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BA THESIS

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Literary, Cultural and Historical Influences in the Works and Beliefs of Oscar Wilde

Literární, kulturní a historické vlivy v díle a přesvědčeních Oscara Wildea

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně, že jsem řádně citoval všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

V Praze dne 15. 8. 2012 …......................................

Alex Lorenzů

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

Abstract

The thesis deals with the cultural and literary influences that can be traced in the works of Oscar Wilde. Its aim is to map out and elucidate some of the important motifs of the author's work and aesthetics in their own context as well as in the wider cultural-historical one. The methods used will be comparison of relevant materials, analysis of certain expressions typical of the author with their connotations, explaining the intertextual allusions in Wilde's work, and historical sources. The requisite attention will also be paid to Wilde as a representative of a subversive element of Victorian society and how this relates to his sexuality; that is to say, exploring the issue of the tabooing of non-heterosexuality, which may have been a decisive factor in Wilde's criticism of the conventions of his era and to his search of positive role-models in the ancient tradition both for his art and for his personal philosophy.

Keywords

Ancient Greece, ancient Rome, *fin-de-siecle*, homosexuality, intertextuality, *l'art pour l'art*, LGBTQ*, *Marius the Epicurean*, metatextuality, non-heterosexuality, Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Victorian era, Walter Pater.

Abstrakt

Práce se bude věnovat kulturním a literárním vlivům promítajícím se do tvorby Oscara Wildea. Jejím cílem je zmapovat a vysvětlit důležité motivy autorovy tvorby a estetiky jak v rámci děl samotných, tak i v širším kulturně-historickém kontextu. Bude užito metod srovnání relevantních materiálů, analýzy výrazů typických pro autora a jejich konotací, práce s intertextuálními odkazy ve Wildeově díle a s historickými prameny. Patřičná pozornost bude věnována Wildeovi jako představiteli subversivního proudu ve viktoriánské společnosti v souvislosti s jeho sexualitou, resp. otázkám její tabuizace, která mohla mít rozhodující vliv na autorův kritický postoj ke konvencím jeho doby a jeho hledání pozitivních vzorů především v antické tradici, což se zpětně odráží v jeho tvorbě a osobní filosofii.

Klíčová slova

Antické Řecko, antický Řím, *fin-de-siecle*, homosexualita, intertextualita, *l'art pour l'art*, LGBTQ*, *Marius the Epicurean*, metatextualita, ne-heterosexualita, *Obraz Doriana Graye*, Oscar Wilde, viktoriánské období, Walter Pater.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Statement of Purpose

The work and life of Oscar Wilde have always attracted attention. Wilde's own lifetime seems to have been a sort of balancing act, marked on the one hand by avoiding public curiosity while on the other hand maintaining a personal mystique that could only serve to fuel such curiosity. In the decades after his death, Wilde's reputation for subversion continued to thrive alongside his literary legacy, sometimes even relegating him to a sort of token gay emissary into the mainstream consciousness. Although key details of his personal life used to be customarily omitted from basic curricula, they finally became part of his place in the literary canon as a more open-minded approach to non-heterosexuality began to take hold in the education system and in society at large. The contemporary image of Oscar Wilde is equal parts a literary giant and a queer hero.

Despite this, however, little attention seems to be paid to the complexities of Oscar Wilde in the context of Czech educational institutions, especially below the tertiary level, with respect to the personal side of his life. As for the relationships that arguably influenced the direction his writing took at particular times, they are treated to a sort of re-criminalization in the classroom: instead of being encouraged to delve deeper into the goldmine of analysis offered by those interpersonal histories, students are taught to remember a brief summary of an incarceration, furthering the idea that the only possible association with non-heterosexuality, the only possible outcome for a gay writer, should be public humiliation culminating in a shackled existence. Instead of using Oscar Wilde as a shining example of the fact that queer people have always occupied a place in history and influenced the cultural consciousness, his life's story is spun as a narrative of inevitable tragedy.

This discrepancy between reinforcing the positives and negatives, between celebration and mourning, has in part provided the impetus for the formation of this thesis. In this work, I will examine the connections of Oscar Wilde to other cultural and historical figures, many of whom championed their status apart from the expectation of compulsory heterosexuality as a virtue in its

own way and not a vice, much like Wilde coded those meanings into his work and explicitly argued against their criminalization in his famous trial. I believe in the necessity of spotlighting such cultural connections, lest they be denied by the still rather strong tendency of our society to treat heterosexual behaviour and the historical anecdotes reinforcing it as the default, as something that should supposedly be common to all unless otherwise stated, not to mention as the only phenomenon worth showcasing in the subsequent archiving of historical events. For this reason, the allusions in Wilde's work and his attitude to classical Greece and Rome, to the Renaissance, and to some of the eminent theorists of his own era will be featured among the topics examined in my thesis.

1.2: Special Terminology

As for terminology, there may be need for specialized vocabulary to describe the minority groups of relevance to this paper. I have sometimes opted to use the broad category of non-heterosexuality in order to be inclusive of all the sexual orientations that fall outside heterosexuality as the supposed norm, including the often most relevant homosexuality, but also bi-/pansexuality and others, wherever a more general definition is preferable given the context of the statement in question. Other umbrella terms I may employ on occasion include queer, used as a reclaimed descriptor that can encompass all sexuality- and/or gender-based minorities, and the LGBTQ* acronym (comprising lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other marginalized identities along the sexuality/gender axis.). It often appears impossible to confine the sexualities and identities of people from the pre-modern era in one neat box labelled “homosexual”—a category that, indeed, was only coined in its modern meaning that presupposes inflexibility in the nineteenth century—which necessitates the use of more inclusive or less specific labels whenever those may be more genuine than operating on the notion of mutually exclusive binary oppositions.

As a side-note for the sake of clarity, works with longer full titles may occasionally be

abbreviated. For example, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may be referred to as simply *Dorian Gray* after the first few mentions to avoid unnecessary complication. Standard italics will be used to distinguish between the title of the work and the name of the character.

1.3: Methodology

Regarding the methodology for approaching the source texts, standard devices of literary analysis will be employed, such as close reading. Wilde's language will be analyzed from the point of view of reconstructing the subtext present in his work, especially as regards some of the expressions typical of the author and their connotations. Attention will be paid to Wilde's usage of a variety of allusions, as well as to their origins and their intertextual dimension. Wilde's work will also be compared to Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* in order to examine the sphere of textual strategies and the historical context they both frame their writing by. Secondary texts, particularly Holbrook Jackson's study written at a time almost immediately following the turn of the century, will be interrogated to gain a closer understanding of the particular brand of self-reflection of the era through the eyes of critics who had themselves experienced it. This focus makes the nature of my thesis rather more eclectic and interpretative than being an attempt to compile as much existing scholarship on the topic as possible. I return to discussing this choice in the Conclusion as well.

Occasionally, incidents in Wilde's own life will also need to be taken into account as context for the work he was producing, though not on the expense of interrogating the context of the broader culture of the time. While it can hardly be my aim to provide a definitive answer to whether life truly imitates art or the other way round, Wilde's life cannot be treated as entirely separate from his oeuvre, possibly in a way that goes beyond the apparent truth of the same generality for most writers. As inter- and metatextuality are among the my principal areas of focus here, I will also address the relevance of lived experience to reading and writing experience, and the many ways in which the two may mix.

Chapter 2: The Wider Context

2.1: General Survey of Culture

The Victorian era is remembered by history as a time favouring conformity over individuality, strictness over excess, and bourgeois morality over personal liberty. Holbrook Jackson describes this tendency in the introduction to the study *The Eighteen-Nineties* in more general terms as "a widespread concern for the correct—that is, the most effective, the most righteous, the most powerful—mode of living".[1] Such a view is valid to an extent, considering that this same era lay the groundwork for the stereotype of small-mindedness that would later become the stock image of England abroad. This, however, inevitably suffers from a certain oversimplification. The very prevalence of conformist morality during much of the nineteenth century also fostered an environment that proved to be fertile soil for subversive art and social movements, granting them the conditions to thrive, their appeal only strengthened by the vivacity of the counter-culture they represented, be it in terms of purely artistic methods or in terms of subscribing to a philosophy—or, perhaps, philosophies plural—clearly at odds with the dominant one. Although such schools of thought are almost uniformly seen as the products of decadence, Jackson argues that a more fitting term for the *fin-de-siecle* flowering of activity would be *regeneration* or *renaissance*:

> The atmosphere of the Eighteen Nineties was alert with new ideas which sought to find expression in the average national life. […] There were demands for culture and social redemption. A wave of transcendentalism swept the country, drawing with it the brighter intelligences of all classes; but it was not remote, it was of the earth and of the common life and hour, seeking the immediate regeneration of society by the abolition of such social evils as poverty and overwork, and the meanness, ugliness, ill-health and commercial rapacity which characterised so much of modern life.

[1] Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen-Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards Ltd., 1922) 14.

> The vitality of this awakening of the social consciousness is proved by its extravagances.[2]

This quotation summarizes the fascination the late Victorian era held for its contemporaries, as well as its ongoing appeal as a subject of analysis *a posteriori*. Depending on the theoretical slant of the analysis, the duality described by Jackson can be seen as a manifestation of the torn sensibilities of a society or as a prime example of hypocrisy; at any rate, the era is more complex than the popular notion of its conservatism would suggest. While the Victorian period in England is widely regarded as one that promoted conformity on the outside, the inner life of its people could be shaped by factors completely outside the accepted sphere: pornography, sexual "deviation", and other modes of subversive expression were found close under the surface of the public respectability mocked by decadents, Oscar Wilde included. Unsurprisingly, deviation from the prevalent religion also factored into this: if not towards an outright revival of ancient practices, then "at least" towards an appreciation of Catholicism, which is found to be romanticized even in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when a possible conversion is briefly proposed:

> It was rumoured of him once that he was about to join the Roman Catholic communion, and certainly the Roman ritual had always a great attraction for him. The daily sacrifice, more awful really than all the sacrifices of the antique world, stirred him as much by its superb rejection of the evidence of the senses as by the primitive simplicity of its elements and the eternal pathos of the human tragedy that it sought to symbolize. […] The fuming censers that the grave boys, in their lace and scarlet, tossed into the air like great gilt flowers had their subtle fascination for him.[3]

[2] Jackson 23-24.

[3] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* digitized edition at *The Project Gutenberg,* 9 Jun 2008, 2 Aug 2012 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/174/174-h/174-h.htm>. All subsequent quotations of this work are from this edition.

At the same time, it is remarkable that Catholicism is not treated as the one faith to follow even when viewed in this comparatively favourable light, but is instead compared to "an inn that is but suitable for the sojourn of a night".[4] Strict adherence would, presumably, destroy the stirring novelty of the belief, transforming it into yet another meddlesome source of obligation, chore, or tedium born of maintaining a respectable façade. Dorian's character, as is demonstrated particularly well in Chapter 9 of the novel, possesses a mind in a state of constant flux not dissimilar to the philosophy of Heraclitus, one of the veritable giants of ancient Greek thought. It is interesting that even Wilde's own conversion lasted but fleetingly, considering how late in his life he made the decision to do so. Dorian also resists ossification, and this seems to be far more than a single character trait. On the contrary, Jackson speaks of a pervasive cultural state of awakening, which would have made *Dorian Gray* entirely synchronized—at least in this respect—with the broader cultural climate of Wilde's era:

> It was a time of experiment. Dissatisfied with the long ages of convention and action which arose out of precedent, many set about testing life for themselves. The new man wished to be himself, the new woman threatened to live her own life. The snapping of apron-strings caused consternation in many a decent household, as young men and maidens were suddenly inspired to develop their own souls and personalities. Never, indeed, was there a time when the young were so young or the old so old. No family, were its record for solid British respectability established on no matter how secure a basis, was immune from new ideas […] Life-tasting was the fashion, and the rising generation felt as though it were stepping out of the cages of convention and custom

[4] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

into a freedom full of tremendous possibilities.[5]

It is important to keep this impulse in mind, although it was in many cases overridden by the lingering social mores that demanded conformity in certain matters even as they touted innovation in others. This, in fact, may have been the main source of the schism that marked the Victorian era, rather than the fact that conformist and innovative impulses co-existed as they do in many societies to this day, without one toppling the other. Jackson's phrasing of the previous extract offers a clue as to which segments of life still existed under the presumption that they would not be significantly tampered with: the new woman "threatening to live her own life", for example, illustrates how gender norms were expected to be largely upheld, even though some individuals may have at least partly rejected them. A similar moment is found in one of the essayist pieces Jackson quotes slightly earlier, written by Grant Allen, which merely trumpets rigid social roles tailored to the construed binary opposition of men and women in the guise of Socialist/New Hedonist self-improvement to be undertaken by the masses.[6] Based on these glimpses of evidence, it can be argued that in matters of gender and sexuality, reform was simply not on the mainstream agenda, a fact that would later complicate Oscar Wilde's situation from his manner of dress to his ideologically motivated trial.

2.2: Cultivating Counter-Cultural Identities

In the UK, aestheticism functioned as the most prominent subversive school of thought, with Oscar Wilde being its eventual champion. The movement's ties to French decadence should also be taken into account; some have gone as far as to call the English decadence an "echo" of the French one, which in itself had grown out of French Romanticism.[7] Some of its representatives were poets such as Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine, and even more importantly to the focus of this work Joris Karl Huysmans, the author of the influential volume titled *A Rebours*, translated into English alternatively as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*. The German traveller and art connoisseur

5 Jackson 30-31.
6 The extract can be read in Jackson 28-29.
7 Jackson 58-59.

Winckelmann can also be included amongst those who informed the British aesthetic movement, his figure popularized chiefly by Walter Pater in *The Renaissance*, perceived by its author as "not incongruous with the studies which precede it, because Winckelmann, coming in the eighteenth century, really belongs in spirit to an earlier age".[8] Pater himself would go on to become a key influence on Wilde, as will be demonstrated later. It is vital for the English decadence to be taken in the context of a trans-European movement of artistic subversion, manifesting itself in both the works of art and in the lives of the proponents of such art, who often found themselves shunned by society at one point of their career or another. Classing the wider movement as one of solidarity would be preposterous in many cases, but some consideration should be given to how far-reaching and self-aware this scattered think-tank of nineteenth-century subversivism was.

Tying in with this idea of interconnectedness is the somewhat less positive issue of estrangement. Given that many of the proponents of European decadence—and, indeed, Oscar Wilde himself in the English context—were ostracized on the basis of their beliefs, lifestyle, or sexuality, an absence of positive cultural role models for them must have been markedly felt. Researchers too numerous to cite have pointed out this problem since the study of queer issues came to be regarded as just another component of the humanities, notwithstanding the fact that it can easily be noticed that not even today's mainstream culture offers many positive models to people whose sexualities or gender identities are marginalized. It is not difficult to see how people without any overt cultural support, often faced with flat-out demonization or criminalization of certain aspects of their personhood, would gravitate towards attempts to form a chronicle of otherwise silenced history. Aided by the fact that Romanticism had popularized the supposedly-ideal past already before the advent of decadence proper, artists concerned with queer cultural unity commonly turned to ancient civilizations in search of figures they could identify with across the centuries. Aside from partial identification, (re-)discovering such role models was in contrast with

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8 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* digitized edition at *The Project Gutenberg*, 27 Mar 2009, 12 Aug 2012 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2398/2398-h/2398-h.htm>.

the overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards minority groups that could be felt in the Victorian everyday. Inspiration by ancient Greece and Rome is therefore a frequent theme, as both of those cultures were made attractive by their comparatively greater acceptance of non-heterosexuality, both in the private and the public sphere. This difference in acceptance levels holds true for both popular attitudes and the legal system.

In the case of Oscar Wilde himself, a similar appeal as the one that persists when it comes to the Victorian era at large also remains far past Wilde's own lifespan. In the opening of his study on Wilde, Jackson describes the situation thus:

> The singularity of Oscar Wilde has puzzled writers since his death quite as much as it puzzled the public during the startled years of his wonderful visit to these glimpses of Philistia; for after all that has been written about him we are no nearer a convincing interpretation of his character than we were during the great silence which immediately followed his trial and imprisonment.[9]

The volume of research on Wilde has understandably grown since Jackson's original observation, but Wilde's personality seems at times as impossible to pin down as it must have in the beginning. A more recent take on the difficulty with parsing Wilde as a writer as well as a personality has been described by Regenia Gagnier as being caused by the paradoxes resulting from an engagement with Victorian society through art:

> […] first, that the contradictions in his works can be understood only by reference to his audiences, and, second, that a consideration of his audiences can lead to a serious reconsideration of the aestheticism of the 1890's. This aestheticism was an engaged protest against Victorian utility, rationality, scientific factuality, and technological progress--in fact, against the whole middle-class

[9] Jackson 72.

> drive to conform--but the emphasis is on engaged.[10]

As a key figure of aestheticism, Wilde must logically be the harbinger of its difficulties alongside with its more immediately appealing elements. Further complicating later appraisals, as has been outlined, the Victorian era comes with its own set of assumptions that determine people's associations with it nowadays. At the time, it is safe to say that the bulk of society was not so self-reflexive as to be explicitly aware of its own shortcomings; rather, the standards for respectable ways of life would have been simply accepted by an implied popular consensus, much like they are reinforced in the majority's understanding at present. This sort of environment, particularly in combination with repressive, reactionary measures such as the Labouchere Amendment, fosters a climate of conformity versus subversion, and reminds those who transgress the norms imposed on them by society that they are also transgressing a punitive law. As has been fittingly said of American nineteenth-century utopias, "one can be *in* a culture but somehow not *of* it",[11] and this seems to be quite descriptive of the aesthetic movement in England as well, no matter how different the context of the respective movements may be: an artist as subversive as Wilde could never have been fully integrated, be it due to his beliefs or due to his sexuality. Understandably, then, there appears to be a certain layer of utopianism in the aesthetic-decadent sensibility, an aspiration towards what lies beyond the quotidian concerns and obligations tied to family and social life, beyond the risky movement in the society beyond the home.

Already in Jackson's work on the subject, this duality is pointed out. It is important to realize that the allegations made against decadents in their own time should be viewed as more a testament to the opinions of those making them than comments on the aesthetes/decadents themselves. With insight, Jackson acknowledges that there is no intrinsic unworthiness to the aesthetic state of mind:

> It could be both degenerate and regenerate, and contain at the same time many more contradictions, because at bottom it was a revolt

[10] Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1986) 3.
[11] Carl J. Guarneri, "The Americanization of Utopia: Fourierism and the Dilemma of Utopian Dissent in the United States" in *Utopian Studies* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) 83.

> of the spirit against formal subservience to mere reason.[12]

Considering that the standard caricature of Wilde was one based on his supposed formalism on the expense of content—a number of *Punch* cartoons come to mind—this note that decadence is also an act of resistance to "formal subservience" serves as an important reality-check against some of the persistent constructs surrounding Wilde's self-stylization as a dandy. The integral contradiction in *l'art pour l'art* is the fact that its declared *lack* of aim in terms of content gives it a different kind of aim, one that comprises both style and agenda, or perhaps reshapes style into agenda. Reading Jackson's commentary on the broader characteristics of the *fin-de-siecle*, it may no longer be surprising that this was the time when aestheticism blossomed into a phenomenon impossible to overlook. Gagnier's interpretation cements this notion further, making it clear that art, society, and interpersonal relations are not separate from one another in the aesthetic mindset of attaching value to self-declared artifice:

> […] the artificial and anti-utilitarian emphases of the art-for-art's-sake movement were embedded in what one might call a sex-for-sex's-sake movement—a movement that opposed itself to "natural" sexuality and purposive reproduction.[13]

2.3: Art for Subversion's Sake

As has been stated in the Introduction, the main purpose of this work is to elaborate upon this cultural context and its role in Oscar Wilde's work. Wilde's layering of meanings, which functions as a sort of double-encoding based on the interplay of the superficial level of the "narrative" and the deeper level of reference is in itself a tactic of subversion: only the "initiated" will enjoy a full understanding of the work in question, as well as an awareness of its counter-cultural value in relation to the mainstream. Elaborate knowledge of history, while adding to the comprehension of

[12] Jackson 57.
[13] Gagnier 5.

the culture behind the writing, was not always necessary for Wilde's nineteenth-century audience to comprehend his allusions to homosexuality: some of them are unmistakably Victorian in how veiled these references are, instead of relying on clarity. Unfortunately for readers in other languages, Wilde's word usage is easily lost in translation; unfortunately for contemporary English ones, the same terms may appear completely innocuous nowadays, their original significance eroded. With a little awareness of Victorian slang or speech habits, however, the various terms with coded meanings become more obvious: *shame*, *sin*, *strange, curious* before *queer* became the go-to euphemism for non-mainstream sexuality, *worship of the senses*, *pleasure*, *wild joys and wilder sins*, *exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows*, or the whole theme of having an unspecified secret of some sort. Even idolatry is invoked in relation to the "mad letter" Dorian gets from "some one who had terribly loved him": "The world is changed because you are made of ivory and gold. The curves of your lips rewrite history."[14] These particular words appear again and again, never with a clearly stated meaning, but always hovering at the metaphorical edge of that which is made obvious to the reader and that which lies beyond. One may choose to ignore such implications but will find it hard to disregard the very persistence with which they are reiterated in similar contexts, such as in Dorian's reaction to Lord Henry's first telling him of youth and the illicit life which he has not yet dared to taste or, interestingly, in Basil's own recollection of meeting Dorian. The most striking example of this writing strategy is the speech with which Lord Henry first seduces Dorian:

> "I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely [...] the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal—to something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal, it may be. [...] The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous

[14] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

> laws have made monstrous and unlawful. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also. You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame—"[15]

The motifs of pleasure and temptation versus "monstrous laws", layers of false propriety versus "the Hellenic ideal" and the characters' awakenings to their unrestrained selves are all-pervading and contrast powerfully with the concept of Victorian morals. There are whole passages in the novel that read as obscure without a specification, as though they are describing something off limits to the uninitiated. Even setting all of Wilde's personal reasons or sources of inspiration aside, the subversive potential of this strategy is clear: words like *shame* or *sin* are both provocative and red herrings. The provocation lies precisely in citing such words but never clarifying what supposed *sin* the characters are committing, what concrete reason there is for the *shame*. Indeed, by the time of Wilde's trial the popular imagination would likely have supplied its own answers to these questions, but before this, all anyone could do was guess. At the same time, this lack of specification is a red herring to all Victorian would-be interpreters of Wilde's implications: the vagueness made it possible to supply almost anything, which also deflected any specific accusation to be made against the author and his alleged immorality. Even so, the furore Wilde's novel raised was considerable. The above is only a sample of Wilde's own terminology; outside his work but well within his life, we also find Lord Alfred Douglas's 1894 poem "Two Loves" which contains the famous catchphrase of "the Love that dare not speak its name".[16] Similarly to Wilde's strategy, the

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15 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

16 Alfred Douglas, "Two Loves" digitized by *Wikisource*, 11 Aug 2012 <http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Loves_%281894_poem%29>.

appeal rests upon provocation of the reader's idea of why exactly this love might be so forbidden. Wilde also employed coding by non-verbal means, such as the green carnation, which even inspired a parody of a novel R. S. Hichens named after this very symbol. The view of decadence and aestheticism as common ground for deviants that Wilde was now bringing into respectability manifested itself so strongly after the novel's publication that Wilde furnished it with the famous Preface, which had originally been absent. Indeed, Wilde's proclamations that “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” or that “Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself”[17] were very much ahead of their time.

Wilde himself was no narrow-minded archetype of a Victorian. His persona was that of a dandy: flamboyant, educated in impractical subjects, striking in appearance and with a taste for the exotic. In his Oxford days, rumours flew about him; upon leaving Oxford, he defined the purpose of his manner thus: “Somehow or other I'll be famous, and if not famous, I'll be notorious.”[18] Although his oft-quoted quips may often have been witticisms made in response to a certain situation, it seems safe to conclude from his remarks that Wilde did not feel himself to be subject to the profane, unimaginative lifestyle of his time period. This is where the conflict between his artistic as well as personal philosophy and the expectation of him to perform certain duties in society in order to succeed in it unfolds. In opposition to his anti-Victorian world-view, Wilde was forced into partial conformity: he married, had children, and affected the image of a man with some degree of stability about him. This is a frequent, though far from ideal, strategy employed by queer people in history to secure a semblance of safety. For Wilde on his climb to the promised notoriety, having such basic safety would have been crucial. Wanting his work to be recognized, Wilde had no choice but to blend in to some extent, for as long as his reputation remained intact, he could afford a small amount of provocation. Unable to be open about his beliefs and feelings from the personal

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17 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

18 Claude J. Summers, “Wilde, Oscar (1854–1900)”, *glbtq.com*, 6 Jan 2009 <http://www.glbtq.com/literature/wilde_o.html>.

perspective, he skilfully wove them into the fabric of his fiction and publicized them *as an author*.

Writing in the early 1890s, Wilde must have been aware of the furore the implications in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would raise. His unusual prose would be considered extravagant and artificial; from these terms it is not far to the word "unnatural" and the connotations it held for ordinary Victorian people, including the bigoted leap of logic from "unnatural" to non-heterosexual. While the whole of the decadent movement often faced accusations of being amoral or destructive, summarized most succinctly in Arthur Symons's description of it as "a new and beautiful and interesting disease",[19] it was still different for this criticism to be levelled at a single author who already occupied a spot of prominence in the public sphere. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that writing alone would have resulted in legal persecution of the sort Wilde eventually faced. While publishing texts like *Dorian Gray* or his numerous essays deserves credit for going, one is tempted to say, against the grain of the dominant culture, the risk would also have been calculated on the premise that whatever was kept in the realm of "only fiction" was unlikely to be labelled by the authorities as criminal. Already we can see the central thesis of Wilde's approach to being risqué while remaining within the boundaries of conventional acceptability. He also stays shy of fully crossing the line because of *Dorian Gray's* ending, which may be interpreted as schematically, thoughtlessly moralistic on a cursory reading. Of course, this tactic would crumble when the general public got wind of the fact that the divide between fiction and reality in Wilde's case was not as firm as previously assumed, and that he did not stand on the side of the established order. Without Queensberry, without the trials, and without direct testimonies, it is likely that Wilde would have been allowed to go free had his "offence" been his writing alone.

Aside from the counter-cultural dimension, there is also a metatextual quality to Wilde's discourse in fiction that is made particularly explicit by his addition of the Preface: the majority of the statements that comprise it seem to have a common concern; that is, art. Taking in account the public outcry prompted by *Dorian Gray's* alleged immorality, such an introduction can serve

[19] Quoted in Jackson 55.

multiple purposes: firstly, it is an elegant method for Wilde to stand his ground in the debate, while also allowing him to place his novel into the broader framework of nineteenth-century tendencies in literature. Both of these aspects are united in forming the primary purpose of the Preface; however, its full scope can only be understood when viewing the Preface as commentary on the novel addressed to Wilde's British readers who had just been exposed to his decadent inspiration, *and* as commentary on the subject of art as it is presented inside the narrative. This dual possibility of application within and outside of the novel lends the Preface more ambiguity than it would have as a simple manifesto aimed at countering incensed critics: the Preface reflects upon art as a phenomenon, which is precisely what *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a whole does as well. This extends the Preface's relevance not only to the England of Oscar Wilde, but also to the autonomous universe of *Dorian Gray* itself, in which context the original meaning is retained regardless of any changes taking place regarding the attitude of society at large. On the other hand, changes in mainstream society are very likely to influence readers' attitudes to the Preface if interpreted as an *apologia* addressed directly to the reader and intended for one's consideration before proceeding to the novel as such. Wilde's assertions towards his contemporaries may be dismissed by sceptics as circumstantial; the Preface's interaction with the rest of *Dorian Gray* cannot.

Tying in with this is the next function of art typically found in Wilde's work, namely art as a means of subverting or altogether evading conventional morality, especially in its strict Victorian form. In an age with a tendency to glorify usefulness and content—if said content conformed to the applicable standards, that is—publishing a book that emphasizes form and does not hesitate to proclaim all art “useless”[20] must have registered as a bold act of defiance on Wilde's part. What makes his achievement so clever is the fact that his novel managed to scandalize Victorian society, yet at the same time earned its author a place among the elite, at least until his literary accomplishments were overshadowed by his well-publicized trials. Whatever controversial hints Wilde's contemporaries detected in his work or behaviour, these elements all contributed to his

[20] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

carefully cultivated notoriety at the time they first reached the public without simultaneously providing grounds for actual "punishment". From this perspective, it could be argued that Wilde's wittily articulated philosophy was enough to keep Victorian society frustrated for as long as there was no concrete "proof" in it pointing to Wilde's own actions by the mere fact of its unapologetic attitude. It also gave him ample opportunity to contradict the approved values of the era by his undisguised division of art from any obligation towards morality or industry. Gagnier offers an apt summary of Wilde's faculty for toying with social mores:

> His mind was stocked with commonplaces, and these seem to have been there for the sole purpose of their subversion. The situation is one in which an outsider has to a stunning degree taken upon himself the reflective apparatus of the dominant group and then used this apparatus to mock the group on, and with, its own terms. [...] This is the technique of ironic reference: the use of popular symbology by its critics in order to be both commercially competitive and critical.[21]

Additionally, Wilde employs art and various specific references to it in order to produce an air of exclusiveness. The entirety of *Dorian Gray's* eleventh chapter consists of an elaboration on the cultural background Dorian acquaints himself with, as his life with a seemingly endless amount of time at his disposal progresses. Nowadays it has been near-proven that the "yellow book" Dorian is so enchanted by refers to *A Rebours* by J.K. Huysmans,[22] but Wilde's treatment of the volume as something mysterious magnifies the reader's awareness of the implied meanings in the text. Wilde's choice of certain expressions for their ambiguous connotations has a similar effect, as well as the many mentions of relatively obscure historical figures who inspire Dorian as he learns about their deeds. All of these devices would be perfectly justified solely for the sake of atmosphere; however,

[21] Gagnier 8.

[22] Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Arrow Books, 2004) 79–81.

they are clearly selected for being woven into Wilde's own cultural fabric. The fact that most of Wilde's allusions go beyond the average reader's knowledge introduces another distinctive feature of Wilde's art: it functions as a code of sorts, which can be used to convey specific meanings to the initiated while revealing nothing to anyone else perusing the same text. This strategy of delivering borderline subliminal messages is largely responsible for the density of Wilde's prose; in fact, the novel's preoccupation with secrecy is paralleled in the story by Dorian's picture being the material representation of all the secrets of its owner, the keeping of which turns out to be vital for the continuation of Dorian's life. Remembering that the novel is actually titled *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it is possible to view its entirety as a symbol in its own right. It would certainly become almost a shorthand for subversion for later generations interested in Wilde's work.

In terms of the personal history of Dorian Gray, art plays the absolutely vital role of illustrating the protagonist's character development, established well before the sinister differences between reality and Dorian's painting start setting in at all. It is no exaggeration that some artistic representation of Dorian is present at every critical stage of his life, beginning with his first encounter with Lord Henry before the fated picture is finished, and leading up to his eventual downfall when he stabs the now-disfigured image, killing only himself in the act. Here, instead of being treated as an abstract concept, art becomes literally the mirror of Dorian's soul and the mutations it undergoes. In direct opposition to the initial stage of the narrative, which has Dorian marvelling at the perfection of Basil's painting of him and envying his likeness that it will never know old age, the moment immediately preceding Dorian's destruction shows physical reality as the bearer of a flawless visage and art suffering decay in its stead. This is radically divergent from Wilde's usual perception of aesthetics, perhaps meant as a warning against the exploitation of art for any given individual's selfish desires. Although our reading of the novel must take in account the corruption of Dorian's psyche, it should also be acknowledged that not only does Dorian's portrait display its model's increasingly twisted personality, but it also stands for the corruption of the

artistic ideal by human whims. It is consistent with Wilde's classical sensibilities to define the domain of art as timeless, universal—especially where depictions of beauty are concerned, as beauty is the quality held in highest regard in many of Wilde's writings, including the Preface.[23] In striking a deal with his portrait, Dorian trespasses against the order of things on a fundamental level: it is not the "natural" that is threatened as Wilde's Victorian critics insisted, but the purity of artistic expression, which is inevitably artificial and should stay so. Dorian carelessly mixes the natural and the artificial, or the physical reality and its artistic image, and in such imbalance it becomes impossible for him to live indefinitely because his human personality and involvement with others lack the endurance of a disconnected painting. As a result of this, it is the world of bare reality Wilde presents as deficient, not the artistic medium. Dorian's portrait regains the perfect features it had been unjustly robbed of at the end, whereas the real Dorian succumbs to the very decay he had so long defied or directed elsewhere. In this sense, balance is restored. Nevertheless, there remains the significant fact that no conclusive superiority is ascribed to the natural world, a message that would likely have been preferable to Wilde's audience. The actual "moral" of the novel is quite on the contrary: Dorian's natural body falls victim to long-overdue decrepitude, leaving behind the picture which, in turn, is granted the opportunity to become truly immortal as it had been meant to from the start. Outliving both the artist and the subject, the portrait becomes the only reliable trace of Dorian's existence, preserved only through impersonal, untainted art.

Wilde's word choice made a lasting impression on the popular culture of those decades that were more likely to openly embrace the imagery and subtle sensuality of his language. The 1997 musical film *Velvet Goldmine*, while also featuring a romance between the male leads, is still more recognizable for the fact that it is a homage, after a fashion, to Wilde himself, who is seen by the narrative as a precursor to glam rock—another genre marked by transgression of gender and sexuality-based norms, with an emphasis on bold make-up and accessories on stage. The story mirrors curiously the notion of a "fall from grace" as seen in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, though

[23] Discussed further in Chapter 4.

with a more conciliatory ending, but the most striking point of this film is its testament to Wilde as an embodied *topos* of non-mainstream sensibility that is just as applicable to the glam rocker: an individual who can charm the crowds, who has a way with the "music" of words, and who transcends the commonly upheld norms of propriety. At the time of the film's making, such transcendence was no longer immediately tragic in Britain and, although its protagonists struggle with their own demons, the ending of the film is portrayed in a way that seems to be directly opposite to being suppressed or imprisoned.

Wilde is then invoked as a sort of patron of the characters; they are even shown holding slogans composed of select Wilde quotes. The opening sequence can be said to take Wilde's own brand of symbolism and transform it into a more modern-oriented pastiche: Wilde is seen arriving on Earth as a literal alien whose distinguishing possession is an emerald brooch.[24] The theme of alienation from mainstream culture is easy to spot when illustrated so aptly. The film's reference to him is no doubt allegorical, but the notion of Wilde as a figure that cannot fit into his temporal and cultural designation is one that, I believe, informed the greater part of his writing and cannot be overestimated.

2.4: Doomed by the Times

The absence of any cultural model that would speak to Wilde and his circle—be it in an artistic or personal sense—necessitated a search for possible role models in the past. Even nowadays, it happens to be a common concern of LGBTQ* people to find precedents in history. It is no exaggeration to say that sexual and gender minorities have been systematically erased from popular consciousness and school curricula across the board. This does not only extend to individuals who are omitted, but also to aspects of those who cannot be left out altogether (a famous case in point is the general lack of awareness of Alexander the Great's closest companion, Hephaestion, although everyone in Europe has probably heard of Alexander himself; the list goes on and is by no means

[24] *Velvet Goldmine*, dir. Todd Haynes, dist. CiBy Sales and Miramax Films, 1998, 124 min.

limited to Europe only). In the Victorian climate of erasure that sometimes went so far as to censor the very classical literature it considered necessary to drill into schoolboys, the need to unearth previous examples in order to gain an understanding of one's actual history was understandably pressing. This may be seen as one of the reasons why antiquity is a prevalent topic in much of Wilde's work.

It would be interesting to find out exactly whether the popularity of *Dorian Gray* was due to or despite Wilde's handling of "scandalous" topics; given that he had been able to navigate the risky realities of artistic provocation, blackmail, and illicit sexual encounters for years before the trial brought his life under scrutiny, it is tempting to conclude the former. The fact alone that Wilde decided to stand trial against Queensberry despite others' advice to the contrary shows that, while he may have been too optimistic about his chances to succeed in a society that would drag his personal life to the spotlight and criminalize it, he undeniably had experience with navigating such a society. Or perhaps the difference was simply that up until the trial he had skilfully flouted scrutiny, a habit that may have been useful in everyday life but proved deadly when taken to the pulpit, where society would adhere to its "monstrous laws". This may explain the overwhelming backlash against Wilde when he was on trial but not before; at any rate, there is no small amount of artistry involved in making declarations such as "Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins—he was to have all these things"[25] about the protagonist of a novel published under one's legal name in an era that prosecuted what it deemed to be moral excess, and getting away with it at least for a time.

Wilde's caustic criticism of his own "modern" era suggests that he regards it as inferior to periods such as antiquity or the Renaissance. The best-known example of this attitude is the public speech Wilde made in his defence during his trials, where he invokes the tradition of the time periods that had proven constitutive to his beliefs in an effort to clean himself of the supposed illegitimacy of his actions. It is not surprising, therefore, that his many allusions to history provide

25 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

his work with a link to this romanticized past, confronting its celebration of youth and beauty with the rigid public morality of his own era. Interesting is the fact that such references are not limited to moral role models, but also incorporate the names of the most uninhibited and reviled Roman emperors, including Elagabalus, Tiberius, Nero or Caligula.[26] Again, all these mentions can easily be read as a way for Wilde to appeal to those of his readers who shared his outlook or, at the very least, related to his scepticism towards the constraints of the nineteenth century and wished to keep them separate from artistic expression.

As Oscar Wilde would be ultimately undone by his era, so too the characters in *Dorian Gray* fall victim to the circumstances surrounding the eponymous anti-hero. The theme of Dorian slowly becoming the doom of everyone who associates with him is very prominent: Sybil is driven to suicide, while Basil is murdered and disposed of with the help of another former acquaintance of Dorian's, Alan Campbell, who is still unable to deny Dorian anything. Apart from these important occurrences, there is also some off-screen information related to the reader by Basil when he attempts to chastise Dorian for his lifestyle, this time having to do with his undesirable "friendships". This is conceivably yet another example of the novel's ever-present homoerotic undertones:

> "Why is your friendship so fatal to young men? There was that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton, who had to leave England with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable. What about Adrian Singleton and his dreadful end? What about Lord Kent's only son and his career? I met his father yesterday in St. James's Street. He seemed broken with shame and sorrow. What about the young Duke of Perth? What sort of life has he got now?

[26] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

What gentleman would associate with him?"[27]

Aside from being socially taboo and crossing over to illegality at the time, the main relations of the book—namely that of Dorian and Lord Henry and that of Dorian and Basil—each operate on a specific basis derived from the characters' traits and places in the narrative. The relationship between Dorian and Lord Henry may use a comparable amount of subtext as the one between Dorian and Basil, but the crucial difference lies in reciprocity. Basil's selfless adoration of his model is much easier to interpret as unrequited, whereas the power Lord Henry exercises over Dorian seems to be more than one-sided. There is a strong element of attraction on the part of Dorian and seduction on the part of Lord Henry, which offers one explanation for the fact that they never truly separate. Another reason might be that Lord Henry is the only one able to withstand Dorian's influence, being partly the cause of it himself. The whole nature of this relationship is, again, aptly summarized by Lord Henry:

> "You will always like me, Dorian. [...] Yes, Dorian, you will always
> be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you have never had the
> courage to commit."[28]

Given the chronology of these events, it is of course impossible to read any of the above passages as intentional critiques of Wilde's own life, not in the manner he displays later in *De Profundis*. It is, however, easy to draw the conclusion that they criticize the social climate in which arrests such as Wilde's own could even take place. The courage to commit "sins" clandestinely versus the courage to speak up against the classification of certain acts as sins would eventually become the great distinguishing trait separating Dorian Gray from his author.

2.5: The Importance of Reading

No matter how idiosyncratic and fragmentary in nature, the decadent movement found itself

[27] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[28] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

with a variety of easily recognizable symbols, ranging from the peacock feather to the lily or the sunflower, or even the phrase “the yellow book”. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this is the book Lord Henry uses to “poison” Dorian with:[29] the accepted view of the meaning of this artefact is that it represents J. K. Huysmans’s *A Rebours*, the proverbial Bible of decadence, which Wilde read shortly after getting married in Paris and which deepened his understanding of his sexuality.[30] As a decadent code-phrase, that “yellow book” became so topical that it was even generalized to the “Yellow Press”,[31] “The Yellow Nineties” became an epithet for the period as a whole[32] and, finally, “The Yellow Book” appeared as the title of one of the most notable decadent periodicals that represented “novelty naked and unashamed”, establishing yellow as “the symbol of the time-spirit”.[33] Dorian is so moved by this text that an entire section is devoted to his perusal of the book, which is described almost magically as telling “the story of his own life, written before he had lived it.”[34] This is very similar to the instance where Dorian feels an affinity with historical figures who had lived out their lives before him. In this case, the same affinity manifests itself in connection with a book, showing that the supposed rift between fact and fiction is not definitive for Wilde. This is of course deepened by the fact that Dorian is a fictional character himself, further complicating these presumed distinctions. Wilde himself enabled this mingling of worlds by drawing comparisons between himself and his characters: “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps.”[35]

The metatexual dimension makes itself known in two ways: Oscar Wilde the man and Oscar Wilde the writer are intertwined here in an atypically straightforward way. It is a recognized fallacy to equate the experiences of an author entirely with those of a fictional character, even if said character happens to be the protagonist of the author’s most influential work; nevertheless, there are

[29] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[30] McKenna, 79–81.
[31] Jackson 23.
[32] Jackson 34.
[33] Jackson 46.
[34] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[35] McKenna 172.

some cases when this line of thought may be justified: not in the way of mindlessly attributing every physical event of a book to the life of its author, but in the sense of parallels and the personal, social and ethical circumstances under which the literary work was created. Wilde's private life is arguably reflected in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in his other works in a way that does not copy the precise events of his life, but is traceable nonetheless. Although most of *Dorian Gray's* plot can hardly be construed as an autobiography, the situation in which it was composed all but predetermined its themes and overall message to have a significance above and beyond the realm of detached fiction. Wilde, having been personally influenced by *A Rebours*, turned a hint on the same into a point of significance in his own subsequent work; then there is the fact that Dorian's reading of this text blurs the boundary between storytelling and reality from "within" the novel in question. *Dorian Gray* incorporates really existing books, which in turn makes the "reading" experience itself all the more authentic for a reader who is acquainted with all of them. Another point of interest lies in the kind of artistic, historical or literary kinship that is felt when such a book falls into the hands of the "right" reader—in reality, Wilde; in the narrative, Dorian.

Chapter 3: Wilde's Multiform Inspiration

3.1: Historicizing Sexuality

There are abstract ways in which Wilde's sexuality may have blended into the novel, motivating certain areas of his focus. It must be remembered that he had been a successful Classics student in Oxford, and his knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome transcended the narrow boundaries of expurgated editions. A sort of antique sensibility is a constant presence in his work, starting with his poems, many of which are explicitly based on themes from the ancient world. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, there is a marked Graeco-Roman influence in more than the obligatory mention of Ganymede.[36] The name Dorian itself is derived from one of the terms used for Doric tribes, which is interesting not only as a clever play on words but also in the fact that Doric culture is thought to have introduced formal pederasty,[37] a widespread erotic-educational practice Wilde must have been familiar with, if only because he later invoked the Greeks as well as certain Renaissance figures to defend his views in his famous speech in court. Dorian is often cast as the archetypal Greek youth: even in the second chapter when he is first acquainted with Lord Henry, he is said to move "with the air of a young Greek martyr";[38] later, he is found all but kissing his picture "in boyish mockery of Narcissus" and feeling "almost enamoured of it";[39] shortly thereafter, Dorian supposes that "Like the gods of the Greeks, he would be strong, and fleet, and joyous".[40] He is even likened by Basil to Antinous,[41] which is perhaps the most interesting reference to antiquity because Antinous is also emblematic of extraordinary beauty and eternal youth, although in his case this is caused by his death at the age of nineteen and subsequent deification by the grieving Emperor Hadrian. Both of them are mentioned again in Wilde's poem *The Sphinx*,[42] so there is no doubt that he was familiar with the story and the image of Antinous may have shaped Dorian as well. Of

[36] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[37] McKenna 164.
[38] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[39] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[40] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[41] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[42] Oscar Wilde, *The Sphinx* in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003) 876. *The Sphinx* represents fairly obscure poetry even for Wilde, almost entirely based on intertextuality.

course, the distinguishing trait here is Dorian's character which inevitably leans towards evil, very much unlike what history knows of either Antinous or Hadrian.

In the spirit of decadence, then, Wilde calls upon the most sexually uninhibited Roman emperors instead, such as the notorious Elagabalus, Tiberius with his refuge at the island of Capri, Nero, or Caligula.[43] All of them are associated with chaos and complete decay of morals even by Roman standards, which could not have been more different from those of Victorian England. All these and other personages are projected into Dorian's character as he reads the book from Lord Henry:

> There were times when it appeared to Dorian Gray that the whole of history was merely the record of his own life, not as he had lived it in act and circumstance, but as his imagination had created it for him, as it had been in his brain and in his passions. He felt that he had known them all, those strange terrible figures that had passed across the stage of the world and made sin so marvellous and evil so full of subtlety. It seemed to him that in some mysterious way their lives had been his own.[44]

This example is not merely illustrative of the variety of historical personages invoked by Wilde, but also provides one of the key points to be considered when it comes to the complex treatment of morality in *Dorian Gray*. It would be tempting to conclude that Dorian is simply likened to the "strange terrible figures" in order to emphasize his evil nature. However, there is a unifying positive trait to all the figures Wilde alludes to: namely, their claim to a sort of immortality. While the deeds of Nero and the like have probably never met with approval and history has often used them as examples of total depravity, the fact remains that Nero is remembered. At the end of the day, he stands beside a host of other towering figures of European memory, whatever the

[43] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[44] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

particular associations with each such figure may be. The "strange terrible figures" have still achieved fame on par with Alexander the Great or Michelangelo, two of the go-to positive examples of historical non-heterosexual heroes known in Victorian times. Even for a man like Elagabalus, immortality is empowering and—considering that these rulers deemed evil must have escaped the practice of *damnatio memoria* despite all their excesses to gain any notoriety in the future at all—perhaps even more impressive than the lasting legacies of the famous positive figures. Similarly, in the case of Dorian, being exempt from decay empowers him, in the same way that reading about powerful "immoral" men who could have been his forefathers fortifies his sense of legitimacy. He does become an outcast, wealth and influence notwithstanding, because he is subject to neither ageing nor convention. In this way, Elagabalus and other similar figures serve as metaphorical images of Dorian's own life and position in the world, and it is then no wonder that their lives may as well have "been his own".

It is unlikely that this subtly-coded outcast position would have been wholly negative in Wilde's conception of it. The fact that he invokes both Hadrian and Elagabalus is more indicative of the fact that remaining in the collective memory would have been the desired feat; if Dorian gains literal (if limited) immortality instead of a figurative one, this makes his feat of achieving notoriety on the expense of the society that would otherwise have him relegated to an already-prepared role still more radical. Immortality is directly linked to exceptional status, and it is easy to see how Wilde's own status in society would have been viewed as exceptional by his peers, often also with unwarranted negativity. Turning this precarious position into an advantage and using it to raise one's own prestige in retrospect has a positive dimension as legitimate as fame derived solely from doing "the right thing" according to the given society's standards.

3.2: Personal Interests

Wilde's turbulent relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, often known as simply "Bosie", has

been frequently addressed as one of the crucial events of Wilde's life, but as Bosie was not the primary impulse driving *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his part in Wilde's life will not be the main focus here. Regardless, Wilde's attraction to either Bosie or other similarly distinguished young men such as an earlier lover, John Gray, can be seen reflected in his descriptions of Dorian's idealized beauty. Reading these throughout the novel, one can indeed notice and wonder over the fact that Wilde's wording sounds remarkably affectionate for a depiction of a man who is well on his way to total corruption, as Dorian is:

> The lad started and drew back. He was bareheaded, and the leaves had tossed his rebellious curls and tangled all their gilded threads. There was a look of fear in his eyes, such as people have when they are suddenly awakened. His finely chiselled nostrils quivered, and some hidden nerve shook the scarlet of his lips and left them trembling.[45]

Subtle eroticism permeates this passage: the modification of nearly all of the lad's physical attributes with adjectives such as "rebellious", "gilded", "finely chiselled" and "scarlet" suggests a close attention to detail and a romanticizing eye on the part of the narrator/writer; the mentions of his bare head and the "look of fear" as though he had been "suddenly awakened" suggest vulnerability; the "quivering" of the nostrils and "trembling" of the lips might just as easily be caused by arousal as by being startled, the latter being what ostensibly happens in this segment. It is temptingly easy to conclude that Wilde is simply transferring his own lover on the page when it comes to the descriptions and the author's eye for them, but the purely aesthetic function of this should not be overlooked either. Wilde is demonstrating a kind of aesthetic sensibility that colours his perception of Dorian's character. Does it relate to his sexuality—probably, but it seems more than likely that this is not the sole purpose this passage serves in the context of a novel emblematic

45 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

of *l'art pour l'art*. More than a simple protagonist, Dorian is aestheticism personified, and this is reflected in his entire presence on the scene.

Another key point that may have been influenced by Wilde's own life, this time less favourably, is the treatment of Dorian's proposed marriage in the book when he superficially falls in love with an actress, Sibyl Vane, whose speciality is Shakespearean parts. Dorian announces his love for her to his friends who are intriguingly amused by the prospect, as if there were nothing substantial to Dorian's unexpected affair at all. Lord Henry's reaction to Dorian's passionate avowals illustrates it best:

> "I am not laughing, Dorian; at least I am not laughing at you. But you should not say the greatest romance of your life. You should say the first romance of your life. You will always be loved, and you will always be in love with love. A *grande passion* is the privilege of people who have nothing to do. That is the one use of the idle classes of a country. Don't be afraid. There are exquisite things in store for you. This is merely the beginning."[46]

Apparently related to this is the occurrence of misogyny in some of Wilde's witticisms and, one can argue, in the wider context of what would have passed as the "gay scene" of Victorian England. This may be reflected even in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, considering that the most meaningful relationships of the novel occur between Dorian and Basil and between Dorian and Lord Henry; on the contrary, Sibyl is dismissed by Dorian as soon as she is no longer the image of artistic perfection that Dorian really fell for. When that illusion is shattered, Dorian has no real interest in Sibyl as a person with her own legitimate feelings. The moment she is made "weak" by her infatuation and spoils her acting which first attracted Dorian to her, failing in her role as an *aesthetic* addition to Dorian's life, he changes his mind about Sybil swiftly:

[46] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

> “Yes,” he cried, “you have killed my love. [...] I loved you because you were marvellous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid. My God! how mad I was to love you! What a fool I have been! You are nothing to me now.”[47]

When Sybil is so devastated by Dorian's rebuttal as to commit suicide, Dorian’s mourning is short and easily dispelled. This does indeed echo misogynistic attitudes: a woman's love is “shallow and stupid”, a woman must be perfect in the eyes of men to be considered worthy of basic respect, a woman is blamed when a man sees her as undesirable for reasons beyond her control. In another sense, however, this passage in *Dorian Gray* can also be understood as Wilde's critique of what was, in his own life, nothing more than a public *performance* of heterosexual affection. Although he initially claimed to be enamoured with his wife, Constance Lloyd, this feeling seemed to fade completely after the birth of their second child, about two years after the wedding, and he grew increasingly disconnected from his marriage despite maintaining an unproblematic façade.[48] Such a situation is, of course, unfortunate for all involved and whatever research may have been done on Constance cannot be compared to the wealth of it that has been done on Oscar, although both were affected by the arrangement. In societies that criminalize non-heterosexuality, people who are at risk of persecution will often find themselves performing the socially acceptable duty of marriage, which almost always represents a great strain on the emotional well-being of both themselves and their families in addition to the constant threat of public scrutiny and the resulting backlash. During the Victorian era, criminalization may only have extended to specific acts as it did in the European Middle Ages, but the establishment of the medical profession as a standardized scientific discipline marked a shift towards conceptual pathologization. Moreover, it contributed to the perception of

[47] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[48] McKenna 117.

particular sexual acts as irrevocable manifestations of identity: "the homosexual was now a species."[49] Michel Foucault offers more such startling insights,[50] particularly as regards the insufficiencies of the early medical theories of sex which were quickly becoming accepted canon and which have penetrated so far into the popular consciousness that the majority of people nowadays seem to be shockingly averse to the naturally-found complexity of sexuality, sex and gender, instead opting for rigid binaries. This understanding, or lack thereof, can be traced to the ideological tenets of the nascent *scientia sexualis*; in Foucault's words, "the aim of such a discourse was not to state the truth but to prevent its very emergence".[51] Through the lens of power relations, this refusal to see truths that would undermine supposedly sacred social rules makes sense. It presents a stigma that is still ongoing even in much of today's "hard" science: the results of research are arrayed in a way that corresponds to the researcher's personal beliefs. Foucault calls this "a stubborn will to nonknowledge";[52] rather alarmingly in the context of something termed science: instead of addressing the subject matter frankly and without prejudice, there is an evasive non-treatment of the complexity of the issues surrounding human sexuality. This results in a solidification of social taboos, now on the basis of a respected "scientific" outlook that inherited irrational biases against minorities instead of breaking them down in the name of enlightenment.

Taking this into account enriches our understanding of the questions surrounding Wilde's sexuality, along with its relation to some of the key points in his life and work. It does not seem to be especially productive to make absolute statements on whether he would have identified as gay, bisexual, or something else entirely; the main point is that whatever the precise alignment of Wilde's sexuality was, it set him apart from the society he still had to navigate and survive in. McKenna postulates that Wilde was, in fact, repulsed by the normatively female form in relation to

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[49] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 43.

[50] He characterizes the medical profession of this period as "imbued with age-old delusions, but also with systematic blindnesses: a refusal to see and to understand; but further—and this is the crucial point—a refusal concerning the very thing that was brought to light and whose formulation was urgently solicited" (Foucault 55). The lack of public discourse concerning non-heterosexuality in the Victorian era fits perfectly into this notion of "refusal" to acknowledge or really understand the differences the emergent psychiatric profession claimed to be investigating.

[51] Foucault 55.

[52] Foucault 55.

sex, especially when pregnancy was involved, making this the main reason he became disinterested in any further intimate contact with his wife.[53] The implications here are, in a way, similar to Dorian's eventual disenchantment with Sibyl: the fading of perceived "perfection" and its replacement by the simple fact that a woman is also a human being with feelings that cannot be predicted and a body that may require special care. If this was Wilde's personal experience, however problematic, it is understandable that it may have pervaded the section of *Dorian Gray* that deals with an approximation of marriage and its dissolution.

It should also be noted that some of the famous quotes from Wilde's comedic plays or from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* make sweeping statements about women designed to belittle them as entire class, in the form of irrefutable maxims. In the novel, this is frequently in the words of Lord Henry. When Dorian laments the loss of Sibyl's genius, he counters with a statement that not only downgrades Dorian's distress, but also invalidates any previous attachment on an intellectual basis: "My dear boy, no woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly. Women represent the triumph of matter over mind, just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals."[54] Notice that this quote also satirizes men, but triumphing over morals by mind is something that Wilde would very likely have deemed positive regardless of the wider social climate, while the characteristics ascribed to women are unequivocally shallow.

Reading some of these passages, it will seem rather baffling that, nevertheless, Wilde happened to create some fairly powerful female characters in his plays, though some of them demonic in the same breath (e.g. *Salome*). A nuanced reading points to the possibility that the aim of Wilde's mockery were less women themselves and more the established role of women as wives in the mechanized institution of marriage that was regarded as a prerequisite of respectable life in his time. Combined with his mockery of other norms, this reading seems plausible, though it does not remove the trouble with the generalized insults directed at women in particular in some of his works

[53] McKenna 88–90.
[54] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

and comments.

One may also wonder why Wilde chose to feature sincere emotion as overpowered by corruption in a novel like *Dorian Gray*, which was designed to upset Victorian perceptions of acceptable behaviour. While his actual reason may never be clear to us, the hypothesis that he merely played on Victorian sensibility in order to get his point across is supportable. He had no other choice but to build on the conventional assumptions if he wished to subvert and destabilize them. For a more optimistic account of relationships and their impact on one's life, we can turn to the work written shortly before *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published, *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* Aside from the theory of most of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* being addressed to an actor called Willie Hughes, as derived from certain puns in Sonnet XX,[55] this short story-essay showcases a similar allegory of self-discovery as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, only this time the development is positive and leads to the protagonist's greater happiness regardless of the unproven—and likely unprovable—theory he had initially been so concerned with.

3.3: Linking the Bible to the Decadence

In addition to pagan sources, Wilde has references to Christian mythology in ample supply. Much research has been dedicated to *Salome*, his Decadent play par excellence (further exemplified by the fact that it had originally been composed in French) and its treatment of sexuality as contrasted with sexual repulsion and coercion. Wilde's Biblical links are also an area in which he can be compared with Walter Pater's less ostentatious but perhaps more ideologically consistent treatment of the same. It should be noticed first that the relationship between the implications in Wilde's writing as contrasted to Pater is more complex than might at first be assumed. Comparing Wilde's fairy tales versus later *Salome* to Pater's *The Renaissance* versus later *Marius the Epicurean*, Christopher Nassaar concisely argues:

[55] "A man in hue all hues in his controlling", where "hues" is pronounced the same way as "Hughes". William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets* (Prague: Levné Knihy KMa, 2008) 22.

> Pater, in *Marius the Epicurean*, later reversed most of the ideas of *The Renaissance*, adopting a clearly Christian attitude. Wilde, in *Salome*, follows his example of reversing earlier works and ideas, but in Wilde it is paradoxically the heavily Christian fairy tales that are inverted.[56]

While this particular essay sounds rather black-and-white on the whole and arguably does not address this issue in full—one needs only to see *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* to verify that Wilde had not resigned on Christianity as a theme past *Salome*—it is interesting to consider the statement that while still "following" the pattern set out by Pater in some way, Wilde arrives at the opposite destination. The fact may not be so paradoxical after all, given that inverting universally accepted "truths" is one of Wilde's literary and critical staples, and in his most self-consciously decadent works this motif would understandably have come to the forefront. His apprenticeship to Pater is by no means an uncomplicated case of the student following the mentor's ideas, especially given that Pater's developed in the opposite direction, losing their radicalism along the way as Wilde's intensified. In *The Eighteen-Nineties*, Jackson also comments on the way even *Marius* could be interpreted much differently by readers with decadent sensibilities than Pater would probably have intended by this point:

> Such passages seemed in the eyes of the decadents to give a perverse twist to the aesthetic Puritanism of the intellectual evolution of Marius, and to fill with a new naughtiness that high discipline of exquisite taste to which the young pagan subjected himself. It is not surprising then to find even the revised version of the famous "Conclusion" acting as a spark to the tinder of the new acceptance of life.[57]

[56] Christopher S. Nassaar, "Pater's *The Renaissance* and Wilde's *Salome*" in *The Explicator*, *Vol. 59, Issue 3* (London: Routledge, 2001) 82.

[57] Jackson 59.

One may (justifiably) disagree with Jackson's time-coloured usage of “perverse” in this context, but fascinating is the multiplicity of possible readings that Pater's Conclusion apparently invited, not at all dissimilar from the variegated responses to Wilde's work, as has been and will be demonstrated. Pater himself attempted to shield his work from “misleading”[58] readers, an interesting attempt in light of our modern understanding of a text as an entity not intrinsically bound in terms of reception and interpretation to authorial intent.

[58] Zdeněk Beran, “Walter Pater between *The Renaissance* and Modernism: Dynamic Structures in *Marius the Epicurean*”, *Shakespeare between the Middle Ages and Modernism: From Translator's Art to Academic Discourse*, eds. Martin Procházka and Jan Čermák (Prague: Charles University, Faculty of Arts, 2008) 192-193.

Chapter 4: Books of Similarities

4.1: Pater's Influence, Metatextuality, and Genre Trouble

Walter Pater has long been recognized among Wilde's most significant influences, particularly in conjunction with his essays and other pieces of criticism dealing with antiquity by itself, as well as compared to the society of the nineteenth century. However, an area that appears under-examined in comparison is the strikingly familiar tone of Pater's fiction when compared to Wilde's only novel. *Marius the Epicurean*, first published before *Dorian Gray*, is Pater's two-volume philosophical *Bildungsroman* which, on closer inspection, shares a number of themes with Wilde. The setting, instead of contemporary, is ancient Rome, during the reign of the emperor Marcus Aurelius; this alone highlights the shared interest of Pater and Wilde in the ancient world. Pater's choice of time period is also relevant to the very notion of decadence, as *Marius* only takes place after the best-known Roman rulers have passed (Marcus Aurelius was the last before a period of decline brought on by the fact that unlike his predecessors of the Nervan-Antonine dynasty, he did not adopt a successor on the basis of ability but had a famously inept son, Commodus, who was entrusted with the emperor's mantle). It should not be forgotten that Aurelius's predecessors, especially Hadrian who also figures multiple times in Wilde's writing, were noted for their affection towards male lovers. It can be seen as a sort of vindication, made all the more resonant against the backdrop of the Victorian era which valorized heterosexuality with its familial ties as the only worthy model, that Hadrian who never even made any pretence of needing a blood heir and who became famous for the deification of his deceased lover Antinous turned out to be a more successful and far-seeing ruler than the more conventionally behaving Aurelius, let alone Aurelius's son. Hadrian's relatively peaceful reign serves as an important contrast to the exigencies of emperors such as Caligula, Nero or Elagabalus, all of whom were also associated with non-heterosexual behaviour, which was then treated as part of their depravity. From a modern viewpoint, there is obviously no argument for arbitrarily assigning some intrinsically immoral *or* intrinsically moral quality to any relationship on the basis of the participants' genders alone, but in Wilde's time, countering the persistently negative

assessment of relationships other than those between a man and a woman would have been a chief concern of people who were marginalized by the prevalent cultural attitudes. Historical figures like Hadrian, Alexander the Great or Michelangelo become clichés of the "good" homo-/bisexual precisely because nineteenth-century society itself was opposed to giving any positive examples.

Pater, himself an erudite classicist, is aware of the imminent approach of the decadence of the old Roman order and prosperity, encapsulating it in several passages such as this:

> He was certainly fortunate in the time of his coming to Rome. That old pagan world, of which Rome was the flower, had reached its perfection in the things of poetry and art—a perfection which indicated only too surely the eve of decline. […] And at no period of history had the material Rome itself been better worth seeing—lying there not less consummate than that world of pagan intellect which it represented in every phase of its darkness and light. The various work of many ages fell here harmoniously together, as yet untouched save by time, adding the final grace of a rich softness to its complex expression.[59]

Pater manages to tie his Roman setting of choice cleverly to the atmosphere of his own time by metafictional devices: although the story itself follows Marius, it is not limited by his consciousness or the constraints of his world, and direct references to French art or English literature are treated as legitimate asides. In a regular historical novel, they would have been anachronisms and bring with them the problem of breaking the suspension of disbelief many would feel to be necessary for immersion in fiction; however, Pater handles them as matter-of-fact devices to strengthen a particular argument or draw a relevant comparison without negatively impacting the integrity of the narrative. *Marius the Epicurean* is commonly classified as a philosophical, not a historical, novel:

[59] Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas, Vol. I* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1885) 184-185.

the metatextual dimension is the most prominent reason for this categorization. Although intentional inter- and metatextuality are more often associated with postmodernism and not as readily apparent in the context of earlier periods, it appears that such techniques are often employed by Pater before the term for (post)modernism had ever been coined. Regarding the set-up of the work as a whole, Beran observes that "[t]he story actually never has an opportunity to develop in full and to create any real expectations of the reader whatsoever, the plot thus being marginalized to something unimportant and giving way to reflection and contemplation".[60] Using the novel format as a vessel for something else entirely is what makes Pater's work stand out. Beran elaborates on this more later:

> In its narrative method and thematic organisation *Marius the Epicurean* maintains a unique position among the late Victorian novels. Drawing upon the nineteenth-century tradition of historical fiction set in ancient Rome, it distances itself from traditional form and in many respects precedes the strategies appropriated by the Modernist novel.[61]

While it is indisputable that Pater's work is the unique one by virtue of possessing all these traits, some of them also serve to tie it further to Wilde's. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exhibits self-reflexive features quite often, such as in the oft-quoted chapter on Dorian's readings, despite the text's traditional classification as a novel without even the modifier "philosophical" accorded to Pater's *Marius*. Even so, the plot is only nominally there and borderline predictable; as in the case of *Marius*, plot or linear narrative strength is not the primary reason to read *Dorian Gray*, although its narrativity is probably of a more cohesive nature than that of *Marius*. Beyond the binding function of the fairly straightforward plot, the text occupies a space somewhere between theory and allegorical fable (or any number of other genres, depending on each individual critic's proclivities).

[60] Beran 195.
[61] Beran 204-205.

Wilde may, in fact, be a disciple of Pater most importantly in one wide sense; Beran argues that "Pater's works are interconnected and mutually conditioned considerably more than the works of any other writer and in fact make up one dynamic whole."[62] While it cannot be said that Wilde reaches that intensity of mutual connection among his own works, his artistic output as well as his own commentary on it does show signs of internal connections as well as connections to the surrounding culture and literature. This is not only something that should be taken into account while comparing the texts and viewing them in light of one another, but also in the sense that such an approach creates a kind of mythology around the writer and his oeuvre. Like Pater, Wilde presupposes the subsequent labour of dedicated students for the whole scope of his mental landscape and its projection into his works to be revealed.

What, then, is the genre of *Dorian Gray*? Due to its complex symbolism and the combination of features expected of many different text types, it is difficult to pin it down as simply "a novel" or "a moral fable". A further problem is introduced by attempts to decipher the exact cultural milieu it would have been derived from. In the case of its earliest critics, there was not even any attempt at a genuinely objective—though there is hardly a thing that can be purely objective in the human realm to begin with—attitude to the text being examined. Nils Clausson provides a few choice quotes, while also interrogating the issue of unclear genre affiliation:

> Reading the novel as an English imitation of a decadent French text, for example, the reviewer for the Daily Chronicle denounced it as "a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French Decadents, a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction" (NCE 342-43). The St. James Gazette repeated this attack: "The writer airs his cheap research among the garbage of the French Decadents

[62] Beran 193.

like any drivelling pedant" (NCE 333).[63]

It is interesting that neither of these newspaper critics fails to notice the metatextual dimension of Wilde's prose, but both see it as an unequivocal narrative failing. French decadence is completely discredited as a worthy literary influence and given attributes of "leprosy" and "garbage"; any knowledge of French decadents is "cheap" instead of being seen as simply knowledge of literary works legitimate as any others. What this vitriolic response indicates is that the inter-/metatextual aspects of Wilde's work were obvious even to his detractors and—perhaps in part because of the rigidly defined characteristics of the novel genre under the influence of realists—considered by them to be stylistic as well as ethical blemishes. While this kind of denunciation is most likely caused by the reviewers' contempt of all decadent works of art as a matter of principle, the fact that making ostentatious references was not seen as an acceptable trait for the novel genre in Wilde's time may also have contributed to his receiving total vilification in a score of responses.

A rather fascinating point is that, while a reader nowadays might presume that explicitly religious critics would have been even more scathing towards Wilde than those writing for non-clerical audiences, this assumption may turn out to be patently incorrect when the genre issue is taken into account. Further examples from Clausson's paper:

> But while the popular secular press was denouncing Wilde's novel for its "spiritual putrefaction," Christian publications, such as the *Christian Leader*, the *Christian World*, and *Light*, which interpreted it as an ethical parable or moral fable, praised it as "a work of high moral import" (qtd. in Pearce 169). […] Clearly, the judgment of early reviewers depended, at least to some extent, on the genre in

[63] Nils Clausson, "'Culture and corruption': Paterian self-development versus Gothic degeneration in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", *Literature Resource Center,* 14 Mar 2012 <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA110587368&v=2.1&u=karlova&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>. All subsequent quotations of this paper are from this version.

which they placed the novel. [64]

It should be added as well that not only did presumed genre affiliations play a role in the critics' appreciation of *Dorian Gray*, but that it was impossible—even for those criticisms that adopted an overall favourable tone—to qualify the novel without deferring to a moral judgement. The secular reviewers quoted earlier see no redeeming quality to decadent "putrefaction", hence they find nothing that could possibly redeem Wilde at all. The aforementioned Christian ones, although unexpectedly favourable to Wilde on the whole, also operate on the assumption that Dorian's trajectory is marked by immoral behaviour and his end a cautionary tale. If Wilde's intention had been to emphasize form and allusion and to craft a "story" whose main preoccupation was art itself, it seems to have been lost on the critics of his era quite across the ideological spectrum.

Indeed, the idea of *Dorian Gray* as a tale with morality at heart may be one of Wilde's most intriguing textual manoeuvres. It seems reasonable to classify Dorian as the symbol of self-absorbed youth, initially innocent, loved yet unloving, possessing a beauty entirely at odds with his personality which becomes progressively more corrupt. He is faced with the decision between following the hedonistic Lord Henry who, incidentally, triggers the decay of Dorian's soul by passing the notion of eternal youth on to him, and the painter Basil Hallward who personifies unselfish love and devotion. Dorian, of course, picks the former and completes this choice by eventually murdering Basil, thus losing all remaining links to Basil's principles before causing his own destruction by stabbing the hideously disfigured portrait of his own true self. The apparent moral of the story is uncontested: it is the state of the soul that really matters, not the temporary beauty of a young man afraid of age who seals his fate by tampering with things that had best be left alone. This, at least, seems to be the conclusion of the aforementioned more favourable Christian critics, although Wilde does not go out of his way to insert a closing message into the narrative; on

[64] Clausson, "'Culture and corruption': Paterian self-development versus Gothic degeneration in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*".

the contrary, the novel ends abruptly, one is tempted to say with almost cinematic flair at the scene of Dorian's demise and the restoration of his picture. Emphasis here is placed more on shock than on driving home a forceful moral pronouncement, and it is significant that after the initial charged discussions, critics have approached this text as a much more nuanced and even ambivalent entity. If there is a Christian sensibility to Wilde's concept of art, it may likely be inspired by Pater's treatment of it in *Marius* as well, in that "the Christian doctrine plays much more a specific aesthetic role."[65] This statement may shed new light on Wilde's late conversion to Catholicism, as of course the Christianity detailed in *Marius* is inextricably bound to Rome. The potential to romanticize it in the Victorian era is double: from the more common perspective of medieval revival and from this very specific perspective of Paterian "emotionality".[66]

In both Wilde and Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, art is not understood as a simple concept confined to the space of the novel in question, but transcending it; instead of immersing the reader in a single plot, numerous plots are assembled or played out. Sometimes these are mentions of side-characters of the authors' own devising who seem to have taken on a life beyond their relation to the protagonists, but other mentions may range from historical figures to archetypal stories, best exemplified by Pater's inclusion of the Cupid and Psyche myth, which is present as a long diversion from the main narrative. Such allusions have their in-text functions, but they are also used to put a subtle emphasis on the breadth of the author's knowledge of his subject, which goes even beyond the confines of the "classical" education. Like *l'art pour l'art*, this is knowledge without a practical application according to the Victorian model of industriousness, which in itself makes a clear statement regarding the writer's priorities. The substratum of references lends additional depth both to the fictional universe and to the cultural and intertextual landscape presenting itself to the "ideal" reader of such a text. Wilde may not follow Pater's example precisely in terms of incorporating a whole pre-existent myth, but references to historical personages still abound: some of them, as has

[65] Beran 204.
[66] Beran 204.

been pointed out, are to provide positive examples to people needing them and having the education necessary to decipher why. This second quality—the necessity of possessing certain information in order to make sense of the complex layering of the text in *Dorian Gray*—is also the self-conscious nod to *l'art pour l'art*, to decadence in the sense of subverting dominant cultural values. It is also a manifestation of elitism, a quality infrequently criticized in academic circles, likely because of Wilde's, as well as Pater's, explicit and well-recognized ties to Oxford as one of the pinnacles of academia. It should be taken into account that, if Wilde's text is to be considered an addition to queer liberation and historical reconstruction, this assertion stands scrutiny only to a degree. Undoubtedly, coming across this plethora of references would have been an affirming experience to the Oxbridge-educated gay reader who would have done some research on the side in unexpurgated editions, so in this sense, it is fair to say that Wilde's writing could effect positive change in its target audience. My criticism here is not towards Wilde for being hypocritical, since he has been known for his honesty about pursuing and employing esoteric, eclectic knowledge; it should simply be remembered that his strategy could not have worked in the sense of a universal queer liberation, as the requisite information or even the book itself would have been out of reach for most marginalized people without university education or the money to spend on proudly "useless" art. In short, no attempt is made to engage queer people in the working classes, or from less favoured backgrounds.

Class considerations aside, the influence of both Pater and Wilde on the "educated" culture of their time and beyond is indisputable; it should also be said that in terms of the distribution of power in society, leaving a mark on the literary canon is an effective way to remain in the consciousness of that part of the public that deals with the "higher" sectors and wields more power. The fact that the universe of *Dorian Gray* overlaps with ours—not only by implication, but by the use of self-conscious features to emphasize the permeability of the literary versus the everyday sphere—makes the impact of the text all the more profound, facilitating its integration into the

cultural fabric. Having the characters of the narrative share the same insight that the readers may bring to the text with them, be they the intended audience or an audience simply standing by, creates a sense of joint participation in the commentary taking place beside the main narrative. As is often the case with Wilde's fiction, the supposed line between contrivance and reality is never clearly drawn.

4.2: Back to the Beginning

Another important component of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the Preface, already addressed in an earlier section of this thesis. I shall touch upon it again here, as it can be seen as an exercise in metatextuality from the first. It is obviously interactive, and all the axioms listed in it are concerned with art itself as a concept or a medium, or they deal with the creator's relationship to the created. Virtually all these topics fall to the realm of textual criticism in addition to their role in justifying Wilde's specific novel; for this reason, it could be argued that they are “doubly” metatextual: primarily, in relation to the text itself as a finished product, and secondarily, in analyzing the behind-the-scenes process of creating as well as Wilde's own reasons and aims in the pursuit of writing. That Wilde saw an affinity between art and criticism is corroborated in the very first lines of the Preface, “The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things”[67] and by one of his best-known essays, “The Critic As Artist”.

It is also beneficial to look at the claims of the Preface themselves and what they say about Wilde's concept of art:

> The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are

[67] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

> true can be proved. No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. [...] Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art. Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art. From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type. [68]

It is debatable whether these assertions were intended to placate or agitate; a probable interpretation is that the intended effect was further agitation in the guise of explaining, justifying, apologizing. A significant point is that Wilde converts even the themes commonly thought to be the subject of ethics in the Victorian era—the virtues and vices, ethical sympathies—into the domain of style. By taking this radical stance in the face of criticism, Wilde turns the common perception of morality and art upside down, rendering the complaints against *Dorian Gray* pointless, precluded by simple, impersonal logic. As a defence based on argumentation, the Preface recalls Plato's *Apology*, though its subversive potential in relation to the society is far greater since, instead of arguing innocence on the basis of universally recognized laws or values, it subverts those values first, from which there logically follows the formal absurdity of the original accusations. Instead of being predictably defensive, Wilde dismantles the very foundation of the criticism levelled at him without making any pretence of "apology" in the modern sense.

The next section of the Preface is especially important in relation to the coded meanings discussed earlier and their potential effects on the reader:

> All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.[69]

[68] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[69] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

The first three assertions are evidently tied to the reader's ability and possession of the background information necessary for deciphering implication and allusion. The final statement is proof of Wilde's awareness that readers impart their perceptions and modes of thinking into their experience of any text, let alone a text which is part of "art" and rife with various coded meanings to be extracted at the reader's convenience (or, as Wilde suggests with both facetiousness and wisdom, at the reader's "peril"). For all the care he devotes into establishing the position of the artist, it seems that he operates on the assumption of a "death of the author" effect even before Barthes's popularization of the term in his eponymous essay. In the context of *Dorian Gray*, this crucial assertion is double-edged to boot: it is an invitation for the well-informed, initiated reader to find meanings that may help constitute an understanding of one's personal identity and place in the world and in history, while also serving as a reprimand to the vicious critics for having found their own image in the "immorality" they were busy accusing Wilde of. The Preface is dependent on context and reader participation as much as can be. Formalism, while also among the aspects Wilde was criticized for, is not as prominent in the Preface as a cursory reading would suggest; its one shining beacon is the axiom that "They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty".[70]

As for the Victorian emphasis on industry and morality, it is completely subverted at the end of the Preface:

> We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless.[71]

Rather than argue with his critics or revert to established traditions, Wilde opts to switch places between what is "useful" versus what is "useless" entirely. Being "useful" is something its maker can be forgiven, but not admired for—in so many words, usefulness is only to be tolerated—while "useless" objects are those which should be approached with admiration and passion, because they

[70] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*
[71] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

are self-explanatory and self-justifying. Under this reinterpretation Wilde employs, the applicability of the complaints raised against *Dorian Gray* becomes questionable in itself. However, this is still not the full extent of what Wilde manages to do, as he also articulates one of the main causes for separation between nineteenth-century decadence and nineteenth-century mainstream: the fact that being useless is not a negative trait in the eyes of the decadents. A positive value is ascribed to uselessness, contingent on its subversion of the established order, on viewing the distinction between "useful" and "useless" through a different lens. It is usefulness that is corrupt, as a "useful" thing cannot justify its own existence in isolation—a work of art in Wilde's conception of one, on the other hand, exists purely for its own sake. Unlike the Epicureanism of *Marius*, in which morality and the context of beauty do matter, the beauty in *Dorian Gray* can still be considered valid despite the protagonist's descent into an increasingly evil state of spirit. Even after Dorian dies, it is his sudden physical deterioration that drives the point of his inner corruption home, whereas his portrait regains the good looks it should never have been robbed of in the first place. This final switch is another example of how, in *Dorian Gray*, it is impossible by definition for beauty to be the representation of anything utterly corrupted.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I attempted to outline the main areas I believe should be of interest in scholarship dealing with Oscar Wilde and to write a reasonable argument for each, using comparisons and examples to illustrate the relevance of every partial field. It is by no means an exhaustive list, nor was it intended to masquerade as one, given that I have discussed the work of an author who employs seemingly-endless background resources. I believe my thesis does, at the very least, represent a sample of interpretation and research that can enrich our appreciation of Wilde's oeuvre as well as his life and his place in history. Tracing allusions has been the main text-based strategy with which I attempted to unearth a fuller understanding of the culture Wilde's work was steeped in, and examining the relationship of those elements to the author's life—dangerous as it may be, as a researcher can easily embrace a too-final interpretation of facts that can be only partly reconstructed—offers a degree of psychological insight grounded in historical time. Both are lines of thought that ultimately converge at the same goal: a non-superficial reading of a work of art, much as it may be done at the reader's own "peril".

My motivation for this work was an interest in discussing at least some of the intertextual links and elements of autobiography that I found relevant to contemporary (and historical) interests, culturally significant, or with the potential to contribute to the research of sexuality and gender-based minorities and the selective marginalization of said minorities both by law and in terms of cultural visibility. I believe that the scope of my work presented here is adequate for a BA-level thesis. The individual chapters and sub-chapters outline some of the areas I have found it most productive to examine. As a whole, the thesis has demonstrated that there is a specific cultural-historical grounding from which Wilde's works cannot be separated in order to reach their full understanding, and that delving into this background can still be beneficial to the wider culture and enrich its understanding of itself.

However, my treatment of the main topics has been far from exhaustive. Beyond the scope of a

bachelor's thesis, there is a wealth of related themes and individual points to be explored in greater detail, according to the interests and priorities of subsequent researchers. On the graduate level, there would be less reliance on common knowledge than I have used as a kind of adhesive material in the structuring of this thesis; one could also further analyze some of the generalized statements, or focus only on a given section outlined here in greater depth. A notable missing piece is a discussion of *The Sphinx*, which I had originally planned to include, but which upon closer inspection seemed to provide enough material for a whole separate thesis and would not have fit into the more survey-like nature of this work. I decided against attempting a detailed reading of it for the sake of preserving the integrity of this text.

I acknowledge that more secondary sources may have been integrated into the thesis. The reason I chose not to go the route of aggregating vast quantities of secondary material is that such an approach has been used with success in vast amounts of much more extensive research, and a BA thesis approached through the same method would only result in a shorter, less exhaustive version of the same. Instead, I chose to focus on interrogating a smaller amount of texts, some of which, like Jackon's study, were originally published only a short time after the era they were concerned with. While this does not make my work a definitive compilation of past research by any stretch, it has enabled me to engage in closer interpretative readings of both the primary and secondary sources I did use, even if it has rendered some parts of my work somewhat speculative. I was most interested in analyzing first-hand accounts of the period and how the era reflected upon itself shortly after its most iconic events, which is the reason why I cover Jackson's study in probably the most detail in the thesis.

Beyond the scope of my writing, which has mainly been aimed at tracking and illustrating certain historical and cultural points of importance, the ongoing interest in Oscar Wilde's work is sustained in a variety of ways. Some of it is indeed related to the LGBTQ* rights movement up to the present day, which keeps mapping out the lives of past figures who can be said to fall under the

umbrella in much the same way Wilde and his contemporaries set out to do in the nineteenth century. This can involve both a direct appraisal of Wilde's lived experience and re-readings of his fiction as such. Another major area is the self-conscious nature of Wilde's work underlined by his somewhat-enigmatic style of writing, sure to beget new analyses and viewpoints the longer it has been circulating in the literary consciousness. That interrogation of Wilde's work still abounds best illustrates the fact that it has not yet exhausted its reserves in the capacity to excite readers and to spark motivation for further research. Additionally, Wilde's place as a writer representative of a semi-obscure literary and cultural tradition provides a wealth of mutual links to be discovered and contextual references to be explored. As attitudes towards the acknowledgement of the contributions of LGBTQ* people to world history and culture change for the better, the amount of scholarly work done on one of the most influential queer artists can only increase.

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