, particularly Dorian Gray. Although not a typical Romantic artist, Basil does employ moral considerations when refusing to display his own work. Wilde's intentions, though, might have been to illustrate that Basil's actions are not really ethical, but stem more from cowardice. He doesn't want to be found out. Regardless, Basil does embody the artist unwilling to remove his life

as a man from his life as an artist. At the story's end, Basil's convictions will lead to his death, as if a martyr. Dorian, in his murderous state, cannot tolerate Basil's admonition to turn from his deadly and sinful life.

Ruskin's aesthetic philosophy had some legitimacy because it, like Basil, refused to accept the artificially-induced separation of art and morality. Julia Prewitt Brown skillfully delineates Ruskin's artistic ambitions as an attempt to "overcome the ethical-aesthetic duality by means of Christian doctrine, arguing that in the Christian art of the Middle Ages we find the perfect expression of ethical truth: the savage, changeable, natural imperfection of human life opposed to the immutable perfection of God" (41). This definition could find some sympathy in Wilde's novel, with its preoccupations with and depictions of an irresolute and fallible cast of characters. But, if there is a Christian moral, it is a convoluted one. There is a stark absence of the "immutable perfection of God," with the exception of the omniscient, disinterested narrator who perceives the true beauty that is imperceptible to the novel's characters.

Ruskin's belief in the realistic function of art, in its ability to portray humankind and its relation to the divine, is far different from Pater's more idealistic and sensuous sentiments on the function of art. Yet Pater's treatise on aestheticism is not a one-dimensional ode to sensualism, as Brown contends: "Pater was never able to circumscribe a reality he conceived in empirical terms only. In the end, art is no different in essence from any other sensations" (53). In defense of Pater, with the limitations he imposed on himself, one should bear in mind the spirit in which the

conclusion of The Renaissance was written: Pater, with his love for beauty, was likely interested in using the senses as a means to discover true beauty, and that which may exist beyond the realm of the senses. His interest in the “scientific” discovery of momentary reality was more of a backlash toward the religious systems of thought he found outmoded or cumbersome.

According to Ellman, Ruskin believed “artists could display their morality by fidelity to nature, and by eschewing self-indulgent sensuality” (48). These two parameters are far from the conditions that surround the work of Wilde’s novel, yet the effects of refusing these “laws” are plain to see at novel’s end. Ruskin, as well, resisted the aesthetic movement of the time because of its willingness to allow for an art devoid of morals. He felt of the Renaissance (in a very decadent turn of phrase by Ellman), “the more the Renaissance bloomed, the more it decayed” (48). This blooming could connote nothing more than the celebration of those things considered immoral from a Christian sense. Ruskin had Catholic leanings, but he never fully converted. He lived in a monastery in Assisi, but, like Wilde through much of his life, “refused to be converted on the grounds that he was more Catholic than the Roman Catholics” (Ellman 53).

Julia Prewitt Brown claims “Ruskin’s Christian theology of art is likewise conjoined to Pater’s Pagan theology of experience through much of Wilde’s later work” (36). But she fails to realize, or admit, that the “conjoining” of these two elements is of more an antagonistic character. Particularly, in The Picture of Dorian Gray, this relationship ends with disastrous consequences. Throughout the novel,

Dorian vacillates between reveling in self-indulgence and repenting of the circumstances in which he finds himself. Basil is destroyed, but not by his own misdeeds, per se, but rather from the wrath of Dorian, who has become murderous from the heaping up of sins he has accomplished in his life. Basil's conservatism places him closer to the school of Ruskin, but his heart is in places that conventional society of the times would find questionable. Overall, he definitely adheres less to the "pagan theology" of Pater than Lord Henry or Dorian.

Basil's perception of the painting, and therefore art, changes from the story's beginning to the end. Early on, Basil tells Lord Henry his theory of the autobiographical nature of art: "every painting that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter"(10). Basil's reluctance to display the painting stems from his shame at the idolatry he holds for Basil. Therefore, the love he holds for Dorian is evident somehow in the painting. Homosexual overtones are stronger in the original Lippincott's version. The line, "I knew that if I spoke to Dorian I would become absolutely devoted to him," is omitted in the final version.

Basil's decision to display Dorian's portrait later in the story coincides with his admission to Dorian of his feelings for him. Again, the Lippincott's version reveals a stronger level of desire in Basil: "I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow I had never loved a woman ... I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly" (232). Yet Basil has come to realize that his feelings while looking at the realistic portrait were personal, and not inherent in the work. Basil comes to a more objective understanding of art: "it is a

mistake to think that the passion one feels in creation is ever really shown in the work one creates. Art is always more abstract than we fancy” (90). Basil is learning about the mysterious connection between art and reality. But it is hard to accept his idea about passion and art.

There seems to be some irony, or paradox, in Basil’s newfound aesthetic beliefs. Without passion, the artist would have little to create with. There is a sadness to what Basil says, as if he, too, has lost some of the passion that drove him to paint. Basil appears defeated in his stance. Here we see, again, an artist’s conflict: should one renounce one’s “sins” even if they cause an artist to lose contact with those unseen forces that inspire and drive his work? Is the artist exempted from resisting passions if he or she needs them to create under a new emotion? Wilde himself admitted that Bosie was a catalyst for his writing as well as a curse. How would the absence of Lord Alfred Douglas have affected Wilde’s work? If Wilde stayed true to his wife and children, would he have created all of his literary masterpieces? Basil’s newfound desire to begin repainting Dorian demonstrates his willingness to express himself again, perhaps at a cost, but his moment has passed.

On the other hand, Basil is making an important, mature point about the limitations of art. He realizes that all of a man’s passions may be infused into his art, but, art, being an imperfect medium is incapable of embodying and transmitting, *fully*, all of the inner worlds of the artist. Although art can lead one to *feel* the sublimest of sensations and emotions, it will always remain an abstraction in the realm of our

consciousness. Art can participate in, but not substitute for, life. It is not the end of all men's strivings, although it has the potential to point the way, to educate us.

In the Catholic tradition, art has an important role, albeit a subservient one. The Church has continually struggled to delineate between artistic activity and other human activities. These differences, according to the Church, must be considered if the artist wishes to create without negating or destroying the life of his or her soul. Conversely, (and this is the sticky part), St. Thomas, in his analysis of human activities, realized that art has, *in a sense*, amoral characteristics. St. Thomas delineates between the different "habits" of man, one of them being the habit of making (as in art) and the other habit of doing (moral activity). Jacques Maritain, following the lines of Aquinas, said:

The good that art pursues is not the good of the human will but the good of the very artifact. Thus, art does not require, as a necessary precondition, that the will or the appetite should be undeviating with respect to its own nature and its own-human or moral-ends and dynamism, or in the line of human destiny. Oscar Wilde was but a good Thomist when he wrote: 'The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose. (50-1)

Maritain realized, though, that a neat separation of art and morality, is not so simple when looked at through the lense of human experience: "the trouble is that in actual existence we do not deal with essences [art, for example] taken in themselves, but with essences embodied in concrete reality. ... For once a man is through, his art is through also" (51). Likewise, Maritain also reflects the teachings of the Church when

he claims, like Basil, that art, holds no supremacy over prudence, and the artist who makes a god of art will inevitably betray those sensibilities whose aspect was originally intended for goodness and truth above the operation of the senses used in art.

Wilde demonstrates his debt to Ruskin because he was incapable of writing Dorian's story without a decidedly moralistic bent. Richard Haslam finds helpful Donald Lawler's observation of Wilde's failed attempt to make his numerous revisions of the first version of the story, with its "extremely obvious moral," "subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect" (qtd. in Haslam 435):

In order to achieve this purpose, Wilde would have had to alter radically the basic conception of the story. Once allow the argument that Dorian's portrait is the emblem of his soul and that its disfiguration acts as an absolute moral and spiritual norm, and the moral is inescapable. (Haslam 307)

Furthermore, Haslam rightly sees that Wilde likely didn't want to remove the moralistic element from the story, but wished to meld the two. His speculation on an alternative ending for the text, one that Wilde could have easily mustered, would change the whole tone of the work: "Imagine how differently the novel would read if Wilde had chosen to add a final chapter in which Lord Henry reacted to the news of Dorian's death - Wilde could have thereby completely subordinated the moralizing dimension and vindicated aestheticism" (309).

The problem with Haslam's proposition is that the aestheticism portrayed in this novel is a flawed version of that developed by the likes of Pater and Huysman.

Lord Henry is not the “perfect” aesthete. In terms of his artistic bent, he really has none. His cynicism towards art and life negate any sincerity toward the creation or appreciation of art. He does not take the “art for art’s sake” stance because he holds no sympathy with artists. Wotton sees that a good artist “lives the poetry that he cannot write. The others write the poetry that they dare not realize” (48). According to Wotton, artists cannot obtain perfection in life, only the passive observer who is shielded from life’s treacheries.

The only thing resembling art in Wotton’s life is his spurious influence over Dorian, and even he (Wotton) denounces influence as “immoral from the scientific point of view” (19). Some of his maxims closely resemble those of Pater and Wilde: “Be always searching for new sensations ... nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul ... the true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible” (22-3). But he doesn’t live these maxims; he uses them to charm and cajole Dorian.

But the epitome of Lord Henry’s view of the relationship between life and art is his reaction to Sibyl Vane’s death by suicide. His most grievous action is his diabolical swaying of Dorian’s viewpoint after her death. Dorian’s innate impulse to grieve and feel remorse is upended by Lord Henry’s artificial take on the events surrounding her life: “It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play Some one has killed herself for love of you. I wish that I had ever had such an experience” (80). By carrying the tenets of aestheticism to their most ridiculous limits, and by ending the story on a strong moral event of Dorian dying as

a result of killing his conscience, Wilde has exposed an element of the Decadent movement: not so much the tenets of Decadence, but those people who misinterpret it and exploit its attractiveness for their own selfish ambitions. Wilde was saying that the artistic life is possible and fruitful if only lived with certain moral parameters in mind.

The central motif of The Picture of Dorian Gray is, of course, the portrait of Dorian. Its connection to the destruction of Dorian and Basil speaks of Wilde's realization and attempt to impress the impact of art on society, for good or ill. In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde, through his character, Gilbert, demonstrates, in a paradoxical and satirical way, where art's importance lies: "It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence" (qtd. In Brown 52). This quote speaks nicely of the use to which Dorian put his portrait: to be a "shield" for all of the "sordid perils" which he would subjected himself to. In the light of the novel, is the statement true or false? Both. Art is important, but to misunderstand and misuse it can lead one on a perilous journey.

Dorian's conception of art does not materialize until the appearance of Lord Henry Wotton. He is a blank canvas ("Let me think. Or, rather, let me try not to think") and Wotton will be the painter: ("[Dorian] was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him [... Lord Henry's words had] a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of flute") (20-1). Wotton's flattery of Dorian leads him to a level of vanity that will drive him to subvert the purpose of art, placing

it at his service to exploit others while he pursues relentlessly all extreme sensual experience. He cannot follow the aesthetic way of self-development because Wotton's words have swayed him (Wilde 49).

Dorian's misunderstanding of art turns his love affair with Sibyl Vane into a debacle. The deadly mindset he takes (at the suggestion of Lord Henry) is to refuse to see the real Sibyl Vane in favor of perceiving her as Rosalind or Juliet, an actress, apart from reality. In this way, Dorian can entertain his fancies without developing as a man in love with a real person and the complex and difficult realities of life. Sibyl, conversely, turns the table on Dorian, refusing the artifice of acting in order to live a true life of love. Sibyl ruins his "play" and Dorian destroys her world. Sibyl's willingness to die for what she believes is an act of despair, but signifies the gravity of her conception of life. Dorian's ability to convert his sorrow and brief remorse to just another aesthetic experience puts another dagger in the heart of Decadence by Wilde. It is further aggravated by Wotton's advice: "The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died [...] She was less real than they (the parts) are" (82).

Both Sibyl's and Basil's deaths reflect on Dorian's perception of art and its relation to his own life. Christopher Nassaar sees Dorian's murder of Basil as symbolic of the passing of one aesthetic movement to another: Pre-Raphaelite art to decadent art (66). Basil, as depicted earlier in the thesis, represents Ruskin in that he sees the moral element in artistic activity and is shocked at the presence of evil. Says Nassaar: "When the soul reveals itself as overwhelmingly evil, Ruskin, or the Pre-Raphaelite artist, can only shrink away in horror and yield to the decadent, who can

accept this vision and wring satisfaction from it" (66). Ruskin's "shrinking away" makes sense when viewed in light of his comments about the evils of renunciation. His disbelief in the legitimacy of suffering will only take him so far along the spectrum of all things human.

The Catholic artist, on the other hand, is willing to suffer evil elements of the world in order to depict them truthfully. Here lies the fundamental difference, which Wilde would come to understand in prison, between decadent art and "Catholic" art (art rendered by Catholics, not necessarily about religious topics): what Catholic artists are willing to suffer for their faith, decadents are inclined to turn to their advantage or enjoyment at the risk of their own destruction. Regardless, man can enter into that sphere of art considered evil and not be harmed. As Jacques Maritain states, "All the troubles of the time may enter the soul of a man, and be mastered by creative innocence-that is the miracle of poetry. And they may enter the soul of man, and be mastered by the innocence of the heart-that is the miracle of sainthood. In both cases much suffering is involved" (393).

Wilde's inability, or unwillingness (whatever the case may be), as stated in this paper's thesis, to meld the two discourses of art and ethics, in what he called "ethical beauty," was, according to Haslam, "unattainable in fiction or in life due to the prevailing generic and social conventions." The social constraints were, to be sure, a reality of the author's times. He was no stranger to those forces that conflict with the inner necessity of individuals. Yet one might think Wilde, through his "free and superior" medium of art would be able to conjure a cohesive tale, much like

Pater's retelling of the French story of Amis and Amile. But his artistic instincts did not lead him that way. His Catholic leanings wouldn't permit it either.

Perhaps Wilde's "failure" was just another mode of expression, or art. And this expression may be nothing other than Wilde's constant struggle to reconcile these two apparent opposites that would dog him throughout his life. He could not, like Pater, dismiss the question of morality and its inseparability from the workings of art. Recent scholarly work has attempted not to meld the two discourses, but argue that Wilde was trying to hold up two contrasting viewpoints simultaneously. Julia Prewitt Brown argues "that throughout his career Wilde maintained a paradoxical interrelatedness of opposites that was no mere synthesis" (xv). She is a bit shortsighted and presumptuous, though, when speaking of Wilde, when she argues, "only in art, wherein spirit is embodied in the sensuous, do the ideal and empirical realms realize themselves and become 'true'" (xv). With this statement, Brown chooses to avoid that essential place where spirit and sense come together: humanity. It is through all human activity in its manifold forms that "truth" shapes our reality. In fact, humanity in all its manifold forms, has succeeded, more than art, in melding the spirit and the senses.

Neither Dorian nor Basil, while using the artwork as a shield of sorts, reached any level of perfection. If the mishandling of art is the culprit, then there remains an ethical question as to what faults contributed to their downfalls. Basil's conception of art is important. Idealistically, Basil (like Wilde) feels there are two main events in the world that bring forth great impact: "the appearance of a new medium for art, and

the second is the appearance of a new personality for art also” (14). Basil discovered a new medium and personality in Dorian Gray. Basil’s dilemma, as discussed earlier, with regard to the value of his art, has much to do with the intention with which he created it. He sees, initially, that putting too much of himself into the work is a sort of aesthetic sin. He has not been disinterested, or free from self-seeking, until the end when it is too late. St Thomas would agree with this thought, for he sees that “art is nothing else but ‘the right reason about certain works to be made.’” (II,I, 57 article 3). Dorian’s failure is his loss of the moral sense. This, in turn, keeps him from seeking the perfection of self-development.

Chapter Four: Catholic Elements

To attribute every moral sentiment, occurrence, or struggle in The Picture of Dorian Gray to the Catholic faith would be unfair as well as untrue. There exists an area of plurality between Catholicism, Anglicanism, and other Christian denominations. Any moral aspects of Wilde's novel could find analogies within the philosophies of any one of these denominations. But many of the forces present that drive characters' actions and determine the outcomes of those actions have a resonance with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Likewise, Dorian, like Des Esseintes, seeks experience in the outward signs of the Catholic faith. Additionally, Dorian's sporadic bouts with guilt lead him to ponder forgiveness within the Catholic Church. Although Dorian never finds complete solace within the Church, it is significant that Wilde chose to depict his struggle in this light. Wilde (in his letters), along with other Decadent writers (Huysmans, Beardsley) would struggle with, and eventually succumb to joining the Church. I believe these common themes we find between Dorian, Wilde, and The Catholic church justify analysis.

Michael Buma's recent article, "The Picture of Dorian Gray, or, the Embarrassing Orthodoxy of Oscar Wilde," like Joseph Pearce's The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde, is a contemporary revisitation of a well-worn critical approach to the novel: Dorian Gray is a classic morality tale that is couched in the aesthetic flavor of the fin-de-siècle. Considering Wilde's surprised reaction to the initial negative criticism of the novel, and the subsequent Preface added to the second published version of the novel, Burma makes for a convincing case that Wilde was "masking"

the moral element of Dorian Gray in order to keep his stature as artist. Wilde admits a problem while creating the work was “keeping the extremely obvious moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect” (Letters 478). This attempt at subordination could serve two purposes: to preserve Wilde’s outward personality of the aesthetic Dandy, and to subvert the popularity of Decadence by submerging its criticism within a tale colored with aesthetic images.

Buma’s remarks on Wilde’s preface and his letters to newspaper editors coincide with Wilde’s dilemma. He claims, with good reason, “Wilde’s suggestion in the St. James’ Gazette letter that the ‘moral’ of Dorian Gray—‘all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment’—is a massive understatement of the novel’s essentially orthodox morality” (19). Buma sees that “what the ‘Preface’ does, in effect, is to articulate Wilde’s version of the ‘art for art’s sake’ credo, distancing the work itself from the standards of what Dorian, parroting Lord Henry, calls ‘middle class virtue’” (19). The problem with Buma’s proposition, though, is that it sets up a polarity of art and ethics, ignoring the fact that the interplay between morals and aesthetic effect in any work of art contains a mysterious dimension where overlapping of the two occurs, and there is a difficulty in determining if an effect is truly artistic or moralistic, or both. There is plenty of material in the novel to suggest a veering away from “orthodox morality.” If there is an orthodox message, it is couched in a satirical method that questions commonly held moral thought, particularly within the context of middle class society of Wilde’s time.

Wilde's "Preface" to his book strikes some similar chords with St. Thomas Aquinas and his views on the nature of art, the nature of morals, and the relationship between the two. One statement of Wilde's in his "Preface" is: "The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium" (3). Here Wilde is trying to make the distinction, one overlooked by readers, between the content of a literary work, the intention the author has when choosing subject matter, the relative merit of the work, and the moral life of the author. These are all separate, but interrelated, facets of literary art. The point Wilde is trying to make is that art has its own "morality" or rules, just as the life of men and women has its own morality or rules of right behavior. A "good book" is not the same as a "good person." They are both judged by rather dissimilar standards. Wilde understood that Victorian critics had the false notion that art carried with it a certain degree of morality, or lack thereof. This is a tricky area. Although some works may truly sway people toward dissolution, other works may speak of evil things in a neutral manner, or even as a catalyst toward good.

Some thoughts by Aquinas have application here: "The distinction between doing and making implies the distinction between morality and art" (vol.1, p16). More specifically, there are "virtues of the practical reason ... moral prudence ... which directs our doings so that the ends of human life (happiness) may be secured ... and practical wisdom ... art, which ensures that the things we produce are well-made" (vol 1 p68-9). Art is not good or bad in the moral sense, so much as it is good

in terms of pleasing or stimulating the mind of the beholder. People with questionable morals can create works of artistic merit. People of good moral character can create awful works of art. Wilde's intention, or desire, was for the public to judge his work, not judge him as a man.

Ironically, what Wilde was unable to stop in his work, without being untrue to his art, was the Catholic understanding of the destructive life and outcomes of Decadence. His regret was that the subject matter, good and evil, overshadowed any artistic statements he wished to put forth. Dorian Gray, first and foremost, follows Catholic (and other Christian) theology, because it never loses the elements of good and evil. There is no character in the book that denies the existence of good and evil although many refuse to pursue the good. All choices they make are in accord with a fully informed conscience with respect to the relative goodness or evil of their acts.

Lord Henry Wotton's skewed aesthetic sensibilities are twisted for the precise reason that he denies the value of virtuous living in favor of enjoying aesthetic pursuits at the cost of his soul. His obvious moral depravity makes one question Wilde's artistic decisions; there is little subtlety about the man in terms of his character. Lord Henry's contrast to Basil seems too clear cut and obvious. Lord Henry has a sincere disdain for the Church: "In the Church they don't think. A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen" (9). His marriage is a farce: "the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties" (10). Lord Henry has no need of morality: "Conscience and cowardice are really the same things, Basil" (11). He

has no need for family or belief in human dignity: "My elder brother won't die, and my younger brothers seem never to do anything else ... I don't suppose ten percent of the proletariat live correctly" (13). Although Basil sees him as satirical, the readers realize just how sinister and evil he can become.

Lord Henry's great sin, of course, is the corruption of Dorian. His "seduction" of Dorian in the studio can be compared with the devil and Adam and Eve in the Garden (Buma 20). The opening scene at the studio calls to mind the idyllic nature of Eden: "The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac" (7). Basil, unknowingly, has a presentiment of what Lord Henry will do to the young innocent: "He has a simple and beautiful nature ... don't try to influence him. Your influence would be bad" (17).

Lord Henry twists Pater's philosophy, using the concept of self-development as the rationale for rejecting Catholic virtues of fear of God, temperance, and self-denial. He calls "the terror of God" the "secret of religion" and denounces "self-denial that mars our lives" (20). What's more, Lord Henry audaciously prescribes sin as a means to remove remorse: "The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification" (20). To further persuade Dorian on to self-love, Lord Henry strikes fear into Dorian with his "strange panegyric on youth, his terrible warning of its brevity" (25). "Sin is the only real colour element left in modern life" (28). What Lord Henry is trying to sell to Dorian is a form of narcissistic self-love that in essence denies all other legitimate forms of love, such as charity. It is an

unsound philosophy that will steer a man from his true ends and away from any lasting form of happiness or freedom.

Man, according to Aquinas, has a final end to which he should strive: Happiness. Happiness is found through unity with the Godhead through the mediator Jesus Christ. Lord Henry removes this from the equation, the true pursuit of beauty, divine beauty, making Dorian turn in upon himself, forget his God-given destination, and seek temporal, narcissistic solutions to ease his terrors of eternity. Dorian makes a Faustian pact with the devil, wishing that the painting would take the sins of his own soul upon itself. But Dorian cannot blame Lord Henry for his fateful decision, because he, as 14th century mystic St. Catherine of Sienna writes (from the voice of the Father), has acted with his own free will: "They have, with the hand of free choice, encrusted their heart in a diamond rock that can never be shattered except by [Christ's] blood" (31).

The love affair between Dorian and Sibyl demonstrates an interesting interplay between aesthetic principles and human love, where charity becomes the victim. Dorian's moral sense is initially fostered and reinforced in his relationship with Sibyl Vane, but only in a superficial sense. Her good nature temporarily turns Dorian away from the evil that Lord Henry relentlessly seeks to corrupt him with: "Her trust make me faithful, her belief makes me good. When I am with her, I regret all that you have taught me" (63). But Dorian's love for Sibyl is colored by Lord Henry's influence. It is premised on false values, aesthetic ones. His love for her is false precisely because he judges her as an artifact, a symbol, not a person. Ironically,

Dorian's love for Sibyl is what wakes her from the false aesthetic dream from which he refuses to leave. She tells Dorian, "you had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection" (70). Her newfound grasp of reality, in turn, makes Dorian face a world he doesn't want to see: "You have killed my love," he muttered." It is true. By her actions, Sibyl has killed Dorian's love, his deluded, false love. Sibyl's death is troublesome though. Her death by suicide is an act of despair. Although the human love she bears for Dorian, in a sense, conquers his own misguided love based on self-obsession, Sibyl allows her thwarted love to turn from the Divine, to which her eyes should be turned in order to reconcile her loss and anguish.

It is interesting that Dorian's conscience, so remote from his actions and evil philosophizing, will never leave him. It is portrayed as a separate entity, somehow independent of the man himself. The painting reinforces this idea, that as much as Dorian changes his perceptions and beliefs, there exists an independent, objective view of the true man he has become. At one point, "His own soul was looking out at him from the canvas and calling him to judgement" (93). At other times "He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul" (99). This type of duality is reminiscent of Ellis Hanson's take on Huysmans, but contradicts the scenario of sin and soul finding some type of cohabitation in the "bosom of the Deity." The war is real, raging, and there is a definite winner and loser in the end. Wilde makes no pretense of demonstrating that Dorian is reaching a higher state of self-development by his dalliance with evil.

Additionally, at this point of the narrative after Sibyl's death, Dorian is portrayed as having acquired the subtle and essential aspects of Pater's philosophy of Decadence: "He sought to elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles, and find in the spiritualizing of the senses its highest realization [...] a new spirituality, of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant characteristic" (101). Dorian is not merely a dupe and puppet in Lord Henry's control. These statements characterize him as having become thoughtful, intentional, and conscious of the implications of his beliefs. Like Ruskin, he has a vehement opposition to mortification: "Of the asceticism that deadens the senses, of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it [Dorian's scheme] was to know nothing" (101). Dorian's rejection of self-denial signifies, or coincides, with Wilde's own attempt to link the sacred with the sensual. He perceives the denial of the senses as having a deadening effect on the soul. Wilde, being an artist, would certainly sympathize with this view because his own access to beauty would of necessity come through the portal of the senses.

Dorian's sporadic interest in Catholicism is primarily superficial: "certainly the Roman ritual had always a great attraction for him ... but he never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system" (103). What would have become of the man had he truly converted to the Church? Wilde did not take this route with the plot, perhaps because he could not yet conceive of its outcome. Wilde, up until his death, was incapable of reconciling his own situation to the Church. Instead, like Des Esseintes, Dorian surrounds himself

with ornamentation, the signifier without the signified. He collects ecclesiastical vestments, like Des Essientes, merely for their aesthetic appeal. He remains an observant outsider, a voyeur: "he used to look with wonder at the black confessionals, and longed to sit in the dim shadow of one of them and listen to men and women whispering through the worn grating the true story of their lives" (103). Dorian's observations call to mind Lord Henry and his vicarious living.

But Dorian's compulsions and actions compel him to confront moral forces. His vacillation is characteristic of Wilde: "on his return [from debauchery] he would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin" (109). This scene of Dorian's flirtation with decadence and remorse correlates with Wilde's comments about the dangers of "excess" and "renunciation." But it is readily apparent that Wilde placed greater emphasis on the dangers of excess. Once more, the text implies something much graver in the unfolding of the plot. Dorian does more than merely enjoy excess. He, at the prompting of Lord Henry, and the poisonous book closely resembling Pater and Huysmans, is fulfilling his role as an aesthete. His reactions to transgressions and human conflict follow aesthetic "rules" to their logical conclusion.

The deadly confrontation between Dorian and Basil delineates the moral line drawn between the two characters throughout the novel. Basil conforms essentially with Catholic teachings. On the sins recommended by Lord Henry, Basil knows about compensation: "One has to pay in other ways but money ... I should fancy in remorse, in suffering, in ... well, in the consciousness of degradation" (64). Wilde

was familiar with the value of remorse and found it to have value. He believed sin and repentance forced men to transform into something greater than their past selves. Even Lord Alfred Douglass reinforced the morality of Wilde's book: "Oscar Wilde, just like Shakespeare or any first-rate writer, knew that a play or a novel without a moral is, from the artistic point of view, a monstrosity" (qtd in Pearce 171). It is interesting that Douglas makes having a moral be an aesthetic prerequisite for a legitimate work.

Basil's confrontation of Dorian after hearing the gossip about town is one of few times Dorian is morally challenged. It is a holy rebuke: "you have filled them with a madness for pleasure. They have gone down into the depths. You led them there" (118). Basil pleads with Dorian to change: "You have a wonderful influence. Let it be for good, not for evil" (118-119). Dorian knows he has gone too far, has despaired of ever finding God's mercy. His face, while looking at Basil's horrified reaction to the painting, expresses moral ambiguity: "there was neither real sorrow in it nor real joy" (121). Yet Dorian finds no occasion for self-accusation: "you met me, flattered me, taught me to be vain in my good looks" (121). Basil's pleas for Dorian's repentance are met with resignation to evil: "It is too late, Basil ... Those words mean nothing to me now" (122-3). The murder is accomplished only because Dorian has completed his pact with evil. He could not have done it otherwise.

Dorian's own death stems as much from his interaction with the painting as it does from his own hands. The implications with regard to the modern influence of art are immense, ironic and paradoxical. First, art has become a moving power in the

world, having the ability to effect change, good and bad, in humanity. Secondly, art has the unique ability to “read” the beholder. As Wilde stated in his preface, “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (3). This sort of reflection back on the readers of his works is a brilliant and subtle way of forcing readers to contend with the beliefs and biases they bring with them in interpreting a work.

Julia Prewitt Brown provides a compelling commentary on the effects of an art that has become its own master. It speaks to the difficulty Wilde discovered when trying to create art with a moral sense without losing the preeminent role of aesthetics. She sees the context of Dorian Gray as “a world without formal religion where art has become the central inspiration for conduct and for interpreting life among the characters” (78). While this holds true for Lord Henry Wotton, it *may* not for Dorian and certainly does not for the central artist, Basil, with his highly moralistic motivations. Like Catholic writers and Wilde, she finds herself in the ambiguous struggle where art and ethics meet and lines of distinction are blurred. Her comment on the dilemma is pertinent: “Wilde explores the paradoxical loss and gain that occurs when we moderns give ourselves to a work of art” (79).

The loss portrayed in the story is obvious. The only character left standing is Lord Henry. He has neither gained nor lost anything because nothing was ventured. Basil’s death could be the only one that would fall into the category of a martyrdom for truth and beauty. His life was an attempt to advance an art form that had grown stale. Moreover, he died, ironically, at the hands of a man only he tried to save. Dorian’s death, a suicide, from inability to face the reality of his conscience, resulted

from his exploration of new experiences without the anchor of religion or conscience. The gain of the story, according to Brown, is the work of art, or art itself. The painting now enjoys its original beauty, standing as a testament to new possibilities for artists: "the historical context has now become unfamiliar, and the work of art recognizable as an enduring monument" (81). The advancement of art comes often at a high price to individuals.

Conclusion

The central paradox of The Picture of Dorian Gray is never resolved. This may be Wilde's greatest accomplishment in creating this work. It speaks of the inexplicable mystery of the relationship between art and ethics, perhaps Catholicism. Each follows its own laws, but they remain interdependent. Through Dorian Gray, Wilde attempted to emphasize the importance of both art and ethics as well as the negative effect of removing one from the creative life. Without a moral compass, but with the freedom and means to enjoy all life's pleasures and sensations, man falls into a monstrous state of self-indulgence. But without a sense of aesthetics, an eye for what is beautiful, man denies the vibrancy, variety, and the unfolding "reality" of life.

From a Catholic perspective, even St. Theresa of Àvila, the great 16th century mystic, said life without poetry would be intolerable. This was said after she had gone a long way in detaching herself from the world. She also realized the difficulty the nuns of her order experienced when reading certain sections of Psalms with their sensual connotations. St. Thomas Aquinas stressed the human need for delectation, stating that a person who does not find enough spiritual delectation will seek it in other prurient forms. St. John of the Cross demonstrated the role of the senses in devotion: "When as soon as the will finds pleasure in that which it hears, sees and does, it soars upward to rejoice in God - to which end its pleasure furnishes a motive and provides strength - this is very good [...] for there are souls who are greatly moved by objects of sense to seek God" (qtd. In Merton 164). He also stressed the danger in the soul that rests in these pleasures for their sake alone. What all this

conjecture comes down to is a double conclusion. First, beauty plays an integral part in the life of the soul. Secondly, what is essential is the intention of the will, and this bears directly on Wilde's novel. Misplaced, inordinate desires for experiences that ignore the self-development, or good of the soul, will end in destruction.

Richard Pine, in The Thief of Reason, brings Wilde's Irish temperament to bear on this symbiosis of two seemingly contradictory elements: "the Irish mind is an inclusive rather than an exclusive imagination, one which does have that Joycean capacity for accommodating potential contradictions but not necessarily resolving them" (7). Wilde's comment on his desire for aesthetic preeminence attempts to hold the spheres of aesthetics and ethics together, while admitting its impossibility: "I look forward to the time when aesthetics will take the place of ethics, when the sense of beauty will be the dominant law of life: it will never be so, and so I look forward to it" (Letters 265). Wilde was willing to live in a world of impossibilities because he was not ready to accept what was commonly held as truth.

Wilde juxtaposed his artistic mind, the imaginative one, with his knowledge of the reality he wished to avoid. He knew what he wanted and he knew it was never to be: truth and religion would always overcome art, at least in the sphere of "reality." Wilde understood the subjective, artistic mind as separate from the objective mind that seeks truth for its own sake: "No artist recognizes any standard of beauty but that which is suggested by his own temperament" (Letters 302). Wilde, like Dorian, had his escape from the "sins" of life: through the aesthetic senses where there is no right or wrong, only beauty and order and form. Furthermore, he prescribed sin as a means

of self-development: "By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race ... In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the highest ethic" (Critic xxii). His willingness to afford sin the task of advancing mankind demonstrates a standstill in his own development, a closing of the mind to other possible vehicles of transcendence. He was not yet ready to face the essential element that would wed the two discourses.

As a final point of this thesis, I wish to argue that Wilde's Dorian Gray shows the incompatibility between art and Catholicism for one vital reason. Wilde's development as an artist and a man, at the time of writing the book, did not afford him the understanding of one of life's continual mysteries: the value of suffering. Suffering and the Cross constitute the central paradox of Catholicism, going back to the time of the first apostles. Peter could not conceive of the idea of Christ, the Son of God, suffering and being put to death. Catholics, as well as other Christians, still struggle with the idea that suffering has an intimate connection with the state of humanity and is a crucial aspect to redemption. Cardinal Newman poses a question on the relation between suffering and pleasure: "Is it not something beyond measure strange and monstrous ... to profess that our treasure is not here ... and to own that we have a cross to bear after Him, who first suffered before He triumphed ... and yet to set ourselves deliberately to study of our own comfort as some great and sufficient end?" (Sermon 26, page 3). Newman's quote challenges Catholics to make a choice that will invariably test their fidelity to the words of Christ.

Wilde's displeasure at and avoidance of suffering affected his work and life. His conception of religion was, for many years, colored by the thoughts of Ruskin and Pater who both steered away from the acceptance of suffering (possibly because of its bourgeois connection or Ruskin's evangelical perception that Catholic's suffer as much from self-indulgence as from God) to focus more on an isolated view of beauty. Pater's Michelangelo is not so much an artist with a temperament born of struggle and sorrow as one having a "sweetness ... a lovely strangeness" (73). Ruskin resented the idea of self-denial because he felt it distorted the original message of Catholicism and had a crippling effect on the artistic mind. Huysmans's Des Essientes attempted to circumvent suffering all through his journey in *À Rebours*, choosing instead to fill his mind with experiments that flooded the senses. Ironically, like Dorian, he found suffering unavoidable and intensified the deeper he involved himself in his forays.

There is, to be sure, a great deal of suffering in The Picture of Dorian Gray. Yet most of it is ill-placed, wasted, or goes unrecognized. Basil suffers as an artist for trying to hide those things he holds, aesthetically, in high esteem. Lord Henry Wotton suffers, although we are rarely made aware of it, from not living out his destiny. Yet even he cannot completely free himself from his conscience. When musing on what ended a romance, he strangely explains, "I think it was her proposing to sacrifice the whole world for me. That is always a dreadful moment. It fills one with the terror of eternity" (80). Lord Henry's "terrors" are awoken by the Catholic notion of "sacrifice" and the presence of unconditional love.

Dorian suffers very little, it seems, until the very end. His sorrows and remorse are transferred to the painting or smothered by his distractions. Art suffers so that he may live free from the consequences of his sins. And yet, Dorian discovers there remains a reflexive relationship between the painting and himself. Since he remains physically unharmed, the existence of his soul is proven by his final desolation that leads to self-destruction.

Wilde would not understand the real value of suffering until being forced to contend with it daily in prison. He knew that it was crucial to his understanding. He saw his "new life" of suffering as "simply the continuance, by means of development, and evolution, of [his] former life" (Letters 47). Wilde knew the price he paid for postponing this side of human experience: "My only mistake was that I confined myself so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sun-gilt side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadows and its gloom" (475). Being an artist first, Wilde saw his failure to acknowledge sorrow as more of a detriment to his art than anything else. He still refused to place morals above his aesthetics, even going so far as to elevate Christ, not for his divinity, but because of his great individuality, his artistry and poetic nature.

But Wilde does make one fundamental connection that he would have refused in his younger days: "Truth in Art is the unity of a thing with itself ... the soul made incarnate ... For this reason there is no truth comparable to Sorrow" (473). Wilde had previously denounced the concept of objective truth. It had no place in his aesthetic

schema of reality. It reminded him, like the portrait of Dorian, those things he would later regret.

One connection that Oscar Wilde failed to make, at least in The Picture of Dorian Gray was that between sorrow and love. There is a striking absence of true charitable love between characters, for they all are in pursuit of what can satisfy themselves. According to the Catholic faith, suffering and sorrow have no meaning without the motivation of love. St. Thomas Aquinas writes: “But by suffering out of love and obedience, Christ gave more to God than was required to compensate for the offense of the whole human race” (3rd part, Q48, Art 2). In the end, Basil’s love and concern for Dorian approaches a Christlike love, because he, in essence, lays down his life for his friend. It seems no coincidence that Wilde chose an artist to fulfill this role, perhaps in the hopes that he, too, would live up to such an example. Only in De Profundis did Wilde culminate his aesthetic and Catholic understanding when he spoke, “if the worlds have indeed, as I have said, been built out of Sorrow, it has been by the hands of Love, because in no other way could the Soul of man for whom the worlds are made reach the full stature of its perfection” (474).

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