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## **Dorian Gray from the page to the screen. A comparative semiotic analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oscar Wilde, 1891) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Albert Lewin, 1945)**

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### ABSTRACT

Oscar Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and its homonymous screen adaptation which dates back to the period immediately following WWII, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945), directed by Albert Lewin, constitute an interesting example of semiotic transference from the page to the screen. As an audiovisual product, the film will allow the researcher to perceive the ways in which words become alive and add an enormous symbolic and significant wealth to the already abundant information that is conveyed through the connotative and allusive language of the text. This work tries to analyse meticulously a selection of key scenes taken from the film adaptation to later determine with the highest degree of accuracy possible what has been omitted, what has been added, and what has been deemed worthy of modification in the new version of Wilde's work, where both Lewin and his cast of characters play the role of mediators.

**Keywords:** Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, semiotics, audiovisual translation

## 1. Refashioning Wilde: Albert Lewin's adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945)

The fate of literary works, as occurs with various other forms of artistic expression, is often uncertain. Some behave just like shooting stars and after a period during which they are adored by the public and the critics alike they vanish and become imperceptible. Others have languid beginnings and gradually become cultural points of reference to be eventually enshrined as canonical masterpieces. Still others last for a year, a generation, or an epoch, and after that are left to gather dust until their ultimate rediscovery and more careful assessment.

In the particular case of the works of Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, Oxford wit, epigrammatic genius, sharp critic, and Irish raconteur par excellence, his unforgettable public persona, his personal progression from the heights of elation to the depths of despair and incarceration –indeed physical and spiritual, but not creative–, as well as his enormous capacity for self-fashioning, led to the very unique transformation of a man into a popular idol. No work of Wilde's is read today without being influenced by the memory of the plight of the author's trials and his encounter with the stumbling block of some John Sholto Douglas, also known in London high society as the infamous 9<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Queensberry.

In effect, it is a difficult task to separate Wilde's life from his work either in the case of his poetry or his criticism, much less still his fairy stories, novel or plays. On many occasions, the author himself acknowledged that he drew inspiration from daily experiences and direct contact with other relevant cultural figures of his time at home and abroad. Wilde's dictum of putting all his genius into his life and only his talent into his works is of course open to several divergent interpretations, but it should be remembered that there are plentiful instances of documentary evidence which stand as incontrovertible proof that, far from the image of the dandy that he pursued to achieve in the public sphere throughout his younger years, Wilde the artist was a methodical and hard-working creator.

Although only the future will tell whether Wilde's oeuvre will go down in history and manage to stand in parallel with the Dickens, Thackerays, Brontës, and Shelleys, just to name but a few, it does not seem too adventurous to assert that in light of the tremendous volume of scholarship, depth of analysis, variety of discussion, abundance of translations, and diversity of adaptations, the status of Oscariana has so far proved to be impervious to libel, defamation, disrepute and, like the mythical bird, permanently emerges from its ashes with renewed strength.

The purpose of the present study is to compare Oscar Wilde's only novel *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*, published in book form in 1891, with what is perhaps one of its most evocative audiovisual adaptations, the eponymous 1945 feature film by American producer, screenwriter and director Albert Lewin.

This being a semiotic and analytical approach to the transmutation of a literary text into an audiovisual product, the main research interest will be to try to pinpoint the potential dissimilarities, if indeed there are any, which exist between the language of the page and the language of the screen. With this goal in mind, reference will be made to

the life and work of Oscar Wilde to provide sufficient background for comparison and contrast between these two realities. A succinct bio-bibliographical note will endeavour to signpost which key moments in the author's life could have had a direct impact on his artistic production, and thus contributed to certain aspects of the creative process: from characterisation to public reception.

The present study will not pay attention to how the 1945 film was produced, or compile any information concerning the use that was made of the original text neither by the director nor the cast. Instead, in a dyadic analysis of four cuts excerpted from the film, numerous observations will be made in which the author's text and the director's footage are judged hand in hand as equivalent but distinct expressions of a symbolic construct that features instances of intra- and intertextuality. Therefore, the central concern of this proposal is to delineate a method of semiotic analysis by means of which *Dorian Gray* the novel and *Dorian Gray* the film are to be more easily and clearly understood in their own context.

Except when quoting verbatim, all page numbers in the novel will make reference to M. P. Gillespie's edition (Wilde and Gillespie: 2006b). As for the film and the clips that are subject to semiotic interpretation alongside the textual fragments, reference to their location has also been provided.

## **2. Bio-bliographical background**

### 2.1. The author and his time: early years

Sloan (2009: 1) reports that young Oscar's life in Ireland left a very deep impression on the future author of *The Happy Prince* and *The Importance Of Being Earnest*: "[...] Family life at the eighteenth century house in Dublin's fashionable Merrion Square was cultured, convivial, and sometimes chaotic, with bailiffs at the door on at least one occasion because of his father's financial confusions". Oscar's mother, Lady Jane Wilde, née Elgee, whose literary pseudonym was none other than Speranza in memory of her alleged noble Italian ancestors, was the closest to native aristocracy there was in Ireland, at that time still a colony of the British Empire. In her role as national poetess and political activist, Lady Wilde knew how to use the interstices of British colonial power to her advantage and put forward controversial points without being chastised by the advocates of imperialism. Ellmann (1988: 5) adds that she "[...] had a sense of being destined for greatness, and imparted it. Her son subscribed to her view, and treated her with the utmost consideration and respect, almost as though he were her precursor rather than she his". Therefore, the mother figure in the Wilde household was totemic in size and splendid in intellect, especially when attention is paid to the number of receptions that are reported to have taken place both in the Dublin and the London households during her most active years. Again, Ellmann (8):

Immoderateness was a policy with her. In December 1848 she wrote, 'I should like to rage through life –this orthodox creeping is too tame for me– ah, this wild rebellious ambitious nature of mine. I wish I could satiate it with Empires, though a St Helena were the end'.

It becomes clear in light of Speranza's remarks that the revolutionary spirit of the age had not completely disappeared, and that the power of her convictions would get her far, first locally and then nationally. Her allusion to the fate of Napoleon is double-edged: one can rebel against apparently insurmountable odds, but one can do it only for a short while before one is suppressed, destroyed and forgotten.

Without a doubt it is always advisable to distinguish between real life and fictional works; this appears, however, to be a considerably arduous task in the face of the peculiarities of the Wildes. This was no ordinary Irish family: their economic position was relatively comfortable and would have been so even more had it not been for Sir William's regrettable investment management; their social status and versatile disposition allowed them to be more than welcome both in the colony and in court; and the children could reap the benefits not only of a literary, but also a scientific family background. Even in his later years, during his exile in Paris after completing his sentence to two years hard labour in up to three British penitentiaries, friends, acquaintances and other assorted witnesses whose diaries have been preserved comment that rather than conversation, Oscar had the gift of narration so skilful was he in the art of persuading and making his point beautifully. Both biographers agree that Wilde's parents, although sceptical at first about the intellectual achievements that were to be expected from their second child, soon realised that young Oscar was well equipped with a powerful imagination and a way with words.

Experiences from his childhood and his adult life will inform Oscar's main works of fiction in the same way that his studies in Dublin and Oxford, his lecture tour of the United States and Canada, his meeting with Walt Whitman, the French Decadents, and even the Pope during his short visit to Rome, which would cost him half his scholarship and a period of rustication, will provide the artist with enough original material as to be able to dispel the unfair accusations of plagiarism and appropriation of other artists' work that had been so damaging to his early career as a poet once and for all. In the same vein, apart from being naturally talented and a gifted student of the classical world, Oscar received the best education money could pay, first at Trinity College, Dublin, and then in the most ancient university in England, where he blossomed as a mature artist.

Having had first-hand contact with the Paris zeitgeist and seeing himself as an accomplished international figure whom everyone who was anyone wanted at their dinner table, Wilde decided to abandon his aesthete apparel along with his self-attributed professorship in Aesthetics, to concentrate on his other philosophical staples at least for a while. His transmogrification into a fully assimilated Irish gentleman among the English will see a marriage to Constance Lloyd, the birth of two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, the editorship of *The Woman's World* magazine, the publication of two collections of short stories, hundreds of critical reviews, and the seed of the idea that would become *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*.

## 2.2. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oscar Wilde, 1891)

Wilde's only novel was initially published in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1890 and later corrected, modified, and expanded to be released in book form in a variety of editions: from the very expensive and richly decorated hardbacks the author reserved for his closest friends and male partners, to the shilling versions which tried to combat pirated print runs both in Britain and America. The novel was judged as scandalous and corrupted in the most conservative circles, thus generating a long-winded debate in two of the most circulated London monthlies: the *St James's Gazette* and the short-lived *Daily Chronicle* (cf. Mason, 1908). Yet, what was the reason behind the attacks? What is more, where was the immorality in the story to inflame newspaper editors to such a degree as to suggest the government get down to work and send Wilde to prison? Perhaps a summary of the main plot of the 1891 version of the novel, that is, the one that contains the final amendments by the author after having received a veritable scolding in the papers, could be of some use.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* tells the story of a young man who, by a strange working of Fate, which remains unexplained throughout the novel, is granted his wish of not ageing. Rather than suffering the effects of feebleness and decay in his own person, it would be his painting that would act as a token of the passage of time. This strange pact comes to fruition after the mesmeric and almost diabolical encounter with Lord Henry Wotton, the perfect embodiment of the Victorian dandy, and his friend Basil Hallward, who paints the picture and feels as if he had left behind part of his soul the moment he finished the portrait. Trained in the doctrine of New Hedonism professed by Lord Henry and liberated from the restraints of Victorian social mores, Dorian sets himself the task of living his life to the fullest and thinking not about the consequences of his own acts, but about the multiplicity of ways that are open in front of him to maximise pleasure. The more Dorian searches for the ultimate pleasure, the more he has a deleterious effect on those who surround him, with the possible exception of the Mephistophelian figure of Lord Henry. Sibyl Vane, the actress Dorian believes he has fallen in love with, commits suicide after being rejected by him, and this makes Dorian aware of the curse that has created a binary opposition between the man and his enchanted picture: the picture would gradually degenerate on the surface, while at the same time Dorian would remain young as he was on the outside and fatally wounded spiritually. Lord Henry's influence, however, proves decisive when the protagonist expresses any slight intention to reform himself. The Hedonist mentor advises him not to change his ways and to thrust head-on in his pursuit of limitless pleasure. In consequence, the picture becomes hideous even to his owner; his horrid actions have baleful implications for all those involved with him –from Basil Hallward, whom Dorian murders in a fit of rage, to Sibyl Vane's vengeful brother, accidentally shot dead during a hunting raid– until things come to an end. Dorian, incapable of bearing the painful sight of his degenerate soul in the form of the painting, stabs it and dies. When

he is later found by his servants, his body is deformed beyond recognition and his painting recovers its original appearance, thus breaking the malefice.

Ellmann (1988: 300) makes an interesting point concerning the themes of the novel:

Dorian Gray, besides being about aestheticism, is also one of the first attempts to bring homosexuality into the English novel. Its appropriately covert presentation of this censored subject gave the book notoriety and originality.

Perhaps some people in the know would see this “censored subject” as one of the key elements of *Dorian Gray* as a novel, but judging by the reaction of the editors of the monthly magazines, most of the attacks directed to Wilde insisted on the poor quality of the story and its immoral subject. After all, a gentleman is depicted in the novel as a murderer and debauchee, which went against the grain of traditional Victorian values and common sense. For this reason, Ellmann (305) quips: “The effect of *Dorian Gray* was prodigious. No novel had commanded so much attention for years or awakened sentiments so contradictory in its readers. Wilde’s circle of young men were delighted”.

This “circle of young men” would be Wilde’s male lovers and rent boys, to whom, it has been reported (cf. Sloan, 2009), he gave signed first editions as a present. Among them Lord Alfred Douglas received one. It might be that Wilde’s circle enjoyed being at the centre of any scandal, but Constance’s letters reveal that after the publication “no one would talk to them”.

### **3. Semiotic analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oscar Wilde, 1891) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Albert Lewin, 1945)**

#### **3.1. Preliminary concerns**

From its inception, the present study set itself the goal of being able to identify with a high degree of accuracy the series of visual transformations and textual transmutations that allowed for the conversion of a literary work into an audiovisual creation. The text itself, however, does by no means exist in isolation and, in consequence, carries with it a freight of associations with other texts, discourses, and ideologies that cannot and should not be ignored. According to Cobley and Jansz (1998: 162): “For Eco, a serious semiotics should be concerned to weed out bad interpretations in order to establish the principles of those which arise from successful semiosis, alighting ultimately, perhaps, on a Final Interpretant”. It would probably be too bold to maintain Eco’s position here. Regardless of how percipient the observers may be, they have only been offered partial access to highly complex referential sets of symbols. Indeed, in our case, to state that “bad interpretations” can be removed to clear the path for the truth would be as immodest as to claim that the beauty of a whole room can be grasped by peering through the keyhole. What is more, we assume that adaptation, as is the case with Albert Lewin’s version, requires both creativity and renunciation: however faithful the

transference from the page to the screen may be, much is bound to be lost and a reasonable amount of information is liable to be added. That in itself is not “bad” or prevents in any way the pursuit of “true” meaning, since it is our belief that reinterpretation, comparison, and contrast direct the observer to a novel assessment of what, up until that point, had been challenging to understand. Our very own conclusions, therefore, will be as biased as the original, if not more, and we should keep in mind that our current state of affairs is neither that of 1945, when the film was first released in cinemas in the United States, nor that of 1891, when *The Picture Of Dorian Gray* was first published in book form by Ward, Lock and Company.

### 3.2. State of the art

Crow (2010: 34) provides a clear and straightforward definition of one of the key concepts that will inform the following dyadic analysis, which will focus on the close reading of the original text and the symbolic interpretation of the images and dialogue on the screen:

Peirce uses the term semiosis to describe the transfer of meaning; the act of signifying. What is distinct about his view of semiosis is that it is not a one-way process with a fixed meaning. It is part of an active process between the sign and the reader of the sign. It is an exchange between the two that involves some negotiation. The meaning of the sign will be affected by the background of the reader; their background, education, culture and their experiences will all have a bearing on how the sign is read.

It is interesting to note that the process of symbolic interpretation is understood here as active negotiation between abstract entities, and that the final result will very much depend on the quality of the eye of the beholder. Taking into account that semiosis, rather than being a unique stand-alone act, is to a certain extent iterative, at least until further interpretations are counterproductive or the observer is not sufficiently equipped as to carry on the, in Eco’s terms, “weeding out” procedure, false starts, trials and errors and a permanent sense of uncertainty are to be expected. Trying to pinpoint the scope of Eco’s theory of semiotics, Crow (165) further adds that:

[...] Although Eco sees an openness in the reading of signs, he does not, however, suggest that there are an infinite number of readings. Rather, he describes a situation where the work of art is addressed to an ideal reader who will select from the suggested readings of the work. The ideal reader is not so much a perfect reader who interprets the work exactly as the author intended, but as a reader who is awake to the possibilities that the work contains.

This rather less hard-core reading of Eco’s posits may prove helpful in its application to a parallel semiotic approach to a selection of dyads of written and accompanying audiovisual text. If the only precondition is for the observer to be “awake to the possibilities”, then there are really no right or wrong interpretations,

instead, and more subtly, it becomes the ideal readers' responsibility to gauge the accuracy of their proposals, which should undergo a continuous cycle of interpretative amelioration. Eco (1986: 2-3) fuses together Peirce's theoretical essentials with his own take on semiotics when he indicates that:

The principle of interpretation says that "a sign is something by knowing which we know something more" (Peirce). The Peircean idea of semiosis is the idea of an infinite process of interpretation. It seems that the symbolic mode is the paramount example of this possibility. However, interpretation is not reducible to the responses elicited by the textual strategies accorded to the symbolic mode. [...] Many texts have undoubtedly many possible senses, but it is still possible to decide *which one* has to be selected if one approaches the text in the light of a given topic, as well as it is possible to tell of certain texts *how many* isotopies [paths of interpretation] they display.

Leaving aside the complexity of Eco's standpoint and Peirce's almost chiasmic formulation of the principle of interpretation, it becomes clearer that out of an "infinite process of interpretation" (semiosis), a progressively more polished reading of symbols should be expected to come out in the end. In this respect, Chandler (2007: 187) observes that:

According to theorists of textual positioning, understanding the meaning of a text involves taking on an appropriate ideological identity. In order to make sense of the signs in a text the reader is obliged to adopt a 'subject-position' in relation to it.

This comment reminds analysts of the importance of being aware of their own limitations, since once the interpretive process is started, subject and object become part of the same semiotic space. In brief, to uncover the truth behind signs, observers must take heed of the signifying complexity they are presented with, decide on the path of interpretation that is more effectively conducive to what they judge as an adequate reading, complete as many iterations as necessary to be able to reach some conclusion, and self-assess their own interpretive capacity in light of their final observations.

To conclude with the enumeration of pre-requisites for the effective composition of a semiotic methodology for textual interpretation, we may produce three premises and one preliminary conclusion: (1) semiosis is to be understood as a long process in which interpretation may only progress piecemeal; (2) each iteration brings the interpreter closer and closer to the ideal of truth; (3) the interpreter, positioned as a subject and involved in the interpretive process as much as the symbols which are presented for analysis, is affected by the changing conditions inherent to semiosis, thus; any semiotic interpretation is necessarily partial, but contributes fragmentarily to the pursuit of the "real".

### 3.3. Parallel analysis of four excerpts from the novel and their film correlatives

The subsequent semiotic analysis has been conceived as a comparison between written text and audiovisual text. The possible sources for the former have already been hinted



at in previous sections and the bio-bibliographical note about the author will, we hope, prove useful in the study of reference and allusion.

We remain fully aware of the separation that must exist between the life of the author, the persona of the narrator, and the qualities of the characters, although, as we had stated earlier, we believe that in the particular case of Oscar Wilde, the lines that divide those three realities have gradually become more and more blurred. In fact, biographers and commentators alike would agree that the talent that Wilde claimed to have put into his work found inspiration in the daily occurrences of his personal and professional life. As for the audiovisual text, the superimposition of a plethora of layers of information will need an even closer reading: the feature film is an adaptation of a novel that, at the time, was still in the process of being critically reassessed.

Therefore, from an analytical perspective, it would seem most efficient to put forward a common approach to interpret the page and the screen at once.

### 3.3.1. *First dyad: Come into the garden*

**Text:** chapter I, pp. 6-8.

**Audiovisual clip location:** One minute into the film, starting after the intertitle which reads “LONDON - 1886”.

**Audiovisual clip length:** 2m 48s, until Lord Henry says to Basil “Come into the garden”.

In our semiotic interpretation of the textual and audiovisual material in conjunction, special notice should be taken of the derivative nature of the latter: as we will see later, the film amalgamates the novel, the author’s life, other works by the same author, works by other eminent Victorians, classical pieces of literature, conjectures concerning ideological standpoints of the author’s era, Hollywood clichés, and allusions to the time when the film was produced. In this veritable palimpsest of intra- and intertextuality, it is our intention to explicate and justify the use of certain signs by virtue of which rather than the film being simply an adaptation, it manages to recreate the original and take its premise even further.

In the textual fragment, Lord Henry Wotton is characterised as a languid aristocrat conversant with the principles of paradox. Wielding his “opium-tainted cigarette”, he discusses the contrast he has observed between the Grosvenor and the Academy, where, according to him, there are “[...] either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse”. Interestingly, this exchange with Basil Hallward was not part of the 1890 edition of *The Picture Of Dorian Gray* as it was submitted to *Lippincott’s Magazine* (cf. Wilde and Gillespie 2006b: 186), but it will be reshaped in the form of an equivalent exchange between Algernon and Lady Bracknell in act one of *The Importance Of Being Earnest* (1895), where the former, discussing the programme for her aunt’s dinner party says, “[...] if one plays good music, people don’t listen, and if one plays bad music, people don’t talk”, to which aunt Augusta responds, “[...]

French songs I cannot possibly allow. People always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse” (Wilde and Gillespie 2006a: 14).

Reformulation of rhetorical figures in the same work, between works, as well as from oral to written discourse, is a feature that Wilde will come to adopt as he becomes an author of repute. Lord Henry’s “there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about” is an instance of Wilde’s conversational wit that was eventually made part of his corpus of published bon mots. As for Basil’s remarks on the subject of leaving town without telling his family in a romantic escapade of sorts, which, in light of the painter’s interventions, could easily be interpreted as a homoerotic encoding of his inner feelings, such topics will be also revisited in the Bunburying episodes of *The Importance Of Being Earnest*, where one character could be Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the other create a terrible invalid by the name of Bunbury to avoid importunate social occasions and continue freely with his pursuit of new, recondite pleasures.

The scene that we have selected from the film begins with Lord Henry’s majestic though uninvited entrance in his artist friend’s house. Before he even alights from the carriage, the observer may realise how meticulously Wilde’s atmospheric description has been reflected: this devotee of “the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing” is elegantly dressed and carries gloves, necktie, top hat, moustache and goatee, and the intrinsic cigarette and mouthpiece. His reading of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* identifies him as a Frenchified decadent, and by looking at the way he tosses the driver his hardback copy of the book of poems, a considerably careless bibliophile at that. With the exception of Lord Henry’s superb transformation into a living and talking human being, all of the elements that have been described as part of the opening scene do not exist in the novel. This would undoubtedly constitute a case of semiotic enrichment, of which we will be seeing multiple others before the end of this analysis.

The novel alludes to Greek mythology when Lord Henry places Dorian Gray side by side with Adonis and Narcissus. Following Bullfinch (2000), the goddess Venus hurts herself accidentally with one of Cupid’s arrows and falls madly in love with young Adonis, whose fate was to be killed by a wild boar and whose blood gave Anemones, or Wind Flowers, their pomegranate colour. The same author speaks of Narcissus as a beautiful young man who fell in love with his own reflection in the waters, where he fell and drowned when trying to give himself a kiss. The moral of these two stories and the tragedy of Adonis and Narcissus prefigures Dorian’s fatal ending from very early in the plot. Wilde, a classical scholar out of Oxford, knew what he was implying when he put this comparison in Lord Henry’s mouth, and he could even have foreseen the reaction in the literary papers to his contention that intellect has a detrimental effect on beauty, to the point of suppressing it. Sagaert (2012: 88, our translation) adds that:

In ancient Greece, reasoning, debating, and cultivating oneself were inseparable from physical beauty. The term *kalos kagathos*, translated as physical beauty and beauty of the soul are of the utmost importance. They relate the beautiful and the good to a certain ideal

that implies an aesthetic, ethical, and political dimension. Conversely, in Oscar Wilde's novel, physical beauty finds purpose in itself. That is what makes it different from the Platonic Idea of beauty.

Briefly put, Wilde compares the protagonist of his story to his two closest Greek counterparts, even at the cost of associating physical beauty with certain death. Let us remind ourselves of Basil's somewhat alliterative wordplay concerning secrecy, mystery, and marvel in modern life: secrets and hidden meanings are indeed a basic ingredient of this tale of a lost soul.

The artist's studio and its contents are undeniably worth mentioning: clocks, buckets filled up to the brim with used brushes, canvasses, sets of colourful palettes, china vases, oil and charcoal self-portraits, putti, busts and embroideries of Buddha or Buddhist motifs, Greek sculptures, Louis XVI furniture, decorated mirrors, gas chandeliers, appropriately placed pieces of rope, bronze sculptures of Hermes, a centaur and, last but not least, an Egyptian cat ("one of the seventy-three Egyptian deities"). Bullfinch (2000: 102) says the following about centaurs:

These monsters were represented as men from the head to the loins, while the remainder of the body was that of a horse. The ancients were too fond of a horse to consider the union of his nature with man's as forming a very degraded compound, and accordingly the Centaur is the only one of the fancied monsters of antiquity to which any good traits are assigned.

Earlier on (6), the same author provides a very informative note on the god Hermes:

Mercury (Hermes) was the son of Jupiter and Maia. He presided over commerce, wrestling, and other gymnastic exercises, even over thieving, and everything, in short, which required skill and dexterity. He was the messenger of Jupiter, and wore a winged cap and winged shoes. He bore in his hand a rod entwined with two serpents, called the caduceus.

To the novel's Adonis and Narcissus, Lewin's 1945 production adds a multi-layered visual panorama that is intended to captivate the audience and provide a series of references to be internalised, in Eco's terms, using the most appropriate among the available isotopies, or paths to the right interpretation. Basil's room is populated with tools and decorative objects in equal measure; therefore, it has been designed as a place of inspiration as much as a place of creative exertion. Hermes monitors the room from above and a centaur stands guard beside the entrance, accompanied by a group of Buddhas, whose wisdom is contained in the book that Basil uses as reference and Lord Henry laughs at.

The simultaneous on-screen presence of Lord Henry, the Egyptian god, the mirror, and the hanging piece of rope somewhat resembling the gallows would suggest his visit is not that of a friend but a bad omen in itself. Lord Henry's initial fascination with the picture ensnares his senses and moves him to quench his voyeuristic thirst using Dorian as his object.

With our analysis of reference and allusion we contribute to the iterative process of semiosis in which new layers of information whose origin is in the novel have been adapted to a completely new set of circumstances. Our main hypothesis at this point would be that Albert Lewin sought to adapt *The Picture Of Dorian Gray* using abundant textual, co-textual (i.e.: manuscripts or *Lippincott's* edition, for instance) and contextual materials contemporary to the author in addition to other sources that could not have possibly been employed by Wilde, such as reactions to the 1891 publication, Wilde's subsequent criticism, poems, and plays, newspaper coverage of his public persona, and critical reception of the author contemporary to Lewin. Lewin was no biographer, although he was probably quite conscious of the fact that, to produce a successful adaptation, he would have to give the public at least part of what they wanted and prevent himself from coming to Wilde with his own agenda. Notwithstanding, it is our view that Lord Henry's characterisation in the film is such that it could very well be equated to the figure of Oscar Wilde, as it was conceived in the mid-1940s. Whether or not this theory deserves further development will be determined by the analysis of the subsequent scenes, in which much more direct allusions to Wilde and his works after *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are used to build unexpected plot lines and shocking film discourse.

### 3.3.2. *Second dyad: Words, words, words*

**Text:** chapter II, pp. 18-27.

**Audiovisual clip location:** Six and a half minutes into the film, before Basil says to Lord Henry "Sit down then, Harry".

**Audiovisual clip length:** 5m 58s, until Dorian states "I would give my soul for that".

This second dyad reveals the key elements of the plot and conjures up most of the topics that will inform the remainder of the story: from the pursuit of pleasure to the idea of a pact with an unseen force, and from the battle between art and science to the influence of an older man over a younger one. The first section of the selected clip, which features the critical part of Lord Henry's discourse on the importance of youth, has already been analysed by Seagroatt (1998: 741):

In the first scene of the 1945 film adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry Wotton captures a butterfly in his top hat, slides a plate of chloroform under its rim, and asphyxiates the insect. After he impales the butterfly with a pin and mounts it on a clean white card, he presents the specimen to Dorian Gray. This first glimpse of Harry is both effective and misleading. Though the procedure foregrounds the arch-aesthete's peculiarly scientific predilections (and reveals his alarming cruelty), it belittles his scientific curiosity: Harry's specimen gathering seems the result of boredom rather than a sustained interest in the natural sciences—or indeed sustained interest in anything.

We would take issue with Seagroatt's reading of the scene on two particular points: Lord Henry's pursuit of the fake butterfly in the film reveals very little about his character, much less his "alarming cruelty"; and the first time the audience comes into contact with Lord Henry is not in the room itself, but, as stated above, reading Baudelairean verses inside a carriage on his way to Basil Hallward's home, which produces a rather different impression, making the character into a languid man of letters instead of a devotee of scientific research. In spite of these observations, we would agree that Harry's actions foreground events and discussions that will be enriched by the lord's torrent of arguments.

It is worth mentioning that, in a part of the film that has not been excerpted for the present study where Basil and Lord Henry are conversing in the garden, the latter catches sight of the infamous butterfly for the first time and manages to identify its genus and species as *Limenitis sibylla*. In our view, this would be a case of audiovisual prolepsis that in some way complicates the establishment of a clear and direct interpretative path for the symbolic use of the lepidopter.

Initially, one might surmise, as Seagroatt did, that the butterfly is there to characterise Lord Henry and support the theory of his being a man of two minds in everything he tries to accomplish: on the one hand he proves to be a man of action when he is excited by some external incentive, and on the other he demonstrates a remarkably short attention span that prevents him from devoting himself completely to any one task. Nevertheless, the superimposition of images that can be attested in the selected clip point towards a possible alternative reading of the butterfly symbol: in fact, without even paying much attention to what he is doing or saying, Lord Henry is capable of hitting two birds with one stone when he catches the butterfly and lures Dorian to the creed of New Hedonism.

Whilst Basil captures Dorian's soul in the painting, Lord Henry chloroforms the butterfly, the Egyptian god in the shape of a cat starts to take effect on the young man, the appropriately placed mirror reflects his image, and the small wooden mannequin on the side table metaphorically stands for the control and subjection he has been reduced to. Therefore, from this oversupply of visual and aural information, it could be concluded that where the novel is only hinting at a tragic dénouement, the feature film discloses all the mysteries for those observant enough to piece them together.

Still another anticipatory line of argument relates to Lord Henry's identification of the butterfly as *Limenitis sibylla* and the plausible covert suggestion that the insect stands for the way Sibyl Vane, and not Dorian Gray, will fall in the characters' net of corruption. At one point in the film, while looking inside a bush in the garden, Lord Henry utters the following words: "That's a very common type of butterfly, Basil. *Limenitis sibylla*. It hardly belongs in a gentleman's garden". This classist observation will be later revisited when Basil and Lord Henry attend Sibyl's show in the dismal tavern by the name of The Two Turtles.

In conclusion, whereas in the film the use of the insect conjures up a number of divergent semiotic processes conducive to its symbolic interpretation, the novel makes use of insects, birds, flowers, scents, and sensations as the perfect background for the

introduction of a controversial philosophy which the narrator describes in the film as a “praise of folly”.

Mahaffey (1998: 229, note 69) draws parallels between Wilde’s opinions on his creation and the symbolic relationship between Dorian, his reflection, and his portrait:

On another level, Wilde suggests that Dorian –translated into art– has the capacity to mirror Basil, exposing the corruption that shadows his desire for perfection, so Wilde’s book (another artistic mediation) has the capacity to mirror the reader. In a famous letter to the editor of the Scots Observer (9 July 1890), Wilde claims that “Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian’s sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them” (*A as C*, 248). Wilde’s claim supports his assertion in the preface that “It is the spectator, not life, that art really mirrors”.

In the selected textual fragment for this dyad, Lord Henry questions the existence of sin as a cultural construct, to which he later adds that people “Of course, they are charitable. They feed the hungry and clothe the beggar. But their own souls starve, and are naked”. It could be argued that the lord, regardless of his voyeurism and general passivity, is the only character that goes to any lengths necessary to turn away from Victorian hypocrisy: Basil flees the city at regular intervals for reasons unspecified and then returns to his studio to wallow in *The Wisdom Of Buddha*; Dorian sees himself as a restrained, rational individual, but transforms into a debauchee the moment he is offered the possibility of going against the grain; Sibyl, either in the novel or in the film version, behaves like an automaton until she meets the man of her dreams, who destroys her completely, body and soul. This impossible conundrum is embodied in the binary opposition between mediaevalism and the Hellenic ideal that had been one of Wilde’s main preoccupations since his days at Oxford. Better still than the Hellenic ideal, however, would be the new philosophy of Hedonism, where “[t]he only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it”, later reformulated by Wilde as “I can resist anything except temptation”. According to Gillespie (in Wilde & Gillespie 2006b: 399-400):

For Dorian, Basil’s painting operates in conjunction with Lord Henry’s doctrine of New Hedonism, which has already disposed the young man’s mind to assign paramount importance to sensual pleasure. Readers enjoy a broader perspective. As the narrative unfolds, Dorian’s egocentric behaviour counterpoints our first perceptions of his nature, reshaping our sense of his consciousness as it evolves during his continual search for new pleasures.

Dorian first realises that his beauty means power when he is presented side by side with a piece of art and a theory to supplement it. The film seizes this opportunity to theorise about how the Faust-like pact could have come to be, forcing new lines of dialogue on Lord Henry, depicting the Egyptian deity of the cat in the portrait, and using the latter as a token of dark, occult, and dangerous powers not to be meddled with. Later in his analysis of the novel and its plot (402-403), the same author adds:

As we read through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it becomes evident that an insistent nostalgia continually informs the images of Dorian created in the minds of both Basil and Harry. Each retains a retrospective view of Dorian's nature remarkably close to the judgements reached in Basil Hallward's studio on the June day described in chapter 2, counterpointing the sense of change that surrounds the later stages of the novel. Furthermore, each reflects, in a limited way, the problem facing anyone who tries to read the novel from a single, exclusionary point of view. Each man thinks he sees a complete individual, yet each sees only the picture that he created from the single perspective that he has adopted and validated.

The nostalgia Gillespie mentions is hardly complex to justify once the reader becomes aware of the fact that the novel is told in retrospect. We need only leaf through the first few pages of chapter I to realise that the narrator is telling the story of three men whose fate has already been decided: "[...] some little distance away, was sitting the artist himself, Basil Hallward, whose sudden disappearance some years ago caused, at the time, such public excitement, and gave rise to so many strange conjectures" (6). This would constitute yet another example of foreshadowing since very early in the novel. Lord Henry adores youth, but has lost it; Basil Hallward desires beauty, but does not possess it; and Dorian Gray pursues absolute pleasure, although he will never find it. The three men are dissatisfied and vent their frustrations making one another miserable.

The last two points of dissimilarity to be analysed within this dyad concern the figure of Gladys and Dorian's initial reaction to Basil's masterpiece. Firstly, Gladys could be described as a relatively unimportant character in the novel, perhaps even a mere narratorial instrument to direct Dorian to his final destination. In the film, however, she is transmuted into Basil's niece and equipped with a rather melancholic backstory whereby her mother died tragically when she was only a baby and uncle Basil took over her upbringing. Secondly, Dorian's reaction to both Lord Henry's philosophical "immoralities" and Basil's artistic dexterity are undoubtedly stronger: Basil, desperate at the sight of his two friend's critical view of his best work heads for "the long palette-knife, with its thin blade of lithe steel" and intends for a moment at least to "rip up the painting", until Dorian himself intervenes by crying out loud that destroying his work "would be murder". Indeed, if Basil had reacted more quickly, the main plot line, as well as the main character's life span, would have been surprisingly shorter. Notwithstanding, Dorian's eventual acceptance and almost unhealthy obsession with his portrait comes at the high cost of objectification: "[...] as soon as you are dry, you shall be varnished and framed, and sent home. Then you can do what you like with yourself".

### *3.3.3. Third dyad: Prince Charming and Sir Tristan*

**Text:** chapter VII, pp. 73-75.

**Audiovisual clip location:** Thirty-one minutes into the film, when Dorian starts playing the piano in the presence of Sibyl and the painting.

**Audiovisual clip length:** Five minutes, until Sibyl changes her mind and decides to stay for the night.

On this occasion, our textual and audiovisual selection attests the conspicuous dissimilarity between the novel and the film in the way the break-up has been treated. Where Sibyl the actress echoes Tennyson's *The Lady Of Shalott* when she says, "[y]ou have made me understand what love really is. My love! My love! Prince Charming! Prince of life! I have grown sick of shadows", Sibyl the singer makes her point much more skilfully by making use of her silence and acquiescence. Furthermore, the reasons that move Dorian Gray to break Sibyl's heart are radically different in the two versions.

In the novel, Dorian puts the philosophy of New Hedonism in action by confessing to the former object of his adoration: "[y]ou used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect". Therefore, when the novelty ends, a new pleasure must be sought if one wants to avoid the effects of weariness and boredom. More interestingly still, the young man reproduces Lord Henry's pronouncement almost verbatim when he regrets that Sibyl has caused him an unforgivable disappointment: "The world would have worshipped you, and you would have borne my name. What are you now? A third-rate actress with a pretty face". These brutal words literally destroy Sibyl and drive her to commit suicide.

Powell (in Raby: 2000, 184) believes that the eventual watershed in Sibyl's life, that of leaving her acting career to be the mother of Dorian's children and the angel of his house, was inevitably to lead her to a tragic end: "[...] Deep-seated in Victorian thought, even within the theatre itself, was the idea of an unbridgeable gap between women performers on one hand and wives and mothers on the other".

In the end, it appears, Lord Henry was right when he predicted that Dorian's romance would not last, as he was also correct in his assessment of the young man's expectations after being converted to the creed of Hedonism. Sibyl, on her part, never did amount to more than a thing to be possessed, or a prey to be shot down. With just one kiss from her Prince Charming, she became a captive of someone else's every whim.

In the film, the matter of Sibyl and Dorian increases in complexity. The allegory of the sparrow and the canary featured in the song at *The Two Turtles* continues to be developed by means of a contemporary twist that would bring the melodrama closer to 1945 spectators. In Dorian's richly decorated living room, under the influence of the portrait, the bewitched cat idol, the piano, Chopin's *Les Préludes*, and the accuracy of the grandfather clock, a game of shadows and light takes place at two in the morning. At Lord Henry's suggestion, Dorian sets Sibyl a trap whereby she would be blackmailed into staying for the night. Thus, a kiss in the original version turns into sexual intercourse before marriage in the adaptation to the screen. In other words, what Wilde's original tale had only hinted at, Lewin's adaptation brings to the fore much more explicitly. In fact, Dorian responds to Sibyl's initial reticence by describing her reaction as "conventional". That, however, is not the end of the story.



Lewin's production features an instance of what we would describe as a phenomenon of self-referentiality; a short fragment from "The Sphinx", a poem by Oscar Wilde, is read in this scene and used to voice Dorian Gray's feelings in his search for forbidden pleasures involving Sibyl Vane. What is more, Sibyl inquires who wrote the "strange poem" and she receives an answer that could be deemed metaliterary: "A brilliant young Irishman out of Oxford. His name is Oscar Wilde". What makes this situation peculiar is that Oscar Wilde becomes a character in a story he himself penned, a poem which was written and published in 1894 is introduced in actions dating back to 1890-91, and the fragmentary selection from said poem endeavours to support a plot device that was absent in the original text: the Egyptian cat which renders Dorian unageing. Nevertheless, by way of precaution, Lewin had set the film in 1886, which solves part of the problem and introduces a remarkable anachronism. From Wilde (2000: 127-135) we may see how Lewin's scriptwriters chose to cherry-pick a few verses from the considerably long poem "The Sphinx" in order to underpin their symbolic use of the Egyptian cat: "Dawn follows Dawn and Nights grow old and all the while this curious cat / Lies crouching on the Chinese mat with eyes of satin rimmed with gold. [...] Get hence, you loathsome mystery! Hideous animal, get hence! / You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me what I would not be. / You make my creed a barren sham, you wake foul dreams of sensual life" (vv. 8-9 and 167-169). The incongruity of this decision lies in the use of the poem. We might accept that a reference to Oscar Wilde in the film itself would be enlightening to the American audiences the film was being released to. We might also understand that Chopin be fused together with the "Goodbye Little Yellow Bird" score to evoke certain associations in the viewing public. However, the use of a poem by Wilde for its mere mention of a cat to support the choice of an insignificant film prop seems quite excessive. In effect, verses 8 and 9 of the poem allude to a cat, even so, verses 167 to 169, which are the last part of Dorian's on-screen recitation, deal not with the cat, but with the Sphinx that gives its name to the poem and to whom the apostrophe makes reference to.

#### *3.3.4. Fourth dyad: Blackmailing Alan*

**Text:** chapter XIV, pp. 140-44.

**Audiovisual clip location:** 1h 14min into the film, when Alan Campbell is introduced by the butler.

**Audiovisual clip length:** 3m 45s, until Alan grasps the blackmail letter, defeated.

Lewin's cinematic version has preserved most of the original text and turned into a somewhat stilted dialogic exchange on the part of two of the most inexpressive members of the cast. The role of the narrator, absent in the film for this particular scene, helps the reader to imagine how the action is taking place and gives access to the minds of both characters, revealing the inner and outer feelings of aggression. With respect to

the role Alan Campbell plays in the resolution of Basil's murder, of whose load Dorian wishes to be unburdened, Seagroatt (1998: 746) comments:

Campbell's importance to the plot is relatively small, which makes Wilde's descriptions especially suggestive. We glimpse Dorian's past through their interaction, and we get the unmistakable hint that scientists are more useful with dead bodies than they are with the souls or minds of living beings.

From the original text we may gather that Dorian and Alan were friends in the past, but, as occurred to those people of his acquaintance who are still alive after meeting him, a great chasm now separates them. The letter Dorian writes to blackmail his old friend remains a secret both in the original and in the film adaptation, however, the screenwriters make up a few lines of dialogue through which Alan Campbell allows the spectators to know that it has something to do with a woman who is very close to him: "It would kill her", he says, "to have her name involved in such a scandal". The rest is so cryptic that to put forward a plausible explanation would hardly leave the realm of pure conjecture.

As had happened earlier with the introduction of one of Wilde's poems to support a plot line which did not exist in the original, on this occasion Alan's arrival triggers another episode of poetic fourth wall breaks. Once again, Dorian commands one of his guests to listen to his recitation: "I sent my Soul through the Invisible, / Some letter of that after-life to spell: / And by and by my soul returned to me / And answered: "I myself am Heaven and hell". These verses belong to the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, translated by Edward Fitzgerald from Persian into English for the first time around 1857-58. If Wilde's "The Sphinx" had been cherry-picked to relate the verses to the on-screen presence of an Egyptian cat idol, Khayyám's canto is probably featured in the film adaptation because of the inclusion of a number of buzz words that would prove effective after the semiotic transference: soul, after-life, heaven, and hell. However, Karlin's interpretation of the cantos (in FitzGerald 2009: xvi) might modify the average viewer's conception of the verses, at least when they are not presented in isolation:

The poem is governed by his [Omar Khayyám's] heterodox scorn; as well as ridiculing attempts to dogmatize about the afterlife, it questions the justice of the divine order in terms that unmistakably refer to Christianity as much as to Islam, the notional target; this aspect of the poem reaches a scandalous apotheosis in stanza LVIII, where God is offered man's forgiveness.

And this comes from a 12<sup>th</sup> century Persian astronomer and poet. The controversial stanza (45) reads as follows: "Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make, / And who with Eden didst devise the Snake; / For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man / Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give –and take!" This is to show how the entity which undergoes a process of semiotic transformation hardly ever remains as it was before the process started. "The Sphinx" became a short poem about mystical cats, and the

*Rubáiyát* left behind its heterodoxy to give way to a more hermetic reading intended as a continuation of the discourse surrounding Dorian Gray's temporal stagnation.

A cursory overview of the differences between the novel and the film would once again lead us to three premises and one preliminary conclusion: (1) every instance of environmental description in the written text has been preserved in the audiovisual text, "He kept his hands in the pockets of his Astrakhan coat"; (2) reflections of the characters' state of mind have been almost completely suppressed in the film adaptation, "He felt as if his heart was beating himself to death in some empty hollow", "[...] dividing time into separate atoms of agony each of which was too terrible to be borne", both of them absent from the actor's performances; (3) the verses of Omar Khayyám have no *raison d'être*; therefore, all poetry insertions in the film so far have rendered the adaptation more incongruous and made the spectator disengaged from the development of the action. To put it another way, when the interpretative process is complicated in excess, free adaptation may be detrimental for the new version of the initial product.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Before commencing our analytical approach to Wilde's work and Lewin's adaptation we had conjectured that it would be possible to draw the line between the director's commitment to faithfulness and his artistic concessions. In fact, our first impression after re-reading the novel and finding an audiovisual counterpart in a production that was released more than fifty years after the novel was published had been that of a recreation rather than a complete and integral transference from the page to the screen.

Literary references and allusions that were absent in the original text have been introduced with the intention of enriching the primary and secondary sources. As we have put forward in our careful study of each of the dyads, the units of analysis that we established to pinpoint the similarities and potential divergences between the excerpts taken from the novel and their cinematic mirror images, this pretension of improvement has given way to diverse effects on the adaptation, often successful –as in the case of Sibyl's change of profession and the inspired performance of a remarkably foreshadowing musical score–, sometimes insufficiently justified –two instances of which would be the insertion of fragments from the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and Wilde's own *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, a true anachronism, even for a film set in 1886 as the director makes clear after the introductory credits–, and inescapably laden with intertextuality –let us just think, for example, of the melodrama in which the spectators are immersed when they are forced to bear witness to not one but two failed love stories.

From the outset, the study pursued the objective of assessing not simply the level of achievement of semiotic transmutation, but also the degree to which the researcher's own preconceptions might have certain repercussions and, in consequence, affect the way the dyads were looked at, thought of, and reflected upon.

Whenever reference was made to the isotopies or alternative paths of interpretation that were open for the observer to choose from, special attention was being paid to the necessity for the researcher to remain self-aware. Determining the screenwriters' possible dilemmas may have involved some degree of hypothesising and even a touch of speculation, but the steps that were followed at every stage to make sure that no hint went unnoticed are there to ensure replicability and therefore leaves a collection of symbols available for future reconsiderations.

This comparative semiotic study could be synthesised into a total of six fundamental points, which serve as conclusions: (1) Wilde's work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in light of its successive textual transformations in the period early-1890 to late-1891 cannot be perceived as an unchanging cultural artefact that is in any way fixed or permanent; (2) contemporary criticism up until 1945 may be labelled as an 'original' source for Lewin in the same terms as Wilde's work by itself; (3) Wilde's personal and professional affairs can never be completely separated from the textual fruits his creativity bore; (4) Lewin's adaptation fictionalises the author in the exact same way it fictionalises the text; (5) the attempt to gauge from the present how an adaptation of a novel published in 1891 may have been received by the average cinemagoer in 1945 might perhaps require an infinite number of analytical iterations, and; (6) some semiotic readings may have lost all applicability by now owing to the passage of time, that is to say, some past realities are inevitably irrecoverable.

In our case, from Wilde's page to Lewin's screen, the author has changed position relative to the characters he created to the extreme of being able to look them in the eye and control their actions from the inside. This, in essence, has been the most impressive in our palimpsest of semiotic transmutations.

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