

Art and the Aesthetic of Graphic Novels as Seen in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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**Introduction**

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been afforded many different derivations over the last several decades ranging from films to graphic novels<sup>1</sup>. What, then, does the visual medium—specifically the graphic novel—do that the original text could not? The obvious answer is to provide a visual representation of the story, the characters. But more than that, it provides a visualization of Wilde's views about the art world as well as the Englishman's world. Wilde believed that good art, *real art*, is a "lie"—it should not be a reflection of life, but rather influence life. In that way, people should make art from their own imaginations rather than what they see in the real world, which is known as "Art for Art's Sake."

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**<sup>1</sup> Important Note to the Reader**

Throughout this essay I will be using two phrases interchangeably: "graphic novels" and "comics." I have decided to use both phrases for several reasons. Some of the sources that I will be referencing throughout my essay use the word "comics" and some use the phrase "graphic novel." Both phrases can be used in reference to the same medium, so I wanted to clarify that they essentially mean the same thing as one another. They are not to be read as two different mediums, or two different types of comics. Also, since *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has three different amalgamations that I will be utilizing, I will be referring to them by their publisher for clarity: *Marvel Illustrated*, *Graphic Classics*, and *Sterling*.

I believe that the visual forms of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* provide something even more meaningful. More specifically, I believe that the graphic novel versions are the visual representation of Wilde's views about the influence of art and the aesthetic. Each graphic novel has a different style of art that all serve the same purpose successfully—to tell the tale of Dorian Gray and his portrait. In order to make my point more apparent, I am going to explore how the graphic novels are representative of the primary text, as well as how the graphic novel medium provides the avenues necessary for the secondary texts to flourish as “Art for Art’s Sake.”

For the sake of my argument, I will begin by examining Wilde's views about art beginning with his short essay, “The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue.” Within his essay, Wilde makes it very clear that art should exist as a “lie.” I will then establish the significance of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to that very ideal. Afterwards, my essay will examine how graphic novels are the embodiment of Wilde's views, which can be perceived through the graphic novel amalgamations of their primary source, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

### **A Look at the Primary and Secondary Texts**

Throughout my essay I will be examining a number of texts; specifically, I am going to utilize two of Wilde's primary texts: his essay titled “The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue,” and his larger narrative *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Although they are both independent works, they both act as testaments to Wilde's view that good art should be influential rather than a reflection of real life. In this section, I will establish the significance of each of those texts and the graphic

novels that I will be using. I will also qualify how and why they will be pertinent to my central argument.

### *Primary Texts*

Wilde's essay, "The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue" was first published in *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* in 1889 ("The Decay of Lying"). Although narratively it is unrelated to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's views about art and the aesthetic are made blatantly obvious in the essay, which pre-dates the novel. The essay is foundational in itself, bringing forth Wilde's views that art had become too much a reflection of life rather than life existing as a reflection of art. The inclusion of "The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue" will provide more insight into Wilde's intentions in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and will also be a foundation for graphic novels as a form of "lying" art.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the primary source for each of the graphic novels I will examine. Although it is important to consider the original as a basis for comparison, it is also important to note that a lot of Wilde's views about art and the aesthetic are planted across the text in its entirety. Wilde's ideals about art are seen in both the actions of the character Dorian, as well as the role of the portrait itself in the narrative. I will explore more of these ideas in the section about Wilde's views on art and the aesthetic, but first it is important to consider the narrative as a whole.

The narrative of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* follows a young Victorian man aptly named Dorian Gray. He is a sitter for an artist named Basil Hallward who is painting a portrait of Dorian because he possesses such a great deal of beauty. Lord Henry Wotton, a friend of Basil's,

mentions to Dorian that youth is only eternal in the portrait, prompting Dorian to wish for the portrait to grow old so he can stay beautiful. By chance, Dorian gets his wish and the portrait begins to take on the physical manifestation of Dorian's actions and aging, all the while Dorian gets to remain youthful and beautiful in appearance (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*).

He first notices the portrait's ability to change when he has a very heated argument with his fiancé, Sybil Vane, who is an actress. He is angry at her poor performance on stage, especially since he brought his friend's along to see her show. That night after he leaves, Sybil kills herself and upon hearing the news, Dorian begins to plunge himself into the dark Victorian underbelly. He goes to opium dens and other seedy places, all the while never taking on the appearance of a man who might visit such places; he still looks like an upstanding member of society—the ideal Victorian man. At one point he even goes as far as killing Basil, yet only the portrait Dorian looks as though he has lived a life of sin. At the close of the novel, Dorian decides that his conscience was too much to bear, and perhaps destroying the portrait will quiet his conscience; however, Dorian's destruction of the portrait results in his own death, making his death a suicide (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*).

### *Secondary Texts*

Since the primary texts will be used to establish Wilde's position, the graphic novels will be used in a much different way. Each graphic novel is a secondary version of the original text, and tell the story in different ways from one another. They use different art styles, leave some parts of the story out, and illustrate the scenes differently than one another. More importantly, they all operate as most comics do, such as having speech bubbles for characters' speech and differing ways to transition from one scene or moment in time to the next.

The novels' ability to operate as comics rather than just a re-print of the original text is what makes them so special to my argument. Comics, especially adaptations, have many different ways that they can "lie," in the aesthetic sense. For example, I will later highlight how the artistic freedoms of comics give artists the opportunity to draw characters however they would like and add visuals to the panels that are not mentioned in the original text. I will also explore how these freedoms and other aspects such as speech bubbles, and time and space are all a part of the "lie."

The first graphic novel I am using is the *Graphic Classics* version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It was adapted by Alex Burrows and illustrated by Lisa K. Weber. I chose this particular version for this essay because the *Graphic Classics* series provides the reader with a small window into the larger original text, encouraging further reading. Their line of graphic novels includes other classics such as Bram Stoker and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle ("The Graphic Novel and the Age of Transition" 14). The front matter of the novel even includes several quotes from Oscar Wilde that the editor, Tom Pomplun, believed the youth should live by (Burrows and Weber 3). The intention behind the novel is clearly to introduce comic readers into the world of classics that Wilde wrote. Also, the novel itself tells the story of Dorian quite well.

The next graphic novel that I will analyze is *Marvel Illustrated's* take on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It was written by Roy Thomas and illustrated by Sebastian Fiumara. Much like the *Graphic Classics* series, the *Marvel Illustrated* series inspires readers to pick up the original version of the text by presenting them with a graphic version of the original. However, the *Marvel Illustrated* version provides a much more in-depth representation of the original text than

either of the other graphic novels analyzed for this essay. It also provides the reader with an outstanding color rendering of the scenes from the primary text.

The lesser known publishing house *Sterling* put out the last version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that I will use. This particular version was adapted by Ian Edington and illustrated by I. N. J. Culbard. The original publisher, *SelfMadeHero*, released this particular adaptation with very similar intentions as *Graphic Classics* and *Marvel Illustrated*. They aimed to translate the primary text in the best way possible (“About”), and even knew that their readership may have never read the primary text before embarking on their version (Edington n.p.). The purpose of the text’s inclusion in this essay is to provide more context to my central argument—that graphic novel representations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are the embodiment of “Art for Art’s Sake.” Oscar Wilde’s Aestheticism

Wilde presented his views about art and the aesthetic by publishing two works back to back that both encompass his ideals about art as a “lie.” First, I will expand on “Art for Art’s Sake,” then I will analyze “The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue,” and I will compare how his views from it are presented in the *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It is only after his views are established that I will be able to connect Wilde’s notions about the influence of art to the way that comics are also influential.

### *Art for Art’s Sake*

Aatos Ojala wrote a two volume set about aestheticism and Oscar Wilde titled *Aestheticism and Oscar Wilde*. Very early on Ojala quotes Wilde from a piece that he wrote in *The English Renaissance*. The quote outlines the Wilde’s views on aestheticism as any reader

can infer from both “The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde says:

The recognition of a separate realm for the artist, a consciousness of the absolute difference between the world of art and the world of real fact, between classic grace and absolute reality, forms not merely the essential element of any aesthetic charm, but is the characteristic of all great imaginative work and of all great eras of artistic creation (Ojala 102-03).

Wilde is saying that there exists a kind of realm between creativity and reality and that the two are not the same or co-existing. Creativity is of the mind, and the world is of nature. Good art—*great art*—is from the realm of the creative mind and cannot possibly come from real life. It is this kind of art that is the embodiment of “Art for Art’s Sake.”

What exactly *is* Oscar Wilde’s opinion of “Art for Art’s Sake?” Kelly Comfort defines it as “an effort to advocate a total aestheticization of the social and natural world; to free art from societal dictates, pressures, and expectations; to reject imitation, mimesis, and realism in art; and to shun any ethical or moral considerations on the part of the artist” (Comfort 23). Wilde was the advocate for the notion that art should not be a product of the real world, but instead it should be from the imagination of the artist. Art should not be influenced by the many facets of life such as society or ethics, because confining art to such things stifles creativity. Instead, art should come from the imagination and *influence* society and ethics; it should be something that impacts life in some way, but is not impacted by life. It is the “lie” that makes real art adhere to the notion of “Art for Art’s Sake.”



The importance of Wilde's attachment to the "Art for Art's Sake" ideal is that Wilde was not only an advocate for the movement (Bell-Villada 415-16), but both of his works "The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were an artistic expression of that very ideal. By first taking into consideration "The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue," Wilde's views about art as a "lie," and what defines good art become more apparent. Secondly, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* upholds Wilde's views about "Art for Art's Sake" through the telling of the narrative.

*"The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue"*

As aforementioned, "The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue" is a fictional essay that Wilde wrote and was published in 1889. The essay centers around two men, Vivian and Cyril, who are having a casual discussion about an article Vivian is writing about lying as an art. Vivian's article is similarly titled, 'The Decay of Lying, a Protest.' As Vivian begins to read the article to Cyril he immediately begins to define lying as an art:

One of the chief causes of the curiously commonplace character of most of the literature of our age is undoubtedly the decay of lying as an art, a science, and a social pleasure ... Lying and poetry are arts—arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other—and they require the most careful study, the most disinterested devotion ("The Decay of Lying" 37)

What Wilde is getting at is that lying is not just a part of life, but rather an *art* of life. A person's aim in lying is to convince the person, or people, that they are lying to that what they are saying is real in some way. In order to do so, a person can't just say something outrageous, but rather something that they can build upon and take pleasure and pride in as well. Essentially, there is

an art to lying. Wilde also alludes that lying takes on a role as art since there is an art in lying. A good lie is something akin to poetry and other arts, according to Wilde. The arts have a structure and a technique much like lying does.

Further into the essay, Wilde begins to pull out his main idea—that good art is art that “lies” to the audience. He says, “*the object of art is not simple truth but complex beauty*” (“The Decay of Lying” 43). Wilde is implying that art should not be the obvious reflections of what the common man can see, but rather the complex beauty of what the common man is sure to miss. He goes on to say “when *art surrenders her imaginative medium she surrenders everything*” (43). When there is no creativity in art, then it is no longer art; it is dull and uninteresting. Most importantly, Vivian says to Cyril:

Paradox though it may seem—and paradoxes are always dangerous things—it is none the less true that *life imitates art far more than art imitates life* ... A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in popular form, like an enterprising publisher ... Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose (“The Decay of Lying” 47).

Wilde is telling his audience that art is “lying” and imagination. Art is not, and should not be a direct reflection of life, but instead it should be influential—it should embody “Art for Art’s Sake.” Life has a way of reflecting art, so when art becomes a reflection of life there is nothing for life to imitate or emulate. “Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art” (“The Decay of Lying” 56). Art’s purpose is to be influential.

All of the aforementioned ideals in Wilde’s text thus far have been representative of “Art for Art’s Sake,” but there is one instance in the text that truly speak to that very ideal spoken by

the character Vivian. Vivian says that “*art never expresses anything but itself*” (“The Decay of Lying” 51). Wilde is telling his audience that it is impossible for art to express life because art can only express art. Therefore, art that is not an expression of life, but rather an expression of itself, is real art.

### *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Shortly after Wilde published “The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue,” he published his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The connection between the two works lies in the life of the title character Dorian Gray. Dorian’s character is a direct reflection of “Art for Art’s Sake,” and the ideal that art should not reflect life. Also, the fate of the painter and Dorian’s friend, Basil, is also a metaphor for the consequence of art as a reflection of life.

Going back to the beginning of the narrative, Dorian is a very beautiful, aesthetically pleasing man. Wilde describes Dorian as “wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, [and] his crisp golden hair” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 12). In *Studying Oscar Wilde: History, Criticism, and Myth*, Josephine Guy and Ian Small highlight that the Dorian is the symbol of Victorian aestheticism. He lives the aesthetic life of a Victorian but does not work for it (Guy and Small 164). As Dorian stands, he is the physical embodiment of the aesthetic Victorian man, which makes his character ideal for metaphorically playing the role of Victorian aestheticism’s central theme—the decadence of art.

At the onset of the novel, Dorian is living art; his character is introduced to the readers as a sitter for the painter, Basil. Lord Henry remarks about beauty to Dorian, saying that one day his beauty will fade and he should revel in it while he can (20-22). Lord Henry’s comment sank in with Dorian and he began to think about the prospect of his own beauty fading. Dorian

becomes consumed at the idea that one day he would no longer have his youth and good looks (19). If Dorian's beauty faded then he would no longer be aesthetically pleasing to look upon.

Much like Dorian's realization that natural beauty faded, Wilde's views about the prospect of art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were the same. Nature and real-life should not be the focus of art because nature, if beautiful, is not beautiful for very long. Eventually nature fades, and people grow old and out of their beauty. Art as a reflection of life would only be a snapshot into a momentary beauty. How can nature influence art if art's beauty can withstand time, but nature's beauty cannot?

As Dorian continues to mull over the prospect of his looks fading, he blurts out that he would trade his own soul to look beautiful forever:

How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that! (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 20).

With these few words, Dorian reveals that he wants to live forever as the Dorian in the portrait: young, beautiful, and aesthetically pleasing. The portrait is a reflection of life and the influence that it had on Dorian is veritably negative. Dorian became willing to give his own soul just to look like the portrait—to look like himself! There is no positive influence from the portrait; it did not inspire Dorian to go out and strive to do any sort of good for himself or the world. It is the antithesis of “Art for Art's Sake.”

As the story progresses, Dorian begins to realize that his wish came true. His actions began to take form in the portrait; the negative decisions that Dorian begins to make start to alter the portrait. Dorian first sees the alteration right after he has a fight with his fiancé, Sybil Vane. Soon after he gets home from the fight he notices that his mouth has changed slightly in the portrait—it had a bit of a snarl to it (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 69). The portrait is beginning to literally reflect the life and choices of Dorian, and the consequence is the slow loss of the portrait's beauty.

The realization that the portrait would visually take on the consequences of his actions coupled with the suicide of Sybil, which occurs after their fight, influences Dorian to take on a life of ill decisions. Since the portrait would take on the reflection of his life, he is able to continuously appear aesthetically pleasing to the eye despite the desecration of his own soul (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 80-82). From that point forward, Dorian decides to concede and let the art reflect his life with complete disregard for the consequences of his actions.

Wilde did not make Dorian into the only example of the consequences of art as a reflection of life, he also made Basil—the painter and source of the art to begin with—into one as well. Basil is the reason that the portrait ever existed since he painted it after all. The fate of Basil is very severe, but the metaphor is still very clear. Not only does Basil die, but he dies as a consequence of the portrait. Had he never painted it in the first place then perhaps Dorian would never have killed him. But before I get into Basil's metaphor-ridden death, it is important to consider Basil's comment on the portrait first.

Very early on in the novel Basil states that he does not want to display the portrait publicly. Basil believes that he has put “too much of himself” into the painting (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 2), and he doesn't even feel comfortable displaying it. However, as time moves

forward he changes his mind and tries to persuade Dorian into letting him see the portrait again because he intends to exhibit it in Paris. Since the portrait had visibly changed Dorian could not let Basil see it (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 85-90). Basil's portrait is a reflection of his true feelings for Dorian, thus making it a direct reflection of life. The inclination that he felt about the painting is an indication that he has done something that he should not have done. He did not create anything from his own mind, but rather from something that already existed. In turn, Basil suffered an ill fate, which is a metaphor for the effect that painting real life brings. Basil's fate is his own death at the hand of Dorian, the very person in the portrait.

In keeping with the notion that Basil's murder is a direct connection to Wilde's opinions about life as art, Rodney Shewan quotes Wilde as saying "'The painter, Basil Hallward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity'" (Shewan 112). Shewan has connected that Basil's murder is the result of his obsession with life as object. The metaphor of his death is read as the lack of Basil's imagination—his true self—in the portrait.

Furthermore, Dorian's character is an example of life imitating art. The older Dorian gets, the more sinful his actions become. As aforementioned, he even goes as far as killing his own friend Basil. Since Dorian's outer appearance remains youthful and the painting takes on the internal evil that dwelled within him, Dorian is a reflection of his own portrait. Internally, Dorian is the evil that the portrait showed externally.

As the novel comes to a close, Dorian's character realizes the consequence of his actions. As he considers his role in the deaths of both Sybil and Basil, Dorian decides that the portrait is the physical manifestation of his conscience. If he is able to destroy the painting perhaps he can destroy his conscience and the very thoughts that haunt him about Sybil and Basil. However,

when Dorian goes to destroy the portrait he kills himself (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 172-73). “Christopher Nassar has argued that the novel is a symbolic account of the decline of Aesthetic art at the hands of Decadence” (Shewan 128). Dorian’s death is a metaphor for the death of true art; since Dorian’s portrait is a reflection of life, and Dorian a living example of life as art, then his death is the consequence of both. Wilde was not saying that *death* is the consequence of life as art, but rather that the consequence is negative, just as Nassar believed. There is nothing to be learned or live for when art is merely a reflection of life.

### **How Graphic Novels Uphold Wilde’s Ideals About Art**

Each facet of the graphic novel medium is an exemplary representation of the notion of art as a “lie.” Although graphic novels may appear to be a reflection of life in some way, the manner in which they tell a story is not a direct reflection. Just as Wilde believed in “Art for Art’s Sake,” each graphic novel version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* works with the both the structure of comics and the originality of each writer and illustrator to not only “lie,” but also to be informational, teaching the reader about the primary source.

#### *The Reader-Author Contract*

First, it is important to consider what Bret Parks calls “the Reader-Author Contract.” Parks points out that it is the reader’s responsibility to read the panels (the boxes in a comic book that contain the images and/or words in each scene and is typically surrounded by a border and space—a gutter—between each panel) of a comic the way that the author intended them to be read (Parks 38-39). What Parks means is that it is up to the reader not to look ahead at upcoming panels or read the panels out of order (such as right to left instead of left to right).

The importance of the reader-author contract to the the graphic novel versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that Wilde's novel was and is read from cover to cover, left to right, in the order that Wilde intended. The graphic novels are to be read in the same manner so as to tell the story of Dorian Gray just as Wilde did, from beginning to end. Since the particular graphic novels I have chosen were published as a stepping stone for readers to discover and perhaps seek out the primary text, then it is only fitting that the reader abide to that contract.

### *Why Comics?*

Wilde's writing, although well-known, is generally as unpopular today as it was over a century ago when he was still alive. His works tend to thrive in academia over anything else. (Guy and Small 77). There is something about Wilde that is not so much entertaining as it is influential. But what is that "something?" As for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, there is the ever-present idea that Victorian art needs a voice—someone to point out the decadence of art. That being said, why would it be important for the modern reader to gain an introduction to Wilde and his notions about Victorian art via comics? Comics are a way to speak to the modern reader in ways that a traditional novel cannot. Stephen Tabachnick wrote:

Like the other graphic novel adaptations discussed here, these potential adaptations would not only allow us to see the original novels in new and different ways, but would also bring the great literature of the Transition era to a broader audience, which is no small accomplishment in our very visual age ("The Graphic Novel and the Age of Transition" 27)

Modern times have so much of our culture steeped in the visual: television, the Internet, smartphones, and more. The majority of modern culture is pictures and video, which means that



it is ideal to try and reach audiences through that medium. Images have become the avenue of choice.

### *Space and Time*

One of the most interesting aspects of comics is the use of gutters. Gutters create a gap in time between panels to signify that some amount of time has passed. It is up to the reader to evaluate how much time has gone by and determine what has happened between each sequence (McCloud 67). Each artist and writer used the gutters to express the passage of time differently from one another in the graphic novel versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The differences in how the gutters are used serve the purpose of connecting the story differently from one another, yet still work towards the same goal: to tell the story in sequential order from beginning to end. The progression is each writer and artist's way of "lying" about how much time has passed, especially given how long Wilde's writing tends to be in the primary text.

It is important to consider the adaptations of novels to graphic novels as a condensed version of the original work—specifically, the *Graphic Classics* version wherein a great deal of the novel that has been omitted. The omitted portions have been replaced with gutters in between the scenes (Burrows and Weber), forcing the reader to think beyond the scope of the given text and images and imagine what happens in between. The abridged version is a "lie" in itself because although it is a reflection of the original work, the reader is forced to use their *own* imaginations and form their *own* conclusions about what happens between panels, thus forcing the reader to create their own "lies" about the events between panels.

But how did Burrows and Weber (the writer and author of the *Graphic Classics* version) successfully force their readers to use their mind with the gutters? One might think that taking

out large chunks of a story would take away from the overall work, making it difficult for a reader to truly perceive the events as they occur. With the exception of the first panel and the last two panels, the gutters between panels create a seamless storyline for the reader (see Fig. 1). There is an even amount of space between each panel (Burrows and Weber). If the panels had overlapped, then the reader would have to conclude that there is little or no time in between each panels; conversely, if there had been no border around the panel a sense of timelessness would be created for the reader, giving them the notion that the scene lingers on (McCloud 102-03). Since the reader only sees an even gutter between panels, they have to get their sense of time from the non-diagetic narration bubbles that appear between large breaks in time (I will go into speech bubbles such as this in a later section).

The equal gutter space gives the reader the notion that time is progressing naturally throughout the story itself. If Burrows and Weber had chosen to break up their shortened version into defined chapters for example, then the reader would likely realize that there are a lot of events that are missing from the primary text. However, since the seamless between the panels ensures the reader can trust that the most important aspects of the story have been illustrated to them.

Despite the continuous flow of the story, there *are* parts left out. Forcing the readers to use their own powers of deduction and imagination to fill in the blanks is definitely a way of “lying” and a way of showing the successful nature of art as a product of the imagination. Since the *Graphic Classics* version is just a lead-in to the primary text, the reader will have to desire to



Fig. 1, Burrows and Weber. Pg. 36. Notice the equal, white space between the gutters.

seek out the original as a result of their imagination. The reader can only infer what happens, so reading the original version will give them confirmation that they were right or wrong about the events in between the gutters and feed said desire.

The *Marvel Illustrated* version uses the gutters in a much different way than *Graphic Classics*. Although it is known that the story of Dorian Gray is very dark—dark in the sense that it shows the human condition as capable of terrible actions when allotted the right freedoms—Sebastian Fiumara illustrates the darkness. Rather than traditional white space between the gutters, Fiumara uses black space (see Fig. 2). While reading, the reader is immersed in a dark world; the black gutters protrudes an ominous tone, even in scenes that are not as such.

Moreover, the early chapters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are not as dark as the latter chapters. Since Fiumara has shrouded the panels in darkness, he has provided the reader with a new perspective on the tone at onset of the narrative. The illustrator has thus forced the reader into a troubled state as they read, providing little expectation of a happy ending perhaps. The “lie” in Fiumara’s gutters is that the tragedy of Dorian’s death beings with the tragedy of Dorian’s life, making his death deserved. Dorian is a bad man who did bad things to those around him, making his own death a stopping point for his madness.

Overall, time and space are a way for the reader to use their own imagination to infer the events of the story. The gutters are a reflection of the readers own “lies” about the story, and in the case of *Marvel Illustrated* a kind of “lie” about the tone of the novel’s opening sequences. Each “lie” is representative of “Art for Art’s Sake” because each graphic novelist created



Fig. 2, Thomas and Fiumara. Even though there are bright panels the black gutters give the reader a dark feeling.

something new that does not reflect the original version. Each version is only a fractional part of Wilde's original piece which is why the gutters have to be used in the first place. It is a way for the writers to skip past seemingly unimportant parts of the narrative or to act as enough of a mystery between panels that the reader will take on reading the original version.

### *Icons*

Scott McCloud uses “the word icon to mean any image used to represent [a] person, place, thing or *idea*” (McCloud 27). McCloud's definition of the word “icon” refers to the art styles of each graphic novel and how they are not only informative, but also fit within the ideal that good art is not a reflection of life. For the graphic novels in question, the icons I want to focus on the closest are Dorian's image and the portrait, and how they symbolize “Art for Art's Sake.”

Each graphic novel portrays Dorian Gray in dramatically different ways. The *Graphic Classics* version of Dorian is illustrated by Lisa K. Weber.



Fig. 3, Burrows and Weber. Here Dorian is drawn very simplistic and cartoon-like.

*Classics* version of Dorian is illustrated by Lisa K. Weber.

Her version of Dorian is very simplistic and cartoon-like (see Fig. 3). According to McCloud, the simplification of the drawing moves the image “further and further away from the ‘real’” (McCloud 29) meaning that Weber's version of Dorian is not very detailed or overly realistic. It is an imagined

version of Dorian, and one that allows the reader to fill-in-the blanks with whatever beauty they believe Dorian to truly

possess. Weber's Dorian is simplistic in other ways aside from a cartoon-like face; he is also drawn in black and white which leaves a lot to the imagination of the reader. Wilde believed that

real art came from the imagination rather than from real life (“Art for Art’s Sake”), ergo, Weber’s black and white Dorian lets the reader imagine Dorian as they wish, much like the text of the original novel would.

However, in the *Sterling* edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* I. N. J. Culbard’s version of Dorian, while simplistic and cartoon-like (much like Weber’s Dorian), is very different from the Wilde’s original text. This Dorian favors his creator, Oscar Wilde himself (see Fig. 4). Although the graphic novel is in black and white, Dorian is clearly portrayed having dark hair just as Wilde did in real life. The primary text explicitly states that Dorian has “crisp gold hair” (Wilde 12). Furthermore, Dorian is given an elongated face that is very resemblant of Wilde’s own long facial shape (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 4, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde, Front Cover. Photo of Wilde.



Fig. 5, Culbard and Edington. Pg. 51. The resemblance is uncanny.

The icon that Culbard has made for the audience is very clearly Oscar Wilde as opposed to the character Dorian because it forces the reader to imagine that Dorian is really Wilde. In the introduction to the *Sterling* version it is said that “The indulgent, decadent lifestyles portrayed in the book were widely viewed as a reflection of Wilde’s own lifestyle” (Culbard and Edington n.p.). Culbard is able to construct a character that the audience could imagine to be Wilde himself, putting a twist on the notion that art should not reflect life. What, then, comes out of

Culbard's decision to reflect real life? It takes away from the ethos of the story. There is no room for imagination in the traditional sense, wherein the reader can imagine Dorian within the confines of Wilde's description. This graphic version strays from the original text which takes away some of its credibility as a representation of the original work, but provides Culbard with the opportunity to draw Dorian as he sees fit, coming back to the notion that art should be from the mind of the artist thus representing "Art for Art's Sake."

On the other hand, Fiumara's Dorian in the *Marvel Illustrated* version is not only in color, unlike *Graphic Classics's* or *Sterling's*, but he is also very detailed.

This Dorian is blue-eyed with blond hair, and fits the Adonis-like description found in the original work (see Fig. 6). The *Marvel Illustrated* version is much more informational than its counter-parts; it is able to show the reader what Dorian could look like based on Wilde's version of him. That being said, there is still enough cartoon-like style in this Dorian that it continues to fit within the confines of Wilde's ideals about art and the aesthetic.



Fig. 6, Thomas and Fiumara. The blond-haired, blue-eyed Dorian.

Although Fiumara's Dorian is very life-like for a comic book, he is still simplistic enough that he could be any young man. The reader still has enough imaginative freedom to look at this Dorian and put himself in the character, or perhaps his neighbor or schoolmate. The advantage of the Dorian icon as a cartoon is the flexibility given to the reader to place any one as Dorian. This way, the art is not reflecting life, but the reader is reflecting the art into *their* life, thus holding up the ideologies of Wilde.

One very common icon amongst all three versions is Dorian's portrait. Since Dorian's character is to remain youthful and aesthetically pleasing while the portrait is to take on the

physical appearance of his soul, the portrait is a focal point. The portrait is a representation of what happens when art reflects life; the result is that art would no longer be aesthetically pleasing but rather hideous and decadent. The commonality between all three graphic novels is the level of detail that is put into the portrait itself.

As mentioned previously, the *Graphic Classic's* iteration uses very simple lines and cartoon-like drawings to show the face of young Dorian. But the portrait of Dorian, especially at the end of the story, is much different.

There is more detail than any of the other characters or scenes had in them, and



Fig. 7, Burrows and Weber, pg. 47. Dorian's portrait at the close of the novel.



Fig. 8, Culbard and Edington. Dorian's portrait shortly before his death.

has a bit of shock-factor to it (see Fig. 7). The consequence of art as life is very clear in the panel, yet there is still a bit of cartoonishness in the way that it is drawn. The reader is still given the chance to embody Dorian's evil into the portrait at their will, unlike the *Sterling* version.

In Culbard's portrait, Dorian is extremely realistic looking, almost as if the reader is being shown a photo of an actual portrait (see Fig. 8). The art

stands out above every other artistic characteristic of the novel, purely

because it looks as though it does not belong—much like Wilde believed that life did not belong on the artistic canvas. Also, at the close of the novel when Dorian stabs the painting and restores order to his soul and the portrait, Dorian is seen lying on the ground as his true, decadent self (see Fig. 9). However, despite the realism of the portrait, the dead Dorian is just a cartoon.



Fig. 9, Culbard and Edington, pg. 118. Dead Dorian the cartoon.

Since order is restored and life is back where it should be (apart from art), the audience is once again pulled into Wilde's ideals.

Fiumara's interpretation of Dorian's portrait also speaks to Wilde's views. Although there is not as high of a contrast between the portrait and Dorian as there is in Culbard's version, there is still a great deal of detail that has been put into showcasing Dorian's manifested evil (see Fig. 10). This is especially true in the final panel of the book. Dorian's dead body is the visual embodiment of his own evil, but what is intriguing is that he does not appear to have any eyes in the final scene (see Fig. 11). Dorian's blindness is influential, reminding the reader of the consequences of art reflecting life.



Fig. 10, Thomas and Fiumara. Dorian's portrait.



Fig. 11, Thomas and Fiumara. Final panel of the novel.

The icons that each illustrator created for both Dorian and his portrait are unique and act as their own versions of Dorian. Some of them are simple enough that they encourage the reader to fill-in-the-blanks for what they believe the true Dorian looks like through the use of cartoon-like drawings. They also are different from one another, which shows that each reader's interpretation of Dorian can be different. The icons are ideal for the notion of "Art for Art's Sake" because they do not have to follow any sort of set of rules, such as his hair color.



### *Speech Bubbles and Time*

Another aspect of most comics is the use of speech bubbles. According to Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*, speech bubbles are used to capture sound (Eisner 24). There is one major difference in the way that all three graphic novels use speech bubbles which is font choice. The differences between fonts changes the way that the reader perceives sound in the narrative. As Eisner said, "The lettering reflects the nature and emotion of the speech" (Eisner 24). Two of the novels use all-caps for the speech bubbles, while one uses bicameral script (which has both capital and lowercase lettering).

The *Graphic Classics* and *Sterling* editions of the novel use all-caps for the font inside the speech bubbles. In doing so, the speech seems to be "outside" of the scenes. It protrudes from the image, separating itself from the story. It is as if the illustrators and writers were separating their own art from Wilde's. In doing so, they are saying that the words are Wilde's but the images are their own. Although it may seem that their art is a reflection of the original work, it is from their own imaginations. As Wilde believed, good art comes from the mind.

However, the *Marvel Illustrated* version uses the speech bubbles quite differently. The use of a bicameral script gives the reader the notion that the text belongs and is a part of their art. There is a greater notion that the entire work is a direct reflection of the primary text. Eisner mentions that typesetting "has a 'mechanical' effect that intrudes on the personality of free art" (Eisner 26), thus taking away from Fiumara's personal art. Although more aesthetically charming, the use of bicameral text makes the novel read as a direct reflection of Wilde which goes against Wilde's view's of "Art for Art's Sake."

Aside from speech, bubbles are also used in all three novels as a way to pass time. Each passing of time is differentiated from standard character speech through the use of boxes as opposed to the oval-shaped speech bubbles. The use of rectangular boxes sets the text apart from the panels. Parts of the novel that have to be truncated and omitted as well, wherein the use of such boxes also comes in handy—it allows the graphic novel to flow seamlessly from one point in time to the next. In doing so, the writers and illustrators are able to create their own time flow different from the original text, making the story a new product of their imaginations.

For example, I'd like to consider the transition between the murder of Basil and the recruitment of Alan Campbell to help him get rid of the body. In the *Sterling* edition and the *Graphic Classics* version, both stories omit the scenes in which Dorian pretends to have been out all night, missing Basil's visit (Culbard and Edington 68-69, Burrows and Weber 31-32, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 122-124). Dorian pretending to be absent from the house would make it look like he is innocent in Basil's murder and that Basil likely left after his arrival, which puts his disappearance outside of Dorian's hands.

The passing of time from Basil's murder is met with "The next morning" (Culbard and Edington 69), and "The following morning" (see Fig. 12).

The passing of time allowed both versions to re-shape Dorian's character. The primary text makes Dorian look even more evil than he already is by showing his lack of remorse through the ensuring of an alibi. The change in time coupled with the omission of the scene means that the story reflects the writers own imagining of the way the story should be told. It has become less of a reflection of the original work of art.



Fig. 12 Burrows and Weber, pg. 32.

*Marvel Illustrated*'s use of boxes to pass time add what Mario Saraceni calls "respectability to the original publication" (Saraceni 9). There is a look of elegance to the box that looks like the end of a scroll (see Fig. 13). The scroll was used in early-modern England to represent speech in images (Syme 35). The use of the scroll-like box reminds the reader that the work is a classic, not just a comic from the modern era.



Fig. 13, Thomas and Fiumara.

Aside from the throwback to its origins, the transitions are unique to this particular publication, setting it apart from the traditional rectangle that is used in the *Graphic Classics* version and the *Sterling* publication. In doing so, Thomas and Fiumara appear to be using their own imaginations, thus bringing the readers back to Wilde's notion of good art.

### *Sound Effects*

The use of onomatopoeias are very common in comic world. Much like speech bubbles represent the sound of speech, onomatopoeias are used to represent other types of sound. According to Hannah Miodrag's first chapter in *Comics and Language*, the use of phonetic onomatopoeias are a breach of linguistics and "threatens to derail the sense of what we read" (Miodrag 32). For the graphic novels of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this means that the use of onomatopoeias are used outside of the "norm"—outside of the rules that language takes on. The breaking of such rules gives the graphic novels another opportunity to fit within Wilde's views about "Art for Art's Sake."

One example of their use is in the *Marvel Illustrated* version in the scene where Dorian stabs Basil. Wilde never gave a sound to represent Basil being stabbed; in fact, it is only after

Dorian stabs Basil several times that Wilde says you can hear the gurgling noises of Basil dying (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 121). But Fiumara gives the noise of the knife entering the back of Basil's neck its own word: "SHUNK" (see Fig. 14). The addition of the onomatopoeia breathes new life into the scene. It is impactful for the reader to not only see the Dorian stab Basil, but also "hear" him do it. Fiumara imagined the sound for himself, then put it on paper, thus creating new art—but more specifically, creating new art that is not a reflection of life. After all, turning sound into text is of the mind since sound has no defined spelling.



Fig. 14, Thomas and Fiumara. The moment the knife enters Basil's head.

The different facets of the graphic novel all work in some way or another to uphold Wilde's ideals. The notion that the reader can use their own imagination and that the writers and illustrators can use theirs, fits well within the notion that art should not be a reflection of life, but rather life should be a reflection of art, which is ideal for Wilde's notions about "Art for Art's Sake." The next section will cover whether or not there is a downside to adaptations as comics, and what that does for the notion of Wilde's ideals.

### **What is Gained and Lost**

A rather important notion to consider is whether or not what is lost in translation between the original text and graphic novels outweighs what is gained. One of the more obvious losses that I'd like to consider is the loss of content. I'd also like to take a look at the lost opportunity to imagine the characters as a reader. Conversely, it is important to examine the artistic freedoms

of the artists and writers, as well as the reader's newfound opportunity to picture the content in ways that the novel would not let them.

### *Lost in Translation*

There is a definitive loss of content when a traditional, text-based novel such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is turned into a graphic novel. The writers and illustrators are afforded the luxury of deciding what scenes or dialogue to include and exclude. In fact, in the introduction to *Marvel Illustrated's* version of the story, Thomas commented on the fact that large portions of dialogue would have to be cut down or omitted completely; especially since Wilde wrote very long monologues in some scenes (Thomas and Fiumara). By cutting out the stretches of dialogue the reader *is* deprived of content, but there are advantages in doing so.

The ability to cut down on some content means that the reader is able to get through the novel at a faster pace. In the case of *Graphic Classics*, the driving force behind the publication is to introduce new readers to the content, encouraging readers to seek out the original text. However, even if the reader decides not to do so, at the very least they are being exposed to it in some way. Oscar Wilde was not a very popular author in his time, and his publications remain often overlooked (Guy and Small 77). By giving audiences a truncated version, there is a chance that they will read the novel even though they may never have desired to do so beforehand.

Shifting back to my main argument, the loss of content actually becomes an opportunity for artistic freedom. As Wilde preached, art should not be a reflection of life; in that way, art should be influential. When there is content cut out and shifted around, the novel is no longer Wilde's; it becomes a work of art from the minds of the new writer and (in the case of comics) the new illustrator. Thomas went over such an opportunity in the introduction of the *Marvel*

*Illustrated* version. He talks about the instance that Dorian is discussing Sybil's performances in the theater which were only vocalized by Dorian in conversation in the original text. But Thomas decided to take it one step further and actually *show* the reader Sybil acting as Rosalind and Imogen (see Fig. 15) (Thomas and Fiumara). The reader is afforded the opportunity to see scenes from the plays that she is in, and also see why Dorian adored her acting so much. In the primary text, such an opportunity is not afforded to the reader.

Another form of loss that the reader suffers when reading the graphic novel versus the original text is the opportunity to decide how they would like a character to look in their mind, based on the short descriptions that are given by Wilde. As aforementioned, the *Sterling* edition went in a completely different direction with Dorian's character and drew him to favor his creator, Wilde (See Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). There is no freedom in deciding how Dorian looks to the reader. The face-shape, hair color, and clothes that he wears are all inserted into the graphic text.

### *Gained in Translation*

As mentioned in the "Icon" section of this paper, making a drawing of an object simplifies that object and provides the reader with the opportunity to fill-in-the-blanks. McCloud calls this "amplification through simplification" (McCloud 30). It is the idea that by eliminating a great deal of detail from an image, the viewer is able to see the important aspects of the image



Fig. 15, Thomas and Fiumara. Sybil's performances.

and then imagine what the rest of the image looks like in their imaginations. In that way, the reader is creating the art in their own minds, filling in Dorian's features, and Basil's and Lord Henry, as they wish. After all, good art should not be a reflection of real life, and instead be symbolic of "Art for Art's Sake."

One more aspect of the graphic novel that results in a gain for the reader, is the chance to evaluate the novel in a different manner than the original text provides. Tabachnick mentions that "one basic difference between graphic novels ... is that graphic novels offer a reading experience in which, as in traditional reading, the reader controls the speed of perception and can linger backward at will" ("The Graphic Novel and the Age of Transition" 4). Although Tabachnick says that the reader is allotted the opportunity to re-read aspects of the original text, the graphic medium allows the reader to linger over images, assessing the background and foreground as they so choose. In fact, the addition of background images in the panel adds detail to a scene that a reader would not get out of just words on a page (unless the writer describes them in great detail).

The ability to alter a reader's pace lets the reader decide if they want to gloss over panels or even full pages. They have the chance to look ahead, see a page with no words, and skip right past the panels, creating a new pace to the story. However, looking ahead *does* break the reader-author contract that Parks brought up (Parks 38-39)—there is an unspoken agreement that a reader will look at and read every image and every word in a graphic narrative. Breaking the agreement breaks the rules, but it can also let the reader choose what they would like to be a part of the story or not.

It is much easier to flip past a few pages with no words that might only make up a short portion in the original text, but a reader wouldn't usually skip over full pages of text out of the

possibility of missing something important. Thinking back to the scene that Dorian stabs Basil, the actual text is only two paragraphs long in Wilde’s version (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 121-22). However, in the *Marvel Illustrated* version, Fiumara made the scene go across five pages in twenty-four panels (see Fig. 16). If a reader tried to skip past such a significant number of pages in Wilde’s version, they would miss much, much more than just two paragraphs of information.



Fig. 16, Thomas and Fiumara, Basil’s death scene

The ability to stretch out such a short scene into so many panels means that the illustrator has decided to exercise their right in making the adaption how they see fit. They are changing the story to reflect their own ideas, and giving the reader the opportunity to be a part of it. There is a continuous ebb and flow between the original text and the graphic novels, but such a flow feeds back into the ideals that Wilde upheld—the creation of art without reflecting upon real life, “Art for Art’s Sake.”

## Conclusion

Tabachnick mentions that staring at the white page with only letters to visually take in can be exhaustive, even for readers who are engaged in the material (“A Comic-Book World” 26-27). What he is saying is that the visual medium that comic books provide is a new avenue to



absorb material in a different—perhaps better fashion than traditional books can provide. For Wilde, the prospect of good art meant that it should be different than real life. Graphic novel adaptations, although a reflection of the original work, are only reflecting a portion of the real-life book. The ability for the writers and illustrators to create new content out of the original text is providing the writers and illustrators with an opportunity to use their imaginations and create new, good art out of the medium, embodying “Art for Art’s Sake.”

The way that comics work are all aspects of Wilde’s views, when considering their ability to breathe new life into an old work of art. The ability to manipulate space and time, create new and unique icons for the characters, and to add image to sound are all aspects of the comic medium that *Marvel Illustrated*, *Graphic Classics*, and *Sterling* used in order to be influential, and introduce a new generation of readers to Oscar Wilde’s world. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel that conveyed Wilde’s views about art and the aesthetic, making it ideal for the graphic novel medium. Each version is unique, innovative, and influential in their own way.

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