

The Many Lives of Dorian Gray



An Analysis of the Lasting Appeal of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Through its Adaptations

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Introduction: Immortal Dorian

When Dorian Gray, the protagonist of Oscar Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, looks upon his portrait for the first time, he cries out: "How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young" (Wilde 1891 25). He goes on to wish that this process was the other way around, so that he himself could remain young while the portrait aged. This is one way in which Dorian (briefly) reaches eternal life through art, but immortality has also come to him in another, unexpected way. Through more than a century of plays, books, films, musicals and other adaptations, Dorian and his story are still very much alive today. While this might not be the immortality Dorian himself was looking for, it is a very interesting phenomenon that a story written at the end of the 19th century is still that popular now and is even the subject of many contemporary adaptations. This thesis will argue that the explanation for this popularity is twofold: it is because of the many different dimensions Wilde's story allows for adaptations to work with and because of the appealing myth of the immortal Dorian that lies at the heart of the story.

The first chapter will focus on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* itself, analysing the different dimensions of the novel. The ambiguity and richness of Wilde's novel have contributed to its own success, but have also allowed for others to produce adaptations which form their own take on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, often singling out one or two of these elements. The original, however, manages to merge all its different dimensions into one successful whole: this is what sets it apart from its adaptations.

Most adaptations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are in the form of film: some twenty films have been made over the last century, all putting forward their own take on Wilde's classic. Widely praised is Albert Lewin's 1945 *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which won on

Oscar. Many more adaptations have followed, and interestingly the 21st century has already seen the appearance of eight *The Picture of Dorian Gray*-based films. Many of these have, however, failed to make any impact, and only a handful have survived into popular culture. For the sake of space, this thesis will focus only on contemporary (21st century) adaptations. Concerning films, this means that the 2009 *Dorian Gray*, which had some commercial success, and to a smaller extent also the 2003 *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* will be analysed in the second chapter. These films differ: *Dorian Gray* is primarily a Gothic horror version of Wilde's story, while *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is a film with the interesting concept of having only literary characters of the Victorian age, including Dorian Gray, as protagonists in an action film.

Even though the film adaptations are the largest in number, there are also some adaptations in book form. Not all of these are literary: horror writer Graham Masterton's *Family Portrait* is a horror novel which is not so much about Dorian Gray, but about his curse, which Masterton applies to an entire family. More interesting is Will Self's 2002 novel *Dorian, An Imitation*: as the title implies, this entire novel is an imitation of Wilde's work, with many of the same characters and a very similar plot, only set at the end of the 20th rather than the 19th century. This novel cleverly reworks some of Wilde's themes and shows how they are still relevant now. This book will be examined more closely in the third chapter.

Many more adaptations of Wilde's novel exist in all kinds of forms. Opera adaptations exist next to fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld's 2005 photo book *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, which uses models to tell the story of Dorian in pictures, while other adaptations include ballet recitals and comic book series. Those are beyond the scope of this thesis, however, so after the discussion of the films and book, a conclusion will follow to provide a summary of the analyses of these different adaptations and an explanation of the two factors that have contributed to Dorian Gray's immortality.

Chapter 1: Different Shades of Gray

Before looking at adaptations of Wilde's novel, it is worthwhile to examine the story more closely, in order to identify those elements which have made the story suitable for a century of adaptations. These elements can be divided into two categories: that of content and that of form. The content of the book, with its treatment of morality and its homoerotic elements will be discussed first. In this context, it is also interesting to see how the treatment of these subjects was received in late 19th century England, which is markedly different from the story's appreciation today. After this, a short examination of the form of the book will follow, focusing on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a Gothic novel and the use of wit, both of which add to the readability of the story and make up part of its success.

One of the most important subjects of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that of (im)morality. It is not only an important element in the story's plot, but also in the characters' dialogues and discussions, which make up most of the book. Oscar Wilde himself described the story as follows: "I am afraid it is rather like my own life - all conversation and no action. I can't describe action: my people sit in chairs and chatter" (Wilde, qtd. in Raby 67). Although Raby justly remarks that this is not entirely true, since the original version already features "three deaths, including a suicide and a murder" (67), the chattering people Wilde refers to do make up the core of the story. Dorian Gray, who is still "unspotted from the world" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 17) is placed in between the influences of Basil Hallward and Lord Henry. Sheldon Liebman writes that most critics see *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as "a running debate between two of its major characters" (440). Some see this as a symbolical battle between Basil and Henry, others as a "conflict between psychological faculties" (Liebman 440) or a "projection of the war in Wilde's own psyche" (Liebman 441). Liebman himself, following Houston A. Baker, sees it not so much as a battle but rather as an (unsuccessful) attempt to merge two different attitudes to life (441). Michael Gillespie confirms that the story does not

provide enough closure for one single interpretation ("Picturing" 394). He mentions Wilde's famous quote ("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"(qtd. in Gillespie 394).) as an example of the "disposition for indeterminacy" ("Picturing" 394) characteristic of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The basic storyline is that Dorian is given a choice between two different ways of life, represented by Basil and Lord Henry. Liebman calls these two "'flat' characters in that they do not change in the course of the novel" (458). Both of them are, unlike Dorian, unchallenged by any "moral choice" (Liebman 458), and they do not change their way of thinking over the course of the novel. They do not, for example, change their initial views of Dorian. As Michael Gillespie points out, Basil goes into denial when he is confronted with Dorian's changed portrait ("Picturing" 400): "Mildew has got into the canvas. The paints I used had some wretched mineral poison in them" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 131). He refuses to accept Dorian's changed nature and claims that everything can be solved by some prayers: he cannot let go of his "idealized views" (Gillespie, "Picturing" 401). Lord Henry, too, cannot believe Dorian has turned into a murderer: "What would you say, Harry, if I told you that I had murdered Basil? ... I would say, my dear fellow, that you are posing for a character that doesn't suit you. ... It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 175). Rather, Henry aims to preserve "the integrity of his initial impressions" (Gillespie, "Picturing" 402).

Basil is described by Liebman as "a moralist" (450), someone who believes in a moral order, where good and bad deeds are rewarded and punished, respectively. He worries about Henry's influence on Dorian. When Henry claims that "[s]in is the only real colour element left in life" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 28), Basil warns Henry not to say these things in front of Dorian. The painter believes that sinning has negative effects, even on one's physical

appearance: "Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 126). He also believes that there is something like a soul upon which sins leave a bad impression: "I should have to see your soul. ... But only God can do that" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 128), he tells Dorian. Basil constantly tries to give Dorian good advice: right from the start, when he struggles to keep Dorian out of Henry's influence, up until the end, when he comes to confront Dorian with the rumours he has heard about him, urging Dorian to "lead such a life as will make the world respect you" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 128) with "a clean name and a fair record" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 128).

Lord Henry stands directly opposite Basil, urging Dorian to follow his so-called "New Hedonism": "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing.... A New Hedonism – that is what our century wants" (Wilde, *Picture 1981* 23). He manages to sway Dorian with his charm, being, as the Duchess of Harley puts it, "quite delightful, and dreadfully demoralising" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 39). Through contemplating human nature, Henry has reached the conclusion that there is no such thing as a moral order, but that human nature "is driven by irrational, impersonal physical-biological forces beyond human control and human understanding" (Liebman 444). Fidelity, for example, is "purely a question for physiology. It has nothing to do with our own will" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 28). Good resolutions are "useless attempts to interfere with scientific law. ... Their result is absolutely *nil*" (Wilde, *Picture 1981* 84). Lord Henry becomes a spectator, living through Dorian to "refrain from emotional involvement" (Liebman 445), thus "avoiding the suffering that shadows passion" (Liebman 445).

Dorian falls under the influence of Henry and turns to a life of sinning, remaining unspoiled in appearance by diverting the physical recoil to his portrait. These sins are purposely left very vague, so that "[e]ach man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray" (Wilde, qtd.

in Raby 68). Dorian's death can then be interpreted as the ultimate failing of the New Hedonism and a victory for morality: in the end, Dorian's sins do not go unpunished. Some critics have argued against this one-sided view, however. Gillespie, for example, mentions the ambiguity of the ending: when Dorian stands before the painting, he forgets the New Hedonistic tenet of "Be afraid of nothing" (Wilde *Picture 1891* 23) and this becomes his undoing. He acts upon his fear of being found out by attempting to destroy all evidence of his sins ("Picturing" 407). Also, Liebman argues that Basil's moral order is not at all visible in the story (451). Basil himself does not live up to his own standards, quickly forgetting his outrage over Dorian's failure to show any emotion over Sybil's death, simply because of his devotion to the boy: "The painter felt strangely moved. The lad was infinitely dear to him He could not bear the thought of reproaching him any more" (Wilde *Picture 1891* 92). On top of that, no moral rule seems to dominate Wilde's fictional universe. As Liebman puts it, in the end "the stage is strewn with the bodies of the innocent - Sybil, Basil, Alan Campbell, and James Vane" (451). So while the story certainly questions these different attitudes to life, it remains ambiguous in its treatment of them.

Another important aspect is the homosexual tension that pervades the story. It is most explicit in Dorian's encounters with Basil. Joseph Carroll claims that this tension is present right from the first chapters, where four central elements work together to add an implicit homoerotic feel to the chapters: "images of luxuriant sensuality, an overriding preoccupation with male beauty, the depiction of effeminate mannerisms among the characters, and a perpetual patter of snide remarks that are hostile to women, to marriage, and to sexual fidelity" (295). Indeed, Dorian's beauty is continually commented upon; he is even introduced by means of a description of his portrait, which shows "a young man of extraordinary personal beauty" (Wilde, *Picture 1981* 6). Lord Henry remarks that someone so beautiful "should always be there in winter when we have no flowers to look at" (Wilde, *Picture 1981*

7). Basil explains why Dorian is so dear to him: "When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with some one [sic] whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my art itself" (Wilde, *Picture 1981* 10). While the two speak positively of male beauty, nothing positive is said about women. Henry's marriage appears to be one of mutually agreed upon deception and sporadic meetings. He has nothing positive to say on fidelity and loyalty either and identifies women as the evil geniuses behind these concepts: "Always! That is a dreadful word. I shudder when I hear it. Women are so fond of using it. They spoil every romance by trying to make it last forever" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 24). The homoerotic tension is also apparent in the characters' interaction. During Dorian and Henry's first meeting, after Henry had remarked that a caprice last longer than life-long passion, Dorian "put his hand upon Lord Henry's arm. 'In that case, let our friendship be a caprice,' he murmured, flushing at his own boldness" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 24).

Interestingly, the homosexual feel had already been toned down by Wilde compared to the shorter story the novel was based on. Before *The Picture of Dorian* was published as a novel, it appeared in *Lippincott's* magazine in 1890. As will be discussed later, the story caused an outrage, which led to Wilde making "modifications that present some of his more daring ideas in a less direct fashion" (Gillespie, "Preface" xii). As Raby notes, Wilde tried to lessen the homoerotic feel of the relation between Dorian and Basil by stressing Dorian's importance as a muse for the painter (68). This difference is indeed clearly visible in a comparison of the two works. Some passages were deleted: "Hallward felt strangely moved. Rugged and straightforward as he was, there was something in his nature that was purely feminine in his tenderness" (Wilde, *Picture 1890* 247) and "It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend.

Somehow, I had never loved a woman. I suppose I never had time ... I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly" (Wilde, *Picture 1890* 250) were left out of the 1891 version, as were many references to physical contact, like Henry laying his hand on Basil's shoulder and Basil taking Henry's hand in the first chapter (Wilde *Picture 1890* 187-188).

These changes Wilde made were instigated by the reactions to his story. According to Karl Beckson, the popular press was outraged with the story and "attacked it as decadent and immoral" (7). Gillespie explains that the temporal context is very important here. First of all, he mentions that in Victorian times "the way to deal with unpleasant things was to suppress any mention of them" ("Reviews and Reactions" 355). Not only did Wilde go against this, but he also did it at a time when the particular issue of homosexual relations was a very sensitive one. As Gillespie writes, only months earlier Britain had been shocked by the so-called Cleveland Street Affair. This affair concerned the discovery of a homosexual male brothel in London (at a time when homosexual relations were still forbidden by law), where several telegraph boys worked as prostitutes and which even members of the English royal family were rumoured to have frequented. The government tried to cover it all up, but without success ("Reviews and Reactions" 354).

In this context, Wilde published *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As Gillespie claims, many of Wilde's critics will have been aware of the existence of such behaviour through experience, but "could not publicly admit this" ("Reviews and Reactions" 355). So instead, many reviews judged the story to be perverse and immoral, without ever explicitly mentioning homosexuality. The *St. James' Gazette* of June 24 featured a review which starts with the statement that the story will not be analysed, since "that would be to advertise the developments of an esoteric prurience" (Beckson 68) and indeed it does not explicitly mention homoerotic elements or sins. The reviewer does describe the plot, and comments how

writers like Gautier, Stevenson and Anstey could have made it, respectively, "romantic, entrancing, beautiful", "convincing, humorous, pathetic" and "screamingly funny" (Beckson 70). These are safer ways of telling a story than Wilde's, who dealt with a sexual taboo in a relatively open way (even though this element of the story is still not so explicit that it cannot be ignored): it is exemplary of a different attitude towards literature than that of today.

Criticism of various elements of society is, to a certain extent, praised in literature nowadays.

At the end of the 19th century, however, such a direct tackling of the taboo subject of homosexuality was not widely appreciated. Rather, these kinds of stories were to be "chucked into the fire" (Beckson 71). The review in the *Scots Observer* of July 5 is also exemplary of this kind of view. In the short review, the reviewer criticises the homoerotic elements, but only indirectly: "he can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys" (Beckson 75), he says of Oscar Wilde, cleverly accusing Wilde of including homoerotic elements and recalling the taboo placed upon homosexuality by referring to the Cleveland Street Affair, without ever explicitly mentioning any of these things (even though the general public will not have failed to grasp these subtle references).

The reviews also commented on the supposed immorality of the story. The *Scots Observer* called it a danger to "the public morals" (Beckson 75), the *St. James' Gazette* "corrupt" (Beckson 71), while *Punch* recommended it only to those interested in "*diablerie*" (Beckson 76). The *Daily Chronicle* of June 30 goes into more depth, calling it a "poisonous book" (Beckson 72), but also explaining why. According to the reviewer, the only moral in the book is "that man's chief end is to develop his nature to the fullest by 'always searching for new sensations'" (Beckson 72). No single "good and holy impulse of human nature" (Beckson 72) is not ridiculed in this book, and the supposed moral ending is nothing more than a "sham moral" (Beckson 73) only added because Wilde wanted to "vamp up a 'moral' at the end" (Beckson 72). So the weak moral ending is, according to the reviewer, not enough to set the

improper indulgence in the rest of the book into the right context; it will only "taint every young mind that comes in contact with it" (Beckson 73). While most of the reviews held similar views, not all of them did. The *Christian Leader*, for example, praised Wilde for explicating the shortcomings of contemporary society and hoped that the book would prevent some of its young readers falling for the temptations of this society (Beckson 9).

An interesting aspect of the reception of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that criticism was not only directed at the story, but also at Wilde himself. Wilde tried to distance himself from the story somewhat by adding a preface to the novel version in which he puts forward his views on art, but did not succeed. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Wilde's trials, where *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was used against him. In the first trial, a libel case against the Marquess of Queensberry, who had accused Wilde of being a sodomite, defence attorney Edward Carson used some passages, including those Wilde had deleted from the novel version, in Wilde's cross-examination. He read, for example, Basil's reaction to his first meeting with Dorian, and asked Wilde whether he deemed such feelings of one man towards another, younger man, proper or improper (Gillespie, "Cross-Examination" 384). He also mentioned the passage where Basil expresses his true feelings for Dorian: "Somehow, I have never loved a woman" (Wilde, *Picture 1890* 250) and "I am only happy when I am with you" (Wilde, *Picture 1890* 250). Carson then went over the passage phrase by phrase, continuously asking if Wilde also experienced those feelings for a certain young man (Gillespie, "Cross-Examination" 386). While Wilde's defence was good enough to protect him from any harm then, he was nevertheless convicted two trials later. This example shows that when *Dorian Gray* was published, the general public could not separate the author from his work, but that this connection was strong enough to hold even in a court of law.

Another aspect of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, praised even in some of the most negative reviews, is the readability of the story. The *Daily Chronicle*, in its very negative

review, also mentions that the story is "undeniably amusing" (Beckson 72). The *Scots Observer*, of the opinion that it would be better if the immoral story had not been written at all, admits that it is "ingenious, interesting, full of cleverness, and clearly the work of a man of letters" (Beckson 75). The reviewer in *Punch* remarks he wishes to forget it, "except for the ingenious idea" (Beckson 77). So already when the story was first published, a distinction was made between the two aspects of content and form. While the content was too controversial for most, the attractiveness of the story's form was more widely recognized. In the context of adaptations, the form of the story is also of much interest. While the style of writing is hard to adapt for use in other mediums, the more general elements of the story's form, its Gothic elements and the wit of its dialogues, are certainly important for adaptations.

First of all, while Dorian Gray's tale is, on a higher level, one of morals and temptations, it is certainly also a story of Gothic horror. John Paul Riquelme states that Wilde "simultaneously aestheticises the Gothic and gothicises the aesthetic" (497). In other words, Wilde not only turns what is in its core a simple horror story into something with much more depth, but also shows the darker side of aestheticism: the point where the boundary of aestheticism is crossed and it goes over into decadence. According to Riquelme, Gothic writing presents "a fantastic world of indulgence and boundary-crossing" (497) and shows "the tendency of the aesthetic ... to press beyond traditional boundaries and to recognize terror within the aesthetic" (497). While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* could be said to uncover the terror "within" (Riquelme 497) the aesthetic, it more precisely shows the terror of what lies beyond the boundaries of the aesthetic: decadence. As the novel progresses, Dorian's experiences (and sins) no longer take place in the realm of aestheticism but rather in that of decadence. Dorian is no longer satisfied with ordinary experiences and since he thinks his soul can come to no harm, he indulges in the most extravagant of pleasures. It is no coincidence that the Gothic element of the immortal soul allows for this extreme and decadent

self-indulgence. The Gothic not only presents Wilde with the possibility of creating this world of decadence, but through such devices of horror as murder and suicide it also allows for Wilde to warn of its consequences. So, in this cleverly constructed story the Gothic is not just an aside to add some action and diversity to the whole, but fulfils a useful role.

The best example of this merging of the Gothic and the aesthetic is the way in which it drives the plot forward. The Gothic elements of eternal life and the portrait as a supernatural and very visual way of showing the effects of sinning on one's soul provide Wilde with a suitable framework for his story. It creates Riquelme's "fantastic world of indulgence" (497) in which Wilde has more possibilities to dramatise the contrast between morality and sin and show the effects of sinning than in a more realistic tale. A reviewer in *Theatre* commented: "Looking at it from the point of view of dramatic possibilities, we are bound to recognise in it great attractions" (Beckson 81). The suicide of Sybil and the murder of Basil are used to the same effect: Wilde uses the most extreme sins at his disposal to effectively make his point. Of chapters 13 and 14, in which Basil is murdered and then disposed of, Raby remarks that they "contain the full range of Gothic effects. ... Here Wilde strikes one as being wholly in command of the idiom, using it for precise effect" (76). Indeed, as soon as Basil and Dorian walk upstairs, Wilde summons up a Gothic atmosphere: "The lamp cast fantastic shadows on the wall and staircase. A rising wind made some of the windows rattle" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 129), until finally Basil's blood starts to "drip, drip on the threadbare carpet" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 133).

Wilde also uses the Gothic to surround Dorian with a sense of doom. Dorian places the painting in an abandoned room, "covered in cobwebs" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 98), *Dorian Gray's* equivalent of the haunted attic, which adds an extra Gothic feel. Interestingly, upon entering this room, Dorian is reminded of his "lonely childhood" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 101), during which his grandfather always kept him at a distance. Earlier on, Lord Henry's uncle

described Dorian's parentage: his mother, daughter of the rich Lord Kelso, ran off with a soldier and lived in happiness for some months, until the husband was killed in a duel, supposedly by someone Lord Kelso hired to do just that. The unhappy widow died a year later (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 32). Violence and unhappiness seem to have surrounded Dorian all his life. As the story draws to a close and James Vane is reintroduced into the story, this sense of doom becomes stronger. After a close escape at the opium den Dorian sees James again and can no longer tell whether it is his imagination or not, but the "consciousness of being hunted, snared and tracked down had begun to dominate him" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 165). Dorian makes another lucky escape, but it is to be his last.

Another element of the story is Wilde's wit (mainly that of his dialogues), which largely speaks for itself but is still worth a mention since it provides interesting opportunities for adaptations of the novel. Most of the contemporary reviews had at least some praise for the clever writing of Wilde and his trademark witty paradoxes, uttered mainly by Lord Henry. Henry's verbal fencing with the Duchess of Monmouth is a great example of this, but he also delivers many one-liners. The first words he speaks, about where to exhibit the portrait of Dorian Gray, are already an example of this: "The Academy is too large and too vulgar. Whenever I have gone there, there have either been so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse" (Wilde, *Picture 1891* 6) and he keeps this up for the rest of the novel. Lord Henry's cynicism is part of his characterisation and Wilde uses it as a clever and attractive way to put forward some ideas on life, morality and sin, but apart from that, Wilde's wit also makes for a more pleasant reading experience.

In conclusion, Oscar Wilde's novel offers a variety of elements that work together to form *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. While the focus is on the contrasting lifestyles of Basil and Henry and their influence over Dorian, the book is more than just a moralistic tale on right

and wrong, imbuing this central element with a dose of ambiguity. Homosexual tension also runs throughout , even in the toned-down novel version. The whole is made even stronger by the attractive form in which Wilde presents his story: a Gothic horror story drenched in cynical wit. Contemporary reception was not positive: while Wilde received praise for his writing style and ingeniously constructed plot, little praise was given to his treatment of morals and his inclusion of homoerotic elements. On top of that, Wilde was attacked personally, since the writer was constantly identified very closely with his work. At a time when discussing these matters openly was not appreciated and when homosexuality was an extremely sensitive subject, Wilde was heavily criticised for publishing just the story that has eventually earned him great renown.

Chapter 2: The Motion Pictures of Dorian Gray

This chapter will examine Dorian Gray's appearance in film through *Dorian Gray* (2009) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003). Even though six other film adaptations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have appeared since 2001, all of these failed to attract any public attention. The *Internet Movie Database*, which usually provides very complete and up to date information on films, lists only two of these (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 2004 and *Dorian*, 2005), but even these films have remained very obscure and are not widely available. This thesis will therefore focus only on the first two mentioned here, since they have actually become a part of popular culture.

For the 2009 adaptation *Dorian Gray*, the producers have made a very clear choice about which aspect of the story they wanted to stress: the Gothic element. The film, especially the first two-thirds, largely follows the book, but there are some notable differences. One exception is that Dorian Gray's sins are not just spoken about but also shown: scenes of sex and nudity (which are, noticeably, the only kind of sins this film really emphasises) abound. The ending, however, has been altered almost completely. After Dorian has travelled the world for about twenty-five years, he returns home, looking exactly the same as he did when he left, to the amazement of an old and greyed Lord Henry. Dorian's feelings for Henry's daughter Emily, along with Dorian's growing paranoia (which is worsened by James Vane's attempts at murder), make him want to change his life of sin. Henry, however, wants Dorian to stay away from his daughter and manages to find out Dorian's secret. In the grand finale, Dorian and Henry face off on Dorian's attic and the portrait is revealed, showing a monstrously deformed Dorian. Henry sets fire to the attic and locks Dorian in: when Emily arrives and urges Dorian to open the door with the key around his neck, Dorian tells Emily she has his "whole heart" (*Dorian* 01:39:12) and then rushes to the painting and stabs it with a

sword, taking on the painted Dorian's horrible appearance.

The choices made in adapting Wilde's novel can be divided into three categories. First of all, the film heavily emphasises elements of horror already present in the story, like the aging portrait, and adds some new elements. Secondly, the story structure is changed to add more suspense to the film to turn it into a thriller: this is most clearly visible in the finale, where the filmmakers have taken great liberties to invent a climax that works on screen. Lastly, the film gives the story a visual update, sometimes changing its emphasis in the process. The details of these changes will be examined first, followed by an analysis of their effect.

The strong emphasis on horror elements becomes apparent right from the opening scene: Dorian is looking down at something beneath him for a moment and then plunges his knife into it. Covered in blood, Dorian clutches a bloody yellow scarf, and some moments later, he is seen dumping a bloody chest into the river (*Dorian* 1:37-2:44). The words "one year earlier" appear, and the next scene has Dorian arriving in London, looking at his surroundings in a sense of amazement (*Dorian* 2:48-2:58). This opening creates suspense right from the start: the viewer knows that there are terrible things to come.

Also, quite early on in the film, a horror element new in this adaptation is explored: the background story of Dorian and his grandfather, Lord Kelso. Their past is explored mostly in the film's version of Wilde's schoolroom (the place where Dorian Gray places his portrait): a stereotypically Gothic haunted attic. Accompanied only by haunting music and strange noises, Dorian enters the small, shabby-looking attic early on in the film in order to investigate strange sounds coming from the room (*Dorian* 10:45-11:20). His visit is interrupted by flashbacks: a young Dorian is seen hiding in the attic and later on a man appears ominously in the doorway (*Dorian* 11:20-11:46). When Dorian mourns over Sybil, the flashbacks return and it becomes clear that Kelso used to hit Dorian with his cane,

blaming the boy for the death of his daughter, Dorian's mother. Dorian tells Henry how Kelso used to say he was damned and cries out: "He's part of me, Harry. I turn all love into death. Into death!" (*Dorian* 40:00-40:17). This curse is referred to by Henry in the final confrontation: "Kelso was right. You are – you are damned!" he yells to Dorian (*Dorian* 01:37:30-01:37:33). Dorian's youth is described by Wilde as lonely, but in this film it is given a violent twist which also allows for the inclusion of mysterious flashbacks, a haunted attic and a supposed curse, illustrative of this film's move towards horror.

The visually rich representation of the portrait is another element of horror. This is partly explained by the transition from one medium to another: in the more visual medium of film, representing the portrait is a challenge, since a description has to be turned into something that works visually. However, extra effort seems to have gone into making the portrait as gruesome as possible. For example, Dorian's picture does not only change in appearance, but it also starts rotting and producing maggots. In a more interesting new move, the film constantly hints at the portrait being alive. On several occasions, a grey filter is placed over the screen as the camera presents the viewpoint of the portrait, as if it is watching the characters. It also makes strange slurping and sighing noises. During the climax the painting actually comes alive. After hearing the strange sounds Henry pulls the cloth covering the painting away: from the greyish viewpoint of the painting, Henry is seen investigating it. When the camera switches back to Henry's point of view, the deformed representation of Dorian starts moving and snarling, confirming suspicions that the painting is somehow alive (*Dorian* 1:37:53- 1:38:16).

Horror elements abound, but, as director Oliver Parker stated in an interview, he wanted not just horror but also "a gothic thriller" (Hay), and some added elements indeed create suspense. One of the major additions to the plot of *Dorian Gray* is the inclusion of Emily Wotton, Lord Henry's daughter. Where Wilde introduces Hetty, the film makes Emily

the character for whom Dorian tries to change his life of sinning. According to Oliver Parker, the climax Wilde has written would not work on screen: they needed a better one (*Dorian* 1:37-3:16). This solution makes for "a terrific finale with three characters all involved with one another's future and destiny" (Philips 3:02-3:07). Additionally, it creates the added suspense of the uncertainty of Dorian and Emily's future together.

Lord Henry himself has also undergone some changes. First of all, he is a much darker character than in the novel: he uses Wilde's witticisms, but they rarely produce any laughter from his audience and he is described as "a dreary old cynic" (*Dorian* 1:09:20-1:09:21). While Wilde's Henry only tries to encourage Dorian to fully live his life, the film's Henry more actively influences Dorian's life by cleverly causing Dorian and Sybil to break up. Just before they go to see Sybil, he takes Dorian to a brothel, and when they finally meet up with Sybil in the abandoned theatre, he remarks to Sybil: "I'm sure you're eager to start a family yourself" (*Dorian* 32:47) before taking his leave. Dorian and Sybil break up in the argument over their future, caused by Henry's remark, and when Dorian leaves, the camera zooms out to show Henry sitting and looking down on a crying Sybil from the first ring, confirming that he planned this to happen (*Dorian* 34:30-34:35). Colin Firth, who plays the role, remarks that Henry enjoys seeing "a young man destroy himself" (Philips 00:48-00:50). However, Firth continues, "whether he intends to take it as far as he does and turn him into an absolute monster is to be argued" (Philips 1:11-1:16). He then compares Henry to Dr. Frankenstein (Philips 1:17-1:25), emphasising again the active role Henry plays in turning Dorian into a sort of monster.

There is another remarkable character change in Henry. As Firth puts it, "[i]n the book Henry doesn't really change – he's the only character who doesn't go on one of these journeys of discovery, what we like to call the arc" (qtd. in Nasson). As has been shown in the previous chapter, Henry indeed does not change in the book. In the film, however, he does.

Firth comments:

I think we've altered that a little in this story by giving him a daughter - the stakes change and because of this, his character has to change. The fact that he has a daughter makes him vulnerable, he can no longer be flippant because something suddenly matters terribly; it gives Dorian a different kind of power and it gives Henry a different kind of urgency, he's no longer a voyeur because he's involved. (qtd. in Nasson)

Adding Henry's daughter to the story does indeed change Henry's character. When Dorian returns after twenty years of travelling, Henry still enjoys watching Dorian live his life: "Dorian, it is quite clear why you've lost your passion for life. You've been away from me for too long. We must go out. Take on the town as we used to" (*Dorian* 1:08:11-1:08:24). Henry appears to have remained the same, but this changes when Dorian starts to develop a relationship with his daughter. He then turns against Dorian for the first time: "You're against nature. You stay away from her. Stay away from her!" (*Dorian* 1:28:23-1:28:27). It is Henry's desire to protect his daughter which makes him Dorian's enemy in the last part of the film and gives Parker his desired "terrific finale" (Philips 3:02), the climax he missed from the book, the climax where Dorian has a real, living enemy (who is all the more interesting since he was a friend first) instead of just a portrait.

A last element of note in the film is that it uses many special effects, costumes and sets in order to make it as visually striking as possible. Parker comments in an interview that he had thought about making this film before, but that he was glad that they had waited long enough so that they could use improved computer-generated imagery (CGI) in order to create a believable version of 19th century London (Olsen). In an interview with Jonathan Ross, he explains that the story had become so traditional that part of the challenge was to "blow off some of the dust" (Ross 2:30-2:31), which he achieves through the visual update. The horror

elements are also an example of this: Dorian's portrait and Dorian himself are turned into monsters by make-up and CGI. Interestingly, the producers also chose to make all Dorian's sins explicit (and at the same time also slightly one-sided, since they are almost all of a sexual nature): they are several montages in which Dorian is seen engaging in all kinds of (homo)sexual practices whilst attending parties or brothels. According to Parker, this makes Dorian a subject rather than an object:

The slight gauge from the book to the film is that in the book, [Dorian] is a blank canvas. He's the object and we're all watching him. We don't know what he thinks or what he feels, really. That's why we took the 'Picture' out of the title. It's just "Dorian Gray." We're more interested in the character and making him the subject rather than the object — and him being the fellow that takes us on the roller-coaster ride. (Hay)

Interestingly, the homoerotic elements are reduced to nothing more than a part of this visual spectacle. During one of Dorian's parties, Basil comes to ask Dorian if he can exhibit the painting. Dorian, lying smoking between two scantily dressed women with a hazy look on his face (*Dorian* 50:12-50:14) distracts Basil by having sex with him, supposedly as a way of thanking Basil for the painting. This is quite out of the blue: only once before has Henry hinted at this homosexual tension ("Perhaps Basil should be a little more fearless with his own feelings" (*Dorian* 29:12-29:14), explaining Basil's disappointment over Dorian's engagement to Sybil) and it is also mentioned only once more after that ("No, it's about a good deal more!" (*Dorian* 53:56-53:58)) Basil screams when Dorian asks him if he has come to complain about borrowing the painting again). Not much is done to further develop these homoerotic tensions between the main male characters. Homosexuality is not left out completely, however, since some of Dorian's sexual encounters do feature men, but these scenes are never very explicit. For example, Dorian is seen dancing with and touching a male dancer on the dance floor of one of his own parties (*Dorian* 51:59-52:00). However, nothing is done to really explore this

element of the film, so it remains nothing more than a passing reference to Wilde's work. In an interview with Stephen Holt, Parker mentions that, to his own amazement, gay scenes still spark controversy (2:34-2:44), so one possibility is that the producers intentionally left out homosexuality as a major plot element and only referred to it in passing in order to prevent negative publicity.

So in short, the choices made in adapting this novel can be divided into three separate categories: stressing the element of horror, stressing the element of suspense and giving the story a visual update. These alterations also affect the story in other ways.

First of all, shifting the emphasis from the content of the story to the form (horror and suspense) leaves the film with a diluted representation of Wilde's moral story. As has been said, the homoerotic elements have been marginalised, but the moral battle between Basil and Henry has also been toned down. Basil's importance in this film has diminished: he has some criticism of Henry's influence over Dorian ("But he was never cruel till he met you" (*Dorian* 52:24-52:26).) but never explicitly confronts Dorian with his moral choices until just before he is murdered. Even there, the focus seems to be more on Basil's approaching death: he conspicuously wears the yellow scarf seen in the opening scene, haunting music sounds constantly and the murder is also hinted at when Dorian, urged on by shrill music, appears to want to push Basil off the stairs (*Dorian* 54:22-54:24). Rather than being fought over by Basil and Henry, Dorian appears to be mostly Henry's project gone wrong. Henry is always seen watching Dorian from a distance as he sins and he even deliberately causes Dorian and Sybil's break-up. Firth fittingly describes it as "it all starting off as a tantalising experiment and realising you have created something over which you have actually no control" (Philips 1:29-1:38).

Not only is Dorian never really given the choice between two different ways of living, the lifestyle Lord Henry offers him does not bear much resemblance to Wilde's "New

Hedonism". "Be searching always for new sensations, Dorian. Forbid yourself nothing. Nobody at all need know" (*Dorian* 31:27-31:42), Henry tells Dorian, which is true enough to Wilde: in practice however, this supposed aesthetic way of life comes down to nothing more than having sex with people of all ages and genders in all kinds of different ways (incidentally, there are also some instances of opium smoking), which is a direct result of the filmmakers' wish to visualise Dorian's sins. Instead of allowing people to see their "own sin in Dorian Gray" (Wilde, qtd. in Raby 68), Dorian's life of sin now becomes rather one-sided, losing the nuances of the novel's contrasting attitudes to life. Parker's view of the story is that Wilde is "still saying 'Live life to its full', although clearly if you go in the wrong direction, you are going to get punished for it" (*Dorian* 4:12-4:19). This is not really apparent from the film, however, which focuses almost entirely on Dorian's (consensual) sexual escapades. So in making Dorian's travel into sin work in film, the filmmakers have had to sacrifice its depth and turned it, as Firth rightly notes, into a Frankenstein-like story where Henry corrupts Dorian until he loses control and is threatened by Dorian himself (Philips 1:16-1:38).

When comparing this with the different categories of form and content identified in the previous chapter, this film has clearly chosen one of these elements and fully worked it out. In making this film an exciting Gothic horror movie, all of Wilde's elements of horror have been kept and others have been added. The wit has partly been kept but mainly in service of the horror: in the film, Lord Henry uses the most cynical of the witticisms to illustrate his dark character. The changes made to the plot in order to create more suspense and make it work on screen have taken away most of the richness of the original. The moral story has become slightly one-sided, while the homoerotic elements have been marginalised. The film does succeed in its intent, however, which is presenting a visually attractive reworking of Wilde's story, with horror and suspense rather than an intricate plot as its driving forces, which is what, according to Parker, works best for film.

Dorian Gray also makes an interesting appearance in Stephen Norrington's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, a 2003 action film set in the Victorian age, in which a group of contemporary literary characters led by Allan Quatermain (Sean Connery) has to save the world from the evil schemes of professor James Moriarty (Richard Roxburg). Dorian Gray, played by Stuart Townsend, is recruited as a member of this league, but turns out to be a spy in the service of Moriarty (of Sherlock Holmes fame), who has somehow acquired Dorian's portrait. Dorian is eventually killed by one of the League.

The storyline has nothing further to do with Wilde's story, but Dorian himself and his painting have also been altered somewhat. Interestingly, the film was based on a comic in which Dorian Gray played no role, but the producers have added him on their own initiative, which shows the apparent appeal Dorian has. Unlike the book, but in keeping with the nature of this action film, Dorian is turned into some sort of superhero. The portrait makes Dorian invulnerable to bullets and swords: in one of his first scenes, Dorian is riddled with bullets, but these wounds heal themselves (*League* 26:46-27:05). He then displays some typical action movie wit by answering his dying enemy's question "What are you?" (*League* 27:06-27:07) with "I'm complicated" (*League* 27:09-27:11). Like most superheroes, Dorian has a fatal flaw: he will die if he looks upon his portrait. This is not true to the book, but it is an opportunity for the producers to devise a creative ending for Dorian: he is pinned to a wall and then confronted with his painting, causing him to burn up while his youthful looks are transferred back to the painting (*League* 1:28:49-1:29:04). Throughout the film, Dorian is presented as a stereotype: apart from being an action hero, he concerns himself with looking good by always wearing his hat and cane and by applying his make-up regularly (*League* 33:49-33:53) and making the occasional arrogant or clever remark.

To sum up, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* reduces Dorian Gray to his most basic form, an immortal man with a secret painting, and takes this as a basis to build the

action hero version of Dorian Gray. Discussions of morals and homosexuality and Wilde's paradoxical wit do not belong in this film, and, as Don Murphy says in the audio commentary, the horror has been toned down slightly because the producers did not want an adult rating (*League* 1:28:19-1:28:25), so none of the original elements of Wilde's novel survive this adaptation. What is interesting about this is that it shows the basic appeal of Dorian Gray, since the producers specifically brought Dorian into the story because they thought he would appeal to the audience. So apparently, the story of Dorian's immortality through his painting gives the character so much appeal that he becomes suitable for even an action film.

There are some similarities between the two films: *Dorian Gray* also has Dorian recover from physical wounds by transferring them onto the portrait, for example. Other than that, it is only the very basis of the story, the myth of the immortal Dorian, that lies at the heart of both films. Interestingly, the back of the Dutch *Dorian Gray* DVD case reads "*Dorian Gray* is a compelling fantasy thriller around the character from *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*"¹, through which *Dorian Gray* tries to tie in to the appeal that already exists for this character and his story. Both films present slightly different takes on Wilde's novel, however, and both are valuable in analysing the process of adapting *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Looking at both these adaptations reveals some things about the contemporary meaning of Dorian. Apparently, it is not so much the book as a whole that has made it into popular culture, but rather elements of the story that have been singled out by various adaptations. For *Dorian Gray*, the producers have made the clear choice of emphasising the Gothic horror element, changing or leaving out the other elements that are important in the original. It is important to note that the lack of balance between these elements when compared to the original is not coincidental: the choices made are consistent and all work

¹ "*Dorian Gray* is een meeslepende fantasy thriller rondom het personage uit *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*", my trans.

towards one goal: appropriating the story and turning it into a horror version of Wilde's novel that works well on screen.

What then remains is the question why filmmakers would choose a story that is originally so complex and ambiguous for a somewhat one-sided adaptation. This would seem to suggest that the strength of Wilde's story does not lie in the complex interplay of its various elements alone: otherwise an adaptation which singles out just one of these dimensions would not work. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* provides some insight into this matter. This film shows that Wilde's story can be stripped of all its ambiguities and praised elements of style and content and still retain a basic appeal. The whole myth of Dorian as an extravagant and arrogant character with a dark, supernatural secret is so appealing that it transcends those elements the literary work is praised for and has taken in its place in popular culture. As Dorian's inclusion in this Hollywood action film blockbuster shows, his myth is attractive and powerful enough to even function completely on its own, without so much as a mention of the other elements of the original (even though, contrastingly, these are the elements that give the literary work its renowned status).

To conclude, these two different adaptations provide some useful insights into the contemporary status of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and its adaptations. While *Dorian Gray* shows that emphasising the right elements can successfully turn Wilde's story into an adaptation in a different genre, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* shows where the basic appeal of the story comes from. These are two different reasons why *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is so suitable for adaptations: its versatility and the powerful myth at its core.

Chapter 3: Dorian 2.0

While film adaptations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* abound, adaptations in book form are more rare. There is one novel that is in its entirety a reworking of Wilde's classic tale: UK writer Will Self's 2002 *Dorian, An Imitation*. In this novel, Self uses Wilde's story as a means of criticising both society and the definition of homosexuality and alters both the content and form of the story in the process: this will be discussed first. What will follow is an analysis of how these alterations can be useful in determining the contemporary value of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

While *Dorian* runs largely along the same lines as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in terms of characters and events, Self has transferred the events from 19th century *fin de siècle* London to London at the end of the 20th century: two periods of time he thinks are remarkably similar. In the 20th century, Dorian is displayed on *Cathode Narcissus*, a video installation of nine monitors featuring images of Dorian, made by conceptual artist Basil "Baz" Hallward. Both of them are openly gay, unlike Henry Wotton, a remnant of the British aristocracy who prefers a sham marriage over openly confessing his homosexuality. All of them frequently indulge in sex and all kinds of drugs; this reaches its climax at a party after *Cathode Narcissus* has been finished. They meet up with their friend Alan Campbell and a friend of Dorian's, a prostitute and junkie called Herman, through whom they are infected with HIV. Dorian, however, does not contract the disease himself, but his image on the *Cathode Narcissus* does: he himself is free to engage in all kinds of vividly described (homo)sexual encounters and drug experiments. He is not free from danger, however, since this novel also features a Sybil and James Vane in the persona of the junkie Herman and his skinhead flatmate Ginger. Dorian drags Herman along to the *Cathode Narcissus* party but leaves prematurely himself, leaving Herman subject to the other guests' sexual wishes.

Feeling alone and abandoned, Herman commits suicide the next morning and as soon as his flatmate Ginger discovers this, the skinhead is out for revenge. The rest of the novel, which takes place a decade after this party, focuses both on Henry slowly succumbing to AIDS and on Dorian's sins (like in Wilde's novel, he kills Basil, for example). Ginger, like James Vane, is shot when Dorian goes hunting (by Dorian) and the inquisitive police contributes to Dorian's growing sense of unrest and paranoia. Dorian eventually destroys *Cathode Narcissus* and thus himself.

However, in a postmodern twist, the story has an epilogue, focalised through Dorian, through which the reader discovers the whole story is in reality a manuscript Henry had written before his death. Actually, Dorian is a very successful but also very mortal gay man. Over these last twenty pages, it becomes clear that Henry has distorted many more facts, often not in Dorian's or in the other homosexuals' favour: Dorian judges the book to be filled with "homosexual self-hatred" (Self, *Dorian* 265). Dorian is then haunted by Henry's narrative voice in real life as the different realities start to merge together, driving Dorian crazy and leading to a confusing ending where the real-life Dorian is killed by the (doubly) fictional Ginger.

Self has taken the subtle hints at homosexuality Wilde put into his story and worked them out on a much larger scale, filling his story with gay characters. He goes beyond just showing homosexuality, however, and tries to lay bare the problems in defining it. According to Alderson, Self claims "that he thinks homosexuality should be about doing rather than being" (326) and Self indeed puts forward this theory in the course of his novel. He keeps Wilde's main characters, but changes their behaviour and relations so that all three of them represent different types of gay men.

First of all, there is the artist Basil: he is openly gay, but not confident enough to be "unashamed" (Self, *Dorian* 12) of this. He would like to be, however, for when he comments

on Henry's sham marriage, he says: "so I s'pose she just goes along with the fraud because she finds it perfectly natural. But I want a different kind of relationship. I want truth and beauty and honesty, but the world wants to destroy that kind of love between men" (Self, *Dorian* 13).

Henry, on the other hand, is perfectly comfortable with keeping up appearances, quickly turning the conversation away from this discussion of open homosexuality. He is married to a wealthy woman whom he treats, according to Basil, "like a convenience store" (Self, *Dorian* 13). He describes Basil and his fight for gay rights as "proselytizing for 'gay' rights" and being a member of the "pink militancy" (Self, *Dorian* 40), conveying his negative opinion of Basil's actions. Henry himself does not even want to admit that there is something called "gay": it is merely "another word that couldn't exist in the Wotton lexicon, save in so far as it applied to bunting" (Self, *Dorian* 40). Henry also takes on the passive role during sex: "as soon as he had entirely disrobed [...] Wotton transformed, becoming pliant" (Self, *Dorian* 60), emphasising his inability to actively enjoy his homosexual activities.

Even more is made clear about Henry's homosexuality in the epilogue (focalised through Dorian, since Henry is already dead), where the reader discovers that Henry has made up this whole story, transforming his secret love for Dorian and Dorian himself into grotesque, malevolent caricatures of homosexuals and homosexual love. Dorian is not the "ludicrous, narcissistic pretty boy, with nothing on his mind but sex and sadism" (Self, *Dorian* 259) Henry makes him out to be, nor did he purposely infect others with HIV. Rather, Dorian sees this story as the product of Henry's inability to cope with his homosexuality, turning Henry into "a twisted involution of homosexual self-hatred" (Self, *Dorian* 265). Alderson sees this as "a comment which consigns Wotton to an unenlightened, pre-gay past (a condition further symbolised by his convenient marriage ...)" (321).

Dorian, lastly, is turned into a stereotype in Henry's story, combining all kinds of prejudices against gays. Already a drug user from the start of the book, his lifestyle spins out

of control as he starts indulging in other kinds of drugs, murders people and even becomes a sort of "AIDS Mary, a malevolent and intentional transmitter of the virus" (Self, *Dorian* 112). His danger is further emphasised by some of the imagery: "Dorian's penis was red, curved and gnarled with veins like the dagger of some alien warlord" (Self, *Dorian* 60). He purposely transmits the virus, even to women:

Performing in excess of a thousand thousand HIV impregnations had given Dorian the forensic attitude of a virologist injecting an attenuated virus into experimental cohorts. ... Indeed, he relished it when the condoms were brought out; there was nothing that excited him more than a challenge. (Self, *Dorian* 231)

Alderson justly remarks that Dorian's bisexuality is "a fact which contributes to the stigmatisation of this group for 'spreading' the virus amongst heterosexuals" (315). In an interview with Robert Birnaum, Self has put forward his view on the AIDS epidemic:

I was an IV drug user during this period. I had my first HIV test in 1985. I was aware of the spread of the AIDS epidemic which was savage in the IV-drug-using community just as much as it was among gay people. ... My perception was that following the Halloween parade riots and the real outburst of gay liberation at the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s, one thing is true in life, in the realm of the emotions, events that are consecutive are interpreted causally. ... I think the perception both outside the gay community and within the gay community, was [sic] we gained some level of social acceptability or at any rate we were allowed to be out publicly. We then had a lot of fun and games. We then fell victim in large numbers to a sexually transmitted virus. Our behaviour caused that. Now, people of the so-called Moral Majority and on the right were saying that. My perception is that lot [sic] of gay people internalized that as well. And felt that as well. I remember talking to people about this at the time. There was a sense, no matter how unjustified, of guilt around

this behaviour because of that ‘law’ of the emotions, if you like. And some people have said this text [*Dorian*] has a kind of homophobic taint to it. It looks at those ideas. (Self, *Interview*)

So while Self has apparently been accused of homophobia, he is not presenting this malevolent image of homosexuals because he believes it to be true, but in order to do something about these prejudices surrounding gay people and the spread of AIDS. By presenting this "AIDS Mary", who is more a stereotype than a real character, in all his absurd glory, Self is ridiculing this idea of gay people being solely responsible for the spread of AIDS: Dorian is not a believable character at all, so neither is the myth of people like him spreading AIDS around the world. Rather, he shows that homosexuality is indeed more about doing than about being: Basil and Henry are also gay, but they deal with this in their own particular ways. While this notion may seem obvious, from Self's interview it becomes apparent that he himself thought the image of homosexuality was still too one-sided.

However, with his novel Self does not only problematise the relationship between homosexuality and the AIDS epidemic, but the whole definition of "gay" itself. Alderson paraphrases Self, who has

argued for an end to the term ‘gay’ on the grounds that it was incoherent in its range of reference, tainted by effeminacy through its connotations of sexual passivity, committed to the principle of liberation by dubious analogy with other socially excluded groups, and – the vaguely Foucaultian bit – an obstacle to an understanding of sexuality given its emphasis on being rather than doing. (Alderson 310)

Self is certainly trying to show that incoherence of the term in his novel, not only by having the three main (and gay) characters acting completely differently, but also by making nearly all of the other characters in the novel gay. This is a major departure from Wilde's novel, where homosexuality is limited to a select few, setting them apart from the rest.

Homosexuality then becomes a defining and essential characteristic. In Self's novel, nearly everyone is gay, leaving it without any value as a means of defining people. One of the characters in the novel even comments on this: "I couldn't 'elp 'over 'earin' ya,' the man drawled in fluent Mockney, 'but surely homosexuality -- as in the 'gay lifestyle' -- is a sorta category error?" (Self, *Dorian* 210). He explains, later on:

It's been the misfortune of people who prefer sex with their own gender to be forced to regard this as some essential part of themselves. After all, homosexuality was only defined as a pathology in response to the alleged healthiness of heterosexuality. It's the great mistake of you... erm... you *gays* to mistake a mere attribute for an essence. (Self, *Dorian* 212)

This view is the same view that Self puts forward in his writings. Hayes quotes him having written that the word "gay" "has been semantically twisted and bent over the years until its connotations are at best fluffily innocuous -- some might even say specious -- and at worst hopelessly contraindicated" (152). Throughout the novel, Self uses his host of diverse gay characters to show the differences between all these members of one supposedly similar group of people.

Another important element in Self's novel is his critique of late 20th century society. He uses Wilde's novel and its critique of late 19th century society to strengthen his argument by immediately expanding on the similarities between these two periods. He does this by commenting on

the particular correspondence between the year our story begins, 1981, and the year of [Henry's] house's construction, 1881, and ... the peculiar similarity of the times - a Government at once regressive and progressive, a monarchy mired in its own immemorial succession crisis, an economic recession both sharp and bitter. (Self, *Dorian* 3)

Self matches Wilde's descriptions of indulgence with his own, presenting a host of characters who are more often than not addicted to drugs and who do not appear to do much more than go to parties, use drugs and have sexual intercourse. Self has said about the 1990's that "decadence characterises the contemporary zeitgeist" (Hayes 149) and this is visible throughout the novel. One of Self's main issues is that of shallowness, the preference for appearance over content. His choice for a video installation as the new picture of Dorian Gray is not a random one: it refers to the ideals put forward by popular culture via television, with pictures of celebrities who do not seem to age. Self explains:

The Dorian Grays of today are Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. These are the celluloid imagoes [sic] who dominate not only Hollywood, not only the international entertainment network, but actually dominate the psyche of people in a very, very powerful way. They are the people whose images do not age. And therefore people take [them] to be as kind of totems of our culture's values. (Self, *Interview*)

Self sees Princess Diana as a good example of the increasing focus on appearance rather than content and uses her as a "leitmotif for the changing social attitude of the times" (Self, *Interview*). She is mentioned throughout the story and Dorian is even said to be acquainted with her. Self has said about her: "If Diana stood for anything it was a miserable Oprah Winfreyisation of public culture, in which egregious tit-beating came to be synonymous with honour and probity" (qtd. in Alderson, 322). Henry shares Self's view on Diana: "her particular act -- her grazed heart crying out for a Band-aid, while she shops 'til every last equerry drops -- constitutes the very *Zeitgeist* itself" (Self, *Dorian* 108). Diana is portrayed as the best example of this preference for appearance over content, and of the inability of most members of society to look past attractive outward appearances.

The Dorian Gray of the epilogue shows some similarities with the popular Princess: he too supports charity, specifically the battle against AIDS: "he'd also worked tirelessly to

make the British AIDS charities model organisations, using all his charm, his business acumen and his social connections" (Self, *Dorian* 263). On the other hand, he also seems obsessed with appearances. When he rants against Henry's widow about his portrayal in Henry's book, she remarks: "You can't deny that you're a little bit vain, Dorian" (Self, *Dorian* 259). Dorian answers: "I like to look good and I take care of myself -- a lot of gay men do, it doesn't make us *immoral*, it doesn't make us *evil people*, prepared to sacrifice any vestige of morality in order to stay young" (Self, *Dorian* 260). Dorian's strong defensive reaction to this seems to suggest that there is at least some truth to this accusation. And indeed, some pages later Dorian's obsession with appearance is shown: "Dorian prided himself on his carflesh, and this gunmetal-grey Bristol ... was the finest of the collection. Yet in the stupid bloody *novel* Dorian was reduced to tootling about town in an MG - how pathetically uncool" (Self, *Dorian* 261). Of all the horrible things said about him in the novel, ranging from murder to infecting people with HIV, the choice of this car is one of the most infuriating things for Dorian. Furthermore, Dorian's Gray Organisation is concerned with digitalising *Cathode Narcissus*, thus making Dorian immortal: this also refers back to Self's criticism of television and its seemingly never-aging celebrities, of which Dorian becomes the ultimate example.

By adding this epilogue, Self's critique becomes more subtle: he exposes well-known but false prejudices with his over-the-top, explicit description of what supposedly happens in the margins of society in the main story, but focuses his criticism on the less obvious manifestations of this attitude, apparent even in popular figures like Princess Diana and the (at first sight faultless) Dorian of the epilogue. This criticism can also be said to apply to the gay community, since a superficial, appearance-based lifestyle is sometimes associated with this community, as can be deduced from the stereotypical image of homosexuals: an obsession with good looks is often part of this image. To round up his story, Self refers back to the connection with Wilde's novel near the end of *Dorian*:

Street fashion synergised with pop music, pop music energised politics, politics draped about its shoulders the humanitarian mantle of the Princess, and the cartoon antics of the conceptual artist galvanised everybody. So what if the whole giddy rondo had the air of the *fin de siècle* about it? Because it *was* the end of the twentieth century, and after a hundred years of willed decline, there was a feeling abroad in the land that things could only get better. (Self, *Dorian* 267)

Here his reference back to Wilde's original is of great importance. Only through knowledge of this novel, in which Wilde criticised certain aspects of *fin de siècle* society that had become widely accepted and considered the norm, can the reader uncover the sarcasm Self lays in this thought of Dorian's. Things are not going to be better: rather, they are going to be similar to the *fin de siècle*, of which Self has by now made his negative opinion clear. This paragraph even includes his criticism of how he thinks society will look: it will again attach too much importance to appearance, like when politics diverts attention away from its actual motives by draping "about its shoulders the humanitarian mantle of the Princess" (Self, *Dorian* 267).

Another interesting aspect of the epilogue is the comparison drawn between Henry and Wilde himself. Since Henry turns out to be the writer of the story, which is largely the same as the story Wilde wrote, Henry and Wilde are in some sense similar. Indeed, Self has stated during a book reading that he thinks Wilde's quote about how Henry, Dorian and Basil all represent parts of Wilde is a lie and that Wilde is mostly like Lord Henry (Self, *Will* 60:40-61:11). Self then uses this parallel to show another side of that appearance-based lifestyle: the psychological problems it causes for the ones living it. While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may contain criticism of overindulgence, Wilde himself still lived an extravagant life of indulgence and of the focus on appearance that Self mocks in his novel. Self believes what some critics have argued: that Wilde was unable to cope with his feelings of homosexuality and that *Dorian Gray* was a way of expressing them: it was Wilde's "calling card to say he

was out" (qtd. in Alderson 317). The Henry Dorian describes in the epilogue of Self's novel has these same problems: "Rather than stopping at being gay, he'd become a twisted involution of homosexual self-hatred: instead of accepting the modest elevation provided by an Oxford education, Henry had metamorphosed into a parody of a toff" (Self *Dorian* 265). Henry's wife explains to Dorian that what bothered Henry most was the affair the two men once had and that this novel was an expression of Henry's homosexual feelings, that it was "a lengthy love letter" (259). While Dickinson claims that 20th century pop stars who made a "cult of excessive style and artifice, and ... androgyny and sexual fluidity" (426) are only the latest members of a movement started by Oscar Wilde, Self's Henry can also be seen as a modern reincarnation of Wilde. Self's explanation for this excessive attention to appearance is Henry's inability to cope with his feelings, from which it could be deduced that he feels likewise about Wilde. This view is not a strange one: Liebman points out that some critics see *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as "a projection of the war in Wilde's own psyche" (441), and this description is also fitting for the book that Self's Henry wrote. This parallel is another way in which Self criticises the focus on appearance: it allows for people to hide their inner problems away, which in the case of Self's Henry at least (and possibly also in Wilde's case, as Self wants us to believe) unhealthily leads to unhappiness and even self-hatred.

Self has slightly altered the form of the novel, rejecting Wilde's careful balance between Gothic horror and epigrammatic wit by shifting this balance entirely in favour of wit. He uses many epigrams in the style of Wilde, with some added curse words. Gingell calls them a "vulgarised refashioning of aphorisms and witticisms aired in Wilde" (103). Right from the start this mix between Wilde's well-known style and Self's own additions is apparent: "An Englishman never polishes his shoes, but then neither does a lazy bastard" (Self, *Dorian* 4). According to Gingell, this is part of Self's effort to cause a shock similar to the shock *The Picture of Dorian Gray* caused (104). This is more difficult to achieve in contemporary

society, so Self also tries to reach this "through depicting AIDS and homosexual activity in a flippant and offensive manner" (Gingell 104). Indeed, Self's novel is filled with vivid and explicit descriptions of homosexual intercourse, to such an extent that some critics, like Gingell, think it is overdone, ruining "the opportunity to create any semblance of the affecting and impassioned beauty of Wilde's original" (106).

So while Self has more or less taken up the themes and form of Wilde's novel in this adaptation, he has made some significant changes. Most of the characters and their relations have been altered in order to more convincingly support Self's main points. In this context, it is interesting to look at the choices Self made here, since this will reveal something about the status Oscar Wilde and this novel enjoy nowadays.

One of the best-known aspects of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is its treatment of homosexuality, which is often combined with Oscar Wilde's trial and conviction following the publication of the novel: Wilde and his work are often not separated, as the parallel Self draws between his Henry and Wilde shows. Self has a certain view of Wilde, which is shared by some but not everybody. Alderson argues that Self is right about the "internalisation by many gay men of the moralistic narrative about Aids" (317) and mentions that some critics claim that Wilde himself foreshadowed narratives like this. He cites Nunokawa, who claims that "[*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] concentrates fatality in the figure of male homosexual identity; it casts the most common sentence (death) as the gay signature" (qtd. in Alderson 317). In such an interpretation, Wilde's novel "tends to be read as evidence of his own prescience of, and even masochistic longing for, his own downfall" (Alderson 317). In this view, Wilde was struggling with the homosexual feelings he had to repress and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was, as Self puts it, his "calling card to say he was out" (qtd. in Alderson 317). However, Alderson justly remarks that "[a]t the time, of course, such a strategy invited prosecution" (317). In this context, the deaths of Basil and Dorian, the two characters with the strongest

homosexual tension between them, can be interpreted as the evidence that Wilde was very aware of the dangers of having these feelings, or even of him being aware of the fate that was in store for him. In this interpretation, then, his novel is "not only regarded as having pre-empted Wilde's own tragedy, but, in its provocations and the intensification of the speculation it prompted about its author, as having contributed to it" (Alderson 317): so Wilde struggled with both his homosexual feelings and with the punishment he might receive for them and both are visible in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Alderson rejects this view and calls it "indicative of the extent to which Wilde's life and work have been refashioned" (317). However, this interpretation has become widespread and one of its consequences is that Wilde himself has been made into a martyr, someone who dared to express (though in a subtle rather than open way) his homosexual feelings in his writings, even though he knew the dangers of it. Even if he might have attributed to his downfall by doing it, this is not condemned as an act of masochism but rather praised as an act of bravery. This can be seen in other adaptations of Wilde's life. For example, in his discussion of the Wilde biopic *Velvet Goldmine*, a film set in the times of glam rock and androgynous stars like David Bowie, Dickinson claims that the film

seeks to argue that this late twentieth-century pop cultural phenomenon, which made a cult of excessive style and artifice, and which stressed androgyny and sexual fluidity in the personae projected by the singers on stage (most iconically in Bowie's Ziggy Stardust), is part of a camp aesthetic continuum, in Britain at any rate, that stretches all the way back to Oscar Wilde. (426)

In order to emphasise this continuity, the film (like Self's novel) continuously refers back to the 19th century, thus presenting an image of Oscar Wilde as the starting point of a liberating gay movement, or, as Dickinson puts it, "the inevitable Christ-like martyr for the rainbow coalition" (425). While Alderson condemns this interpretation of Wilde's life and work as "an

anachronistic projection of gay liberation practices onto the past" (317), this view nevertheless seems to be widespread.

Self also seems to adhere to this view, claiming that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is "an openly gay novel. Nobody was in any doubt and if you look back over the history of the Aesthetic Movement in the 1880's of which Wilde was the absolute leader, it was an openly and flamboyantly homosexual movement" (*Interview*). Moreover, Self's Henry, who seems to be modeled partly on Wilde, is also someone who is not openly gay but does express these feelings (and the punishment that could follow the expression of these feelings) in his book. This similarity seems to suggest that Self stands behind this interpretation which others condemn as anachronistic. At first sight it seems strange, then, that Self always speaks of Wilde with praise, but that Henry, who is supposed to be like Wilde, is presented as a cowardly character, filled with self-hatred and holding back gay emancipation, even though their behaviour is very similar. The temporal context, however, is important here. In Wilde's time, what Wilde was doing was quite controversial and new, and while it might not exactly have been the start of an actual gay liberation movement, it was a daring step in that direction. Any instances of self-hatred and the fact that Wilde combines homosexuality with death as its punishment appear to be forgiven by people like Self because Wilde had to deal with a society unfriendly to homosexuals. Wilde is not blamed for his inability to cope with this. Self's Henry, however, has no such excuse: gay rights having advanced a great deal a century later, people like Self's Basil, who actively fights for more gay rights, are continuing what Wilde started. Henry, then, is actually holding gay emancipation back, refusing to be openly gay and producing a work that is the outcome of repressed self-hatred. This difference between these two periods of time explains how Wilde can be thought to have had feelings of self-hatred and, in his desperation, possibly even a longing for his own destruction, but is still seen as a martyr for gay rights.

Wilde is not above all criticism, however: Self's accusations of celebrities who divert all attention away from content by emphasising appearances could well be aimed at Wilde, who was and is known for his flamboyant lifestyle. This is what, according to people like Dickinson, has made him into one of the sources of glam rock, for example. This criticism fits well with Self's criticism of the contemporary homosexual community: he ridicules the extreme accusations made against them, like being solely responsible for the AIDS epidemic, and does not condemn them as a group, but remains critical of their sometimes excessive attention to appearance, like the vanity the Dorian of the epilogue displays. Likewise, he can be critical of Wilde's excessive lifestyle while still praising him, be it anachronistic or not, as the starting point of a gay liberation movement.

Self's view on Wilde's life and work also explains his choice for merging the adaptation of this particular novel with putting forward his (in that time) new views on homosexuality and its definition (or rather, the problems with its definition). In the view that Self (and many others with him) holds, Oscar Wilde was in the vanguard of a gay liberation movement. While this may seem to be incompatible with, for example, the fact that Wilde revised his book and toned the homosexual aspects down after receiving much criticism, instead of leaving them intact and looking for the confrontation, as someone in the vanguard might be expected to, this way of looking at Wilde is so attractive that it remains a popular one. This is why it was fitting for Self, then, to also put this imitation at the vanguard of what was happening in the discussion surrounding homosexuality back in 2002. Alderson describes Self's novel as "part of this emergent range of critiques" (310) of what he calls "post-gay culture" (310), confirming that Self puts forward ideas which were only just emerging at the time. From this it can be concluded that it is not just the presence of homosexuality that has become an integral part of contemporary views on Wilde's work, but also the (possibly anachronistic) idea of Wilde actively being in the vanguard of what was happening with

homosexuality.

Even though the homosexual element is very important, this adaptation shows that Wilde's critique of society has also become an integral part of how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is seen today. Self assumes that his audience is familiar with Wilde's criticism of indulgence in the 19th century *fin de siècle*, since he uses this to strengthen his own arguments about the failings of late 20th century society. As has been discussed, Self starts and ends his novel by drawing parallels between these periods: these parallels can only work if the audience is aware of how Wilde used Dorian's overindulgences as a warning for this kind of behaviour.

These two aspects of the adaptation provide some valuable insight into what *The Picture of Dorian Gray* now represents, but it is too simplistic to say that this is the whole story: in fact, many critics, like Alderson, disagree with at least part of this interpretation and appropriation of Wilde, condemning it as anachronistic. Because of their richness, Oscar Wilde and his works are topics on which there is still no consensus. As Dickinson remarks:

That we still cannot agree on who Oscar Wilde was, nor on what precisely his written work represents artistically, culturally, or politically, is testament, in my mind, to a queer literary legacy as enduring and influential— if not exactly as adhesive (or cohesive)—as Whitman's. As Eagleton has stated, 'everything about [Wilde] was doubled, ambiguous, unstable' (5). As such, one of the central contradictions about the process of 'interpreting Oscar' (cf. Schmidgall) is that it always reveals more about us as readers than it does about him as writer. (432)

Conclusion: The Basic Appeal and Many Dimensions of Dorian Gray

The diversity of the adaptations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does not only prove that the story is still popular, but also provides some valuable insight into how Wilde's novel is seen nowadays and why it is so suitable for adaptations. Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is noticeable for its richness: it successfully merges several elements into what has become one of the best-known novels of English literature. On the one hand, it is rich in (controversial) content. Wilde's depiction of 19th century English society with its attractive points and its faults, and his moralistic story of what happens when a young man crosses the line of trying to live an aesthetic ideal and goes over into decadence form an interesting discussion of lifestyle. Dorian's behaviour appears to be condemned, since he dies, but then Wilde himself was somewhat like Dorian, and the fact that Wilde never explicitly chooses the side of either Basil or Henry in their discussion of lifestyles adds to the ambiguity and thus makes it more interesting: it is not a simple tale of right and wrong. Likewise, Wilde's treatment of homosexuality is so (intentionally) vague that there is no consensus on its role in the story: some think this places Wilde in the vanguard of a gay liberation movement, while others condemn this view as anachronistic.

On the other hand, the novel's success is also partly because of the elements more related to style. Wilde is renowned for his particular clever wit, and the dialogues in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are riddled with his epigrams. Furthermore, Wilde also shows his mastery of the Gothic at times, imbuing his novel with a sense of horror to add suspense when needed, but also using the full range of possibilities the genre of the Gothic offers to support the themes of his book. The "fantastic world of indulgence" (Riquelme 497) the Gothic creates provides Wilde with the ideal setting for Dorian's voyage into the decadent.

While taking all these elements and merging them into a whole proved a successful formula for Wilde, adaptations of his novel choose a different strategy. In all cases, Wilde's

story has been appropriated and one or two of its original elements have been retained rather than all of them. This holds true for the films especially, there being traditionally less room for ambiguity and multiple layers in film than in literature. Will Self's literary adaptation, however, certainly includes more of Wilde's original in terms of content and themes, but it is still not as rich as the novel it adapts.

The 2009 film *Dorian Gray* shows that it is possible to single out just one element of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and still make a successful adaptation out of it. The producers have turned the story into a Gothic horror film by emphasising the original Gothic elements and adding some of their own. They have even changed some aspects of the original, like the plot, in order to make the adaptation fit better into its genre of Gothic horror. More complex elements like criticism of society and subtle homosexual tension have been left out almost completely. Typical of the more visual medium of film, one of the elements of style has been chosen as the focus of this adaptation.

Will Self's novel *Dorian* takes a more literary approach and focuses on the elements of content rather than on those of form. The Gothic disappears completely from Self's adaptation and Wilde's subtle, clever wit is replaced by Self's blunt, satiric humour. Rather, he follows Wilde in depicting contemporary society with all its shortcomings. He also incorporates the gay element in his novel, placing his novel somewhere in the vanguard of the discussion on homosexuality, something he thinks Wilde also did with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

However, not only do the adaptations lack the multiple dimensions that Wilde's story has, their treatment of those elements they do focus on is less rich or ambiguous than Wilde's. While Wilde uses the Gothic to add suspense to the story and create the perfect setting for his moralistic tale, *Dorian Gray* merely uses the Gothic for suspense. Similarly, Wilde's inclusion of the homosexual is so subtle that its role in the story is still the subject of debate, but Self's approach has nothing to do with subtlety. It is purposely shocking and, as he himself has

admitted, clearly written with one goal in mind: exposing the prejudices and vague definitions surrounding homosexuality. Illustrative of this loss of ambiguity is the adaptations' representations of Dorian's sins. Wilde purposely leaves this element of the story vague, allowing for each man to see "his own sin in Dorian Gray" (Wilde, qtd. in Raby 68). Both adaptations, however, have filled in this gap in accordance with their appropriation of the original. In the film *Dorian Gray*, Dorian's sins consist of sex, violence, and a combination of the two, in keeping with the horror genre the film belongs to. Self fills in Dorian's period of sinning with descriptions of Dorian having (homo)sexual intercourse and deliberately spreading the AIDS virus, turning Dorian into an unrealistic stereotype and criticising the myth of AIDS being spread by the gay community only. Wilde allowed for others to see their own version of Dorian and his sins in the story, and the adaptations show that Wilde's readers have indeed put this into practice.

This comparison of adaptations makes some things clear about what *The Picture of Dorian* means today. The contemporary status of Wilde's work stays close to the work itself, in the sense that both remain ambiguous and are still not reduced to one meaning. This is not strange for Wilde's work itself, since this richness and ambiguity is often characteristic of literature. After more than a century, however, the contemporary view of his work might have lost some of that ambiguity: it could have remained famous only as a witty and exciting story, or only as a novel which controversially included some homoerotic elements, or only as a moralistic tale on the dangers of decadence. However, this has not happened: rather, adaptations of the novel focus on all these different elements, appropriating the story by singling out one dimension of Wilde's work and shaping the whole story around it. It is this versatility of the novel that has made it suitable for all these adaptations.

There is, however, one factor all these adaptations do have in common, and this can be seen in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. This uncomplicated action film presents a

stripped down version of *Dorian Gray*, leaving Wilde's entire story out of the picture except for the basic myth at its core: the story of an arrogant, decadent man with a painting that makes him immortal as his dark secret, the powerful myth of *Dorian Gray*. Dorian's deliberate inclusion in the film (he was not in the comic the film was based on) shows the appeal this myth has and proves that it can even function on its own, without any of the elements the original novel is praised for to support it. Something similar goes for the horror novel *Family Portrait* mentioned in the introduction (unfortunately, this book has become an obscurity and is not easily available, so it has not been discussed further): Masterton has taken only the very basis of Wilde's novel and has made it function on its own in a horror story which has nothing further to do with *Dorian Gray* or Oscar Wilde. Self has also identified this element of the novel as one of the reasons for its success. In a recent radio show on BBC Radio 4, he talked about the appeal of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "There are various fascinating things about it. One is that it's one of the only real modern myths that we have. You know, we could go out from the broadcasting house here into the street and pick somebody at random and they would know about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. They probably wouldn't have read it" (Self *Great*, 11:41-11:57).

This myth is not, however, the only thing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* means today: for most people the story does not stop, but starts there. It is only used a starting point from which one of the dimensions of *The Picture Dorian Gray*, be it the Gothic horror or the homosexual dimension, is explored further. The contemporary status of the novel actually consists out of two parts: first, there is the appealing myth at its core, which makes adapting Wilde's novel already attractive regardless of what angle is used. What gives the story its real staying power, however, is the ambiguity of the rest of the story and the possibility for every reader to see his or her own version in it. That last element is also precisely what sets the novel apart and makes it literature rather than just a exciting Gothic story. These two elements

working together, however, have made *The Picture of Dorian Gray* so successful and suitable for more than a century of adaptations. While Dorian Gray did not reach the kind of immortality he desired, his attempt has ensured that he lives on in popular culture.

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