

Surface and Symbol in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Subversion in a “Moral” Story

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Abbreviations

- Beckson *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Karl E. Beckson. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.
- Bristow *PDG* Bristow, Joseph. Introduction. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. By Oscar Wilde. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. ix-xxxii.
- CW* Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Joseph Bristow. Vol. 3. New York: Oxford UP, 2005.
- JH* Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror*. 1886. Ed. Robert Mighall. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Mighall *PDG* Mighall, Robert. Introduction. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. By Oscar Wilde. London: Penguin, 2003. ix-xxxiv.
- Mighall *JH* Mighall, Robert. Introduction. *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror*. By Robert Louis Stevenson. London: Penguin Books, 2003. ix-xxxviii.
- Penguin *PDG* Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. By Oscar Wilde. Ed. Robert Mighall. London: Penguin, 2003.
- PDG* Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 1891. Ed. Joseph Bristow. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- SL* Oscar Wilde. *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Rupert Hart-Davis. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979.

Introduction

*All art is at once surface and symbol.
 Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
 Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.*
 —Oscar Wilde

“The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means,” says Miss Prism, Cecily’s private tutor, about the three-volume novel she mislaid.¹ Although Prism believes wholeheartedly in fiction’s moralising role, by the end of this play the ambiguity of her statement becomes evident; it is indeed a fiction that the good necessarily meet with good. These *double entendres* are by no means limited to *The Importance of Being Earnest*; in many of his other works Oscar Wilde, often with the use of seemingly empty aphorisms, questions the prevailing morality.

Morality was a complex term for the Victorians. Nineteenth-Century England was characterised by rapid industrial development, which in turn affected the century’s philosophies and morals.² This change took place over more than six decades, however, so it is fruitful to divide the Victorian era into three periods so as to avoid over-generalisation. The early and mid-Victorian period (1830-70) was characterised by prudishness and high morals, due to Queen Victoria, who made a conscious effort at connecting the connotations of earnestness, moral responsibility and domestic propriety to herself, hoping to set a virtuous example for her people.³ In the Late-Victorian period (1870-1901), however, these high

¹ Oscar Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest,” *The Complete Illustrated Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Bounty Books, 2004), 507.

² André Maurois, *Geschiedenis van Engeland*, trans. J. A. Schröeder and R. de Jong-Belinfante (Amsterdam: L. J. Uitgeversmaatschappij N.V.), 373. Trans. from *Histoire D’Angleterre*.

³ M. H. Abrams, “The Victorian Age: 1830-1901,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: Norton, 2006), 980.

values began to falter with the emergence of Aestheticism and Decadence. Ian Small notes that without Wilde, Aestheticism would have remained much more obscure, as Wilde's fame rubbed off on the Aesthetic movement,⁴ and he was one of its most prominent figures in Great Britain. It is no surprise then that many of Wilde's later works reflect this era of faltering moral standards through their nihilism and questioning of morality.

Wilde's inversions of morally acceptable ideas are the focus of the monograph by Sos Eltis in which she argues that in writing his drama, Wilde borrowed heavily from other works,⁵ but carefully revised his plays until they covertly subverted the originals, while their resemblance to the originals helped them pass the strict censorship of their time.⁶ The degree to which Wilde's plays subvert Victorian morality has been explored further by George Mackie in an essay that focuses in particular on how Wilde's use of language reveals the discrepancy between Victorian decorum and the morality that lies at its foundation.⁷ Lacking from both these works, however, is a discussion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (*PDG*), Wilde's only novel, which deals with the corruption and downfall of its title character.

The use of morality in *PDG* has of course been discussed by other critics, but often not beyond the point of deeming it a moral or immoral work. Wilde's contemporary reviewers largely agreed on the immorality of the work,⁸ with only a few positive reviews, among which

⁴ Ian Small, *The Aesthetes: a Sourcebook* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), xxiii.

⁵ Eltis names *Odette* by Victorien Sardou as the main inspiration for *Lady Windermere's Fan* (63); Alexandre Dumas' *Le Fils naturel* closely resembles *A Woman of No Importance* (102); *An Ideal Husband* echoes Dumas *L'Ami des femmes* (146); and the main plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is very similar to Tom Robertson's *Society* (178).

⁶ Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 4-61.

⁷ Gregory Mackie, "The Function of Decorum at the Present Time: Manners, Moral Language, and Modernity in 'an Oscar Wilde Play,'" *Modern Drama* 52.2 (July, 2009): 145-67.

⁸ Samuel Henry Jeyes's review was the most extensive: "A Study in Puppydom," *St. James's Gazette*, 24 June 1890: xx, 3-4, cited in Beckson, 70-71. Other reviews that questioned *PDG*'s morality appeared in the *Daily Chronicle* and the *Scots Observer*.

notably the *Christian Leader*, which thought that the novel contained a moral lesson.⁹ Today, critics grant the novel more complexity, rarely naming it purely immoral, but Sheldon W. Liebman points out that the novel is still seen in terms of binary oppositions such as good and evil.¹⁰ T.A. Birell, for example, calls it nothing more than a “rather heavy moralising pastiche.”¹¹ Ian Small argues that Wilde’s novel does not belong fully to the school of Aestheticism because it shows a close connection between ethics and aesthetics. Small supports this hypothesis with the argument that Dorian compares unfavourably with the painter Basil Hallward, which imbues the novel with moral judgement.¹² Although Small certainly has a point in linking moral and aesthetic aspects in the novel, it might be somewhat rash to assume that the relationship between Dorian and Basil is so straightforward. Liebman provides a more exhaustive analysis by stating that it is impossible for Dorian to adhere to either of the opposite philosophies Basil and Lord Henry represent,¹³ but none of these interpretations addresses *PDG*’s subversive qualities. Accordingly, a comprehensive discussion of subversion of morality in *PDG* would add a new perspective to this particular field of study.

This thesis aims to explore different aspects of morality in the novel, by looking in detail at the connection between fiction and morality, as well as between morality and the late nineteenth century *zeitgeist*. The 1891 edition of *PDG* will be used as the main text, as it is the standard version, which added more room for character development than the original 1890 version. The first section will place *PDG* in the context of its time, analysing how it relates to major cultural trends and philosophies. The novel will then be linked to the fiction

⁹ “From the Christian Leader,” 3 July 1890, cited in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde, ed. Robert Mighall (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 219.

¹⁰ Sheldon W. Liebman, “Character Design in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” *Studies in the Novel* 31.3 (1999): 296-97.

¹¹ T.A. Birrell, *Engelse Letterkunde* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1969), 228.

¹² Small, xxix.

¹³ Liebman 297.

of other writers, such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Charles Dickens, in an analysis of how Wilde parodies popular themes in fiction. The last section will place *PDG* in the context of some of Wilde's other critical works, to see if they help explain *PDG*'s subverting position on art and its function. By looking at these elements, it will become clear that, although *PDG* was deemed moral enough to pass censorship, a closer analysis reveals that Wilde's novel skilfully subverts Victorian morality.

Chapter 1 – The Faustus Theme

To understand the developments that shaped many of the nineteenth-century Western European ideas on morality and religion, the preceding decades must first be examined. In philosophy, great changes had already taken place during the Romantic period: whereas Immanuel Kant argued in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*) (1781) that reason cannot find proof for the existence of a God,¹⁴ half a century later Arthur Schopenhauer would proclaim God to be a human invention.¹⁵ With the death of Romanticism, nineteenth-century society became more materialistic, but materialism did not reign free during the century; periods of romanticism showed themselves periodically in religion and literature, attacking social and scientific materialism.¹⁶ Although Schopenhauer had already declared God to be a construct, philosophers in the school of Hegel, for example, remained convinced that the world progressed due to a benign God.

The great contrast between agnosticism and piety thus remained intact during the largest part of the Victorian era,¹⁷ but towards the end of the century Friedrich Nietzsche tipped the scale away from religion when he announced in *The Gay Science* (1882) that God was dead,¹⁸ although most people were not aware of it yet. In *Twilight of the Idols*, he elaborated on what the consequences of this death were for morality: “[i]f you abandon the Christian faith, at the same time you are pulling the *right* to Christian morality out from under your feet.”¹⁹ Nietzsche points out that the English thought they were in possession of an

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. 7th ed. (Leipzig: J.F. Hartknoch, 1828), 467-79.

¹⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Essays of Arthur Shopenhauer; Religion, A Dialogue, Etc.*.. 1891, trans. T. Bailey Saunders (Middlesex: Echo Library, 2006), 51.

¹⁶ Maurois 377.

¹⁷ Birrell 188.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, 2001, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 109.

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 1889, trans. Duncan Large (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 45.

innate morality and so “for the English,” he wrote, “[m]orality is not yet a problem.”²⁰

Gertrude Himmelfarb points out that Nietzsche’s new view on morality was rapidly absorbed by followers of Aestheticism and Decadence such as Wilde.²¹

The main plot of *PDG*, however, seems to be set in a much older London, which had not experienced this shift in morality yet. The novel appears to be very Christian indeed; a moralising tale about sin and its inevitable punishment. Dorian’s story echoes the legend of Faustus, the man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge. The most famous adaptations are by Goethe, whose closet drama ends with Faustus’s salvation, and Marlowe, whose Faustus is eternally damned. In Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus*, the title character doubts the existence of heaven and hell, but as the story progresses, he becomes more certain of the damnation that is in store for him. Towards the end of the play, an old man tries to convince him to repent, but Faustus orders Mephistopheles to torture him.²² After having dismissed the pleas of his fellow scholars to call on God for forgiveness, Faustus meets the devil, who has come to claim his soul. It is still not too late for Faustus to ask God for forgiveness, but he believes God cannot help him, and so he despairs and begs the devil not to take him.²³ Faustus is dragged to hell, and the moral of the story is all too clear: no-one is beyond the power of an almighty God, and so despair is the ultimate sin, which is why Faustus is not saved.²⁴

Wilde’s novel follows Marlowe’s *Faustus* on several points, which was also noted by

²⁰ Nietzsche *Twilight* 45.

²¹ Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Manners into Morals: What the Victorians Knew,” *American Scholar* 57.2 (March, 1988): 225.

²² Christopher Marlowe, “The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: Norton, 2006), 1052.

²³ Marlowe 1054.

²⁴ John C. McCloskey, “The Theme of Despair in Marlowe’s *Faustus*,” *College English* 4.2 (Nov, 1942), 110-13.

Julian Hawthorne, in his depiction of Lord Henry as a “Mephistopheles.”²⁵ Dorian is tempted by the promise of eternal youth and beauty, and all the pleasures that await him, as Faustus is tempted by the promise of unlimited knowledge. More than once, Dorian thinks about repenting and leading a virtuous life, but he always counters these thoughts with the argument that it is already too late,²⁶ which corresponds to Faustus’s conviction that he is beyond God’s help. Dorian’s final chance at redemption comes when Basil urges him to pray:

Dorian Gray turned slowly around and looked at him with tear-dimmed eyes. “It is too late, Basil,” he faltered.

“It is never too late, Dorian. Let us kneel down and try if we cannot remember a prayer. Isn’t there a verse somewhere, ‘Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them as white as snow’?”²⁷

Like Faustus, Dorian rejects the person who tries to save him, and punishes him for his efforts. The scene ends with Dorian murdering Basil, thereby closing his only path to salvation, which he believes Basil would have helped him to attain.²⁸ Similarly, in the last chapter, Dorian tells himself that, “[n]ot ‘Forgive us our sins’ but ‘Smite us for our iniquities’ should be the prayer of man to a most just God,”²⁹ which indicates that he does not believe in God’s forgiveness. In accordance with the Faustus legend, Dorian thinks it is beyond God’s power to save him, which is ultimately his undoing.

Besides incorporating this Christian moral, Wilde also adds a warning against the dangers of Aestheticism and Decadence. Although Dorian craves the pleasures he is able to

²⁵ Julian Hawthorne, “The Romance of the Impossible,” *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, Sept. 1890: xlvi, 412-15, cited in Karl E. Beckson (ed.) *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 80.

²⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford UP: 2006), 102, 133.

²⁷ PDG 133.

²⁸ PDG 101-12.

²⁹ PDG 185.

obtain through his Aesthetic mode of living, he cannot truly savour them. As the novel progresses, Dorian grows increasingly numb to the pleasures his life brings him,³⁰ and the latter part of the novel focuses on how Dorian grows more and more afraid of the painting, until he feels he has to destroy it in order to eliminate his nagging conscience. Ironically, Dorian once accuses Basil of being “too much afraid of life,”³¹ while Dorian fears life no less than the painter. He tries to escape the reality of his life through Aestheticism, focusing only on the experience of beautiful things. As the story progresses, however, the narrator remarks that the “[u]gliness that had once been hateful to [Dorian] because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason,”³² showing that Dorian has come to relish any experience for its own sake, leading a miserable life which is far removed from the beautiful and pleasurable one he intended to live at the start of the novel. Walter Pater also pointed this out in his review of *PDG*, when he viewed the Aestheticism in the novel as “a kind of dainty Epicurean theory” with Dorian being “a quite unsuccessful experiment in Epicureanism.”³³

Considering these moral aspects, it seems strange that many critics objected to a “sham moral”³⁴ in the novel. Remarkably, *The Christian Leader* was one of the few newspapers that praised the novel’s morality by stating that Wilde had “performed a service to his age”³⁵ in providing the upper classes with a warning of the vices and corruption which surrounded them.³⁶ Wilde himself also expressed his surprise over the attacks on the novel in a letter to Arthur Conan Doyle: “I cannot understand how they can treat Dorian Gray as immoral. My difficulty was to keep the inherent moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic

³⁰ Elana Gomel, “Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the (Un)Death of the Author,” *Narrative*, 12.1 (Dec, 2003): 83.

³¹ *PDG* 94.

³² *PDG* 156.

³³ Walter Pater, “A Novel by Mr. Oscar Wilde,” *Bookman*, Nov. 1891: i, 59-60, cited in Beckson 85.

³⁴ [Anonymous], “Unsigned Review” *Daily Chronicle*, 30 June 1890: 7, cited in Beckson 72-73.

³⁵ Penguin *PDG* 219.

³⁶ Penguin *PDG* 219.

effect.”³⁷ When Wilde revised the novel in 1891, however, he added a preface which clearly stated that “[t]here is no such thing as a moral or immoral book,”³⁸ implying that the novel does not contain a moral at all. These contradictions indicate that the moral is not as clearly defined as the reader is first led to believe. Some aspects of the novel, such as Dorian’s life of “self-indulgence,”³⁹ very likely provoked the conservative critics, leading them to deem the novel immoral.

Many of the critics attacked the novel using such wordings as: “moral and spiritual putrefaction,”⁴⁰ “nasty” and “corrupt,”⁴¹ and of the second version: “unmanly, sickening, vicious.”⁴² Pater also reviewed the novel, with more insight than many of the other critics,⁴³ but he was nevertheless confused about the character of Lord Henry, whom he assumed to be a caricature instead of a serious advocate for an Epicurean way of life.⁴⁴ Pater was not the only one who had some trouble uniting Lord Henry with the moral tone of the novel. The publisher George Lock complained to Wilde in 1890 that Lord Henry “goes off the scene very quickly,” and suggested that “he also have a little longer and you could make an excellent contrast between the deaths of the two men.”⁴⁵ Wilde did not follow Lock’s suggestion completely; his revision of the novel indeed added more room for Lord Henry’s character to develop, but probably not in the way Lock would have liked. As Lock rightly points out, Lord Henry is the only one of the three friends who is still alive at the end of the novel, without

³⁷ Oscar Wilde, *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), 95.

³⁸ Oscar Wilde, “Preface,” *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 3.

³⁹ Michael Patrick Gillespie, “Preface,” *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde (New York: Norton, 2007), xi.

⁴⁰ Penguin PDG 217.

⁴¹ Beckson 70-71.

⁴² [Anonymous], “Unsigned Notice,” *Athenaeum*, 27 June 1891: 824, cited in Beckson, 82.

⁴³ Pater Beckson 83.

⁴⁴ Pater Beckson 85.

⁴⁵ Karl E. Beckson, “Introduction.” *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 10. In “Introduction,” *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Joseph Bristow. Vol. 3. (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 4 Vols. xi-lx, Joseph Bristow mentions that this letter has “slightly different wording” from the one he uses, in which Lock says: “you could make an excellent *end that balances* the deaths of the two men [emphasis added]” (xlvi).

remorse or punishment, which is rather problematic considering his dubious moral stance. Not only the critics, but also his friends cannot agree on what to think of him; Basil suspects he is much nicer than he pretends to be,⁴⁶ while Dorian finds him “too clever and too cynical to be really fond of.”⁴⁷ In contrast to Dorian though, Lord Henry proves to be a much more successful experiment in the Aesthetic mode of living, which lessens the warning against the dangers of Aestheticism and Decadence considerably.

In many respects the novel follows the outline of a morality play; Basil is the personification of Dorian’s virtue, and tries to keep him on the narrow path of righteousness, while Lord Henry is the personification of his vice, and seduces him to a life of sin, hence being named “Mephistopheles” by Hawthorne. It is striking, however, that Marlowe’s Mephistopheles is eternally damned and punished even when he is out of hell,⁴⁸ while Wilde never provides the reader with a moral evaluation of Lord Henry. Admittedly, he receives a form of punishment towards the end of the novel by his wife divorcing him, but his cynical views on marriage,⁴⁹ and the fact that in retrospect he can only say about his wife that he was “very fond”⁵⁰ of her, seem to imply that he hardly suffers enough for it to be a satisfying moral punishment. He also admits to Dorian that he has “sorrows . . . of [his] own, that even [Dorian knows] nothing of,”⁵¹ but considering that Lord Henry has just been praising Dorian for his everlasting youth while lamenting his own old age, his sorrows may well be nothing more than simple regret of losing his youth. The exact nature of these sorrows is never revealed, however, thus preventing the reader from passing judgement on them.

The reader is left to wonder how good or evil Lord Henry is, who, according to Basil,

⁴⁶ PDG 8.

⁴⁷ PDG 99.

⁴⁸ Marlowe 1031.

⁴⁹ PDG 7, 63-65, 151.

⁵⁰ PDG 178.

⁵¹ PDG 183.

“never [says] a moral thing, and . . . never [does] a wrong thing.”⁵² He is of course not as innocent as Basil would have it; he is determined to influence Dorian, while he readily admits that “[a]ll influence is immoral.”⁵³ He hereby already undercuts his position as bad angel by claiming that all influence is inherently immoral, which inevitably questions the existence of *good* influence. It is important to realise that Lord Henry’s witty remark has some truth in it; he is not the only immoral influence in Dorian’s life. When Basil finds Dorian indifferent after Sybil’s death, he blames Lord Henry for changing him, and a short dialogue follows:

“You talk as if you had no heart, no pity in you. It is all Harry’s influence. I see that.”

The lad flushed up and, going to the window, looked out for a few moments on the green, flickering, sun-lashed garden. “I owe a great deal to Harry, Basil,” he said at last, “more than I owe to you. You only taught me to be vain.”

“Well, I am punished for that, Dorian--or shall be some day.”⁵⁴

Basil has also influenced Dorian by giving him vanity, for which he feels he has to be punished, and which prefigures his actual punishment of being murdered by Dorian. Ironically, Lord Henry escapes punishment, by Dorian or anyone else, although Basil and he are guilty of the same sins. The first impression of Basil and Lord Henry as good and bad angel respectively turns out to be reversed: both characters are a bad influence, Basil even giving Dorian the first nudge by making him vain.

These seeming oppositions in the novel can be reconciled by adopting the method which Eltis applies to Wilde’s plays. Eltis argues that “from sexual stereotypes to the unbending rules of puritan morality, all laws and systems which sought to categorize or

⁵² PDG 8.

⁵³ PDG 18.

⁵⁴ PDG 93.

control humankind were targets for Wilde's attack,”⁵⁵ and that “[h]is plays subverted the conventions of the popular stage [and] challenged the strict morality they upheld.”⁵⁶ This subversive mechanism can also be seen at work in *PDG*: although the novel seems to follow the conventional moral story of Faustus, a closer look reveals a subtle subversion taking place, in which Lord Henry is the key-figure, and probably the reason for the critics' conflicting views of him and consequently of the work as a whole. Wilde skilfully overturns the conventional genre of the morality play, mainly through the figure of Lord Henry. At first glance, Lord Henry only undermines the Faustus theme, but on a closer look he also subverts religion in general.

Lord Henry not only undermines the moral of the novel, he also reverses religion in general with his seemingly empty aphorisms and flippant remarks. His theories on ethics coincide largely with those of Nietzsche,⁵⁷ although he is very careful about his phrasing. He does not name religion as the origin of morality; but defines them both as governing establishments when he says that “[t]he terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion—these are the two things that govern us.”⁵⁸ This passage echoes Nietzsche's work, and gives off the impression that Lord Henry sees both religion and morality as human constructs. By separating these two, however, he has the advantage of being able to safely attack morality without immediately being guilty of blasphemy. This stance is characteristic of Lord Henry; he merely observes attitudes towards God, he rarely comments directly on the supposed existence of the divine. He says, for example, that people “have given up their belief in the soul,”⁵⁹ which addresses belief in the soul instead of its existence.

⁵⁵ Eltis 209.

⁵⁶ Eltis 209.

⁵⁷ James Sloan Allen, “Nietzsche and Wilde: An Ethics of Style,” *Sewanee Review* 114.3 (June, 2006): 388.

⁵⁸ *PDG* 18.

⁵⁹ *PDG* 181.

Although Lord Henry states his opinions very carefully, he nevertheless cuts away the religious basis for morality — like Nietzsche — and stresses the mechanisms that are at work in society. His views on society are rather pessimistic, and he sees man as basically selfish: “[t]he reason we all like to think so well of others is that we are all afraid for ourselves. The basis of optimism is sheer terror. We think that we are generous because we credit our neighbour with the possession of those virtues that are likely to be a benefit to us.”⁶⁰ Morality, he seems to argue, was invented because it allows people to believe in the good of humankind, which relieves the terror inherent to society. However, if morality is only a code of conduct invented by man, instead of a set of laws given by God, then good conduct will not automatically lead to salvation, leaving people to live in fear of an arbitrary God. Indeed, Lord Henry seems to have such a fickle deity in mind when he talks about *terror* of God,⁶¹ instead of *love* for God, as was the more conventional approach. Religion and morality are not divine institutions, Lord Henry seems to argue, but mechanisms necessary for society to function well.

Clearly, Lord Henry is the cause of much disagreement, but also the key in uniting the conflicting opinions of the critics on the morality of the novel. At first glance, *PDG* seems to follow the conventional plot outline of a Faustus tale. Dorian is seduced by the evil Lord Henry, instead of listening to the good Basil who tries to help him, and ultimately pays the price through a violent death. A closer look reveals that Lord Henry, and to a lesser extent Basil, do not simply pose as good and bad angel. Basil is very likely a homosexual, and has made Dorian vain as a result of his inordinate adoration for the beautiful boy. Similarly, Lord Henry may have lured Dorian into a life of sin, but he remains unpunished throughout the story, making it very hard to pass any moral judgement on him. These conflicting

⁶⁰ *PDG* 65.

⁶¹ Also *PDG* 82, where Lord Henry says “fear of God.”

interpretations can be resolved by using Eltis's method of analysing subversion in Wilde's plays, which proves to be an excellent means of examining in what way *PDG* undermines Victorian morality. Like Wilde's plays, *PDG* seems to be unoriginal in its treatment of a moral tale, but the novel secretly reverses these conventional values. What at first glance seems merely discord among critics turns out to be caused by a deeper layer in the text. On the surface, Dorian and Basil add a moral to the story, but a closer look reveals a subversion of these values. Lord Henry completely reverses the religious and moral assumptions that conventionally accompany the Faustus theme.

Chapter 2 – Intertextuality

One characterising aspect of the Victorian era was its enormous drive for scientific discovery. The century was dominated by an ever-increasing number of inventions, which gave many the idea that the world could be controlled by man.⁶² Because of this progress, a hope for a better future began to pervade all social classes.⁶³ The interest in science and its possibilities percolated in the century's literary works,⁶⁴ as society as a whole became more rational and materialistic because of the advances in technology. The developments did not escape Wilde, who commented on them in his fairy tale "The Nightingale and the Rose," in which a student claims that "in this age to be practical is everything."⁶⁵

Wilde's fairy tale already showed the shallowness of practicality, but many more Victorian writers questioned the effects these developments had. Dickens was concerned for the working classes when he wrote *Hard Times* in 1854, which was a direct attack on the negative consequences of rationalism. The novel describes how practicality and rationalism can be abused, and stifle the minds of children.⁶⁶ In the form of Mr Bounderby, Dickens directly assails one of his own stock themes; that of self-help. In an attempt to invalidate the complaints of the workers, Bounderby proclaims he had suffered from the worst upbringing possible, but that this had not prevented him from becoming a self-made man. Towards the end of the novel, however, he is exposed as a fraud, illustrating the difficulty of rising from poverty. *Hard Times* provides Victorian society with a harsh critique of its class system.

⁶² Maurois 373.

⁶³ Maurois 373-77.

⁶⁴ Earlier novels in which scientific discovery plays a significant role are Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), best known is then Verne's fiction, which spans the mid-Victorian era, while the late period was dominated by such novels as Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Short stories about the possibilities of technology also abounded, such as Kipling's "Wireless" (1904).

⁶⁵ Oscar Wilde, "The Nightingale and the Rose," *The Complete Illustrated Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Bounty Books, 2004), 167.

⁶⁶ Kate Flint, "Introduction," *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), xi-xiii, xxxi.

Any criticism on social injustice had to be severely tempered, however. Maurois points out that sin and crime had to be banned from Victorian literature, unless masked by humour or sentimentality.⁶⁷ This was also true for Dickens, who had to give his more tragic stories a happy ending to obscure their realism.⁶⁸ In *Hard Times*, this happy ending is perhaps more difficult to find than in some of his other works, as some of the good characters (such as Louisa, and Stephen Blackpool) are not rewarded with the happy lives they deserve. This might also be explained by the obvious sentimentalism with which Dickens portrays these characters, in particular Stephen Blackpool, who dies a courageous death that is pivotal in furthering the plot. In this novel too, the wicked either repent or get a dose of their own medicine, while the good are largely rewarded. In this way, Dickens attacked society,⁶⁹ but was at the same time obliged to conform to Victorian morality.

Kerry Powell argues much the same for Wilde; according to him, Wilde challenged social conventions in his plays, but always ultimately adhered to them in order to succeed in the theatre, thus compromising his work by the need to remain popular.⁷⁰ Eltis severely questions Powell's argument, and concludes that Wilde's apparent adherence to Victorian morality was a strategy allowing him to subvert that same morality.⁷¹ She argues that by copying from many contemporary sources, Wilde seemed to be following a conventional trend, approved of by the censorship, but on a deeper level he turned these conventions upside down.⁷² The question remains, however, if this is also true for *PDG*.

As already established in the previous chapter, *PDG* certainly undermined older legends dealing with morality, such as the Faustus theme and the morality play. These were

⁶⁷ Maurois 375.

⁶⁸ Maurois 377.

⁶⁹ Michael Goldberg, "From Bentham to Carlyle: Dickens' Political Development," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33.1 (1972): 61.

⁷⁰ Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890's* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 4-13.

⁷¹ Eltis 61.

⁷² Eltis 4-5, 96-100.

stock tales, however, often adapted by great authors such as Goethe and Marlowe, making their use — by Victorian standards — unoriginal at worst, but definitely not plagiarism. The painter and author James Abbott McNeill Whistler was not referring to these works when he named Wilde a plagiarist; instead, he pointed out that Wilde borrowed material from his contemporaries.⁷³ According to him, Wilde appeared to plagiarise from a large number of works in *PDG*,⁷⁴ which led critics to name as many sources as they could, sometimes in an attempt to label the novel unoriginal.⁷⁵ Many other contemporary critics thus agreed with Whistler on Wilde's plagiarism, although they differed on the severity of the crime; many thought that the similarities were slight, or that Wilde even surpassed the originals he imitated or borrowed from.⁷⁶ It is important to realise, however, that Wilde's use of intertextuality also served another purpose. In rising to the challenge of discovering his sources, and deeming *PDG* “not exactly novel,”⁷⁷ the critics actually aided Wilde in maintaining the pose of writing in a long, conventional tradition, which partly veiled the subversive messages underlying his novel.

Wilde subverts Victorian morality by adopting well-known stock features, of which the ideal of self-help was one of the most ubiquitous. This ideal often appeared in the stock

⁷³ James Abbot McNeill Whistler, “To *Truth*,” 2 Jan. 1890, cited in Beckson 63-64.

⁷⁴ Beckson 63.

⁷⁵ Of Wilde's contemporary critics, Jeyes names Horace as a source (Beckson 70), Julian Hawthorne suggests *Vivian Gray* [sic] by Disraeli, *Pelham* by Bulwer Lytton, and the works of Ouida (Maria Louise Ramé) (Beckson 80), an unsigned notice in the *Athenaeum* mentions *La Peau de Chagrin* by Balzac (Beckson 82), and Pater suggests Poe (Beckson 84, 86).

In his introduction to the first Penguin Classics edition, Peter Ackroyd adds to this list Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Pater's *Gaston de Latour*, and Huysmans's *A Rebours*, cited in Penguin *PDG* 227.

Interestingly, in “Fiction as Allegory: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969) Edouard Roditi names *Melmoth the Wanderer*, by Charles Robert Maturin (the uncle of Wilde's mother), a source for *PDG*, as its protagonist is a man who has sold his soul to the devil in exchange for 150 years of youth.

One of the latest additions in this field is Florina Tufesco's *Oscar Wilde's Plagiarism: The Triumph of Art Over Ego* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008).

⁷⁶ Julian Hawthorne says of *PDG*'s similarities with *Pelham* and *Vivian Grey* that “the resemblance does not go far” (Beckson 80). A review in the *Athenaeum* states that “the idea of the book may have been suggested by Balzac's *Peau de Chagrin*, and it is none the worse for that” (Beckson 82). Pater claims that *PDG* is superior to the writings of Poe (Beckson 84).

⁷⁷ “Our Booking-Office,” *Punch*, 19 July 1890, xcix, 25, cited in Beckson 77.

figure of the poor orphan who is scarred by a difficult childhood, but nevertheless manages to succeed in life. The moral behind this tale was that social injustice was just an excuse used by the working classes for their poverty, as with enough hard work and perseverance, everyone could attain the life he or she wanted. This message was advertised in particular by Samuel Smiles, who wrote a set of guidebooks on the topic.⁷⁸ Many Victorian novels incorporate this theme in some form or another,⁷⁹ and Dickens is particularly fond of the device,⁸⁰ although he criticises it in *Hard Times*, through Mr Bounderby.

The orphaned, albeit rich, Dorian, who was raised by his mean grandfather, is a slight variation of this stock character. Lord Henry comments on Dorian's troublesome youth as something that adds flair to the young boy: "it had . . . stirred [Lord Henry] by its suggestion of a strange, almost modern romance,"⁸¹ and "posed the lad, made him more perfect, as it were."⁸² Wilde already acknowledged the appeal these stock figures had on the reader, in this case Lord Henry, who sees Dorian as nothing more than a character in a romance in this short passage. However, Dorian's traumatic childhood is far less romantic than Lord Henry imagines it to be. Indeed, Dorian does not possess the resilience to bad treatment of which characters like Jane Eyre and David Copperfield seem to store infinite amounts. In his early adulthood, Dorian still shudders at the mention of his cruel grandfather.⁸³ Dorian is also separated from the image of the penniless orphan by his wealth, which gives him every chance of becoming a respectable citizen, yet he chooses to plunge into a life of sin and crime. Huysmans already subverted the image of the orphan in *A Rebours (Against Nature)* (1884), a

⁷⁸ *Self-Help* (1859), *Character* (1871), *Thrift* (1875), *Duty* (1880), *Life and Labour* (1887).

⁷⁹ Well-known Victorian novels featuring orphans include: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Kipling's *The Jungle Books* (1894), and just after the Victorian period: J. M. Barrie's "Peter Pan" (1904).

⁸⁰ Orphans feature in *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Nicholas Nickleby*, the title-character's father dies (1838-1839), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1868).

⁸¹ PDG 33.

⁸² PDG 33.

⁸³ PDG 101.

decadent novel about the wealthy orphan Jean Des Esseintes, who indulges in every kind of pleasure and sin he can contrive. The novel was infamous for its outspoken decadence and lack of morality, and *PDG*'s debt to this work was quickly noted by several critics.⁸⁴ By imitating what one newspaper named “leprous”⁸⁵ literature, Wilde already attacked morality, but by imitating conventional themes he accomplished this more covertly. In this way, the beginning of *PDG* evokes the well-known image of the unfortunate yet promising orphan, used by many authors, which is then completely subverted. Ironically, Wilde effectively undermines Victorian morality by the stock feature of the orphan, which serves to make Dickens' work conventional.

A more prominent stock feature in *PDG* is of course the magic portrait, which was often used by writers to instil a moral in their stories. Robert Mighall discusses these stories about pictures, but his argument quickly shifts to the novelty of Wilde's treatment of the magic painting. According to him, Wilde updates the Faustus theme by introducing heredity as the cause for Dorian's motivation to lead a life of sin. In contrast to Faustus, it is not completely Dorian's fault that he is tempted by evil forces, as his hereditary traits seem to suggest that Dorian lives the lives of his ancestors, who were either evil, or met an untimely death. In this way, Wilde reduces Dorian's moral responsibility, which was the focus of the Faustus theme.⁸⁶ Mighall does not, however, comment on the subversive qualities of Dorian's portrait. He describes an obscure short story entitled “Family Portraits,”⁸⁷ in which the ugly

⁸⁴ Jeyes compares it with the works of the French decadents, (among which certainly Huysmans) to which the *Daily Chronicle* agrees (Bristow *PDG* xx). James Joyce links the catalogues in *PDG* to Huysmans (Beckson 269), and Arthur Symons also names Huysmans as a source (Beckson 298). Ackroyd also notices it in his introduction to *PDG*, (Penguin *PDG* 227).

⁸⁵ *Daily Chronicle* (Bristow *PDG* xx).

⁸⁶ Robert Mighall, “Introduction,” *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde (London: Penguin, 2003), xviii-xxi.

⁸⁷ “Family Portraits” appeared under the title of “Portraits de Famille,” *Fantasmagoria; ou Recueil d'Histoires d'Apparitions, de Spectres, Revenans, Fantômes, &c. Traduit de L'Allemand, par un Amateur* (Paris: F. Schoell, 1812).

painting of the wicked protagonist returns to normal when he has atoned for his sins.⁸⁸

Mighall attributes this story to Jean Baptiste Benoît Eyries, who actually only translated the story from the German “Die Bilder der Ahnen,” by August Apel,⁸⁹ whose name will be referred to from here on. Dorian’s case clearly echoes Apel’s tale of moral redemption, as his portrait is also returned to its original state at the end of the novel. Because of this similarity with other moral tales, Victorian readers might have felt a sense of moral closure at the end of the novel.

In contrast to Apel’s tale, however, the sins visible on the painting return to Dorian’s body at the end of the novel, instead of being absolved. In both cases, the painting regenerates, but in Dorian’s case, his sins remain. An unsigned review in *Punch* questioned the morality of this ending: “If Oscar intended an allegory, the finish is dreadfully wrong. Does he mean that, by sacrificing his earthly life, Dorian Gray atones for his infernal sins, and so purifies his soul by suicide?”⁹⁰ Suicide was generally thought to be a sin, and although understandable in some cases, it was certainly not a means of purifying the soul. It follows then that Dorian’s death is a punishment instead of a suicide, as Dorian has no idea that the destruction of the painting will be his death.⁹¹ This is foreshadowed in the novel when Dorian mentions that God should “[s]mite us for our iniquities”⁹² instead of forgive, as Apel’s tale seems to suggest.

The cause of Dorian’s death separates Dorian’s case from that of Apel’s tale. At first glance, Dorian seems to repent of his wicked life in the final chapter. After having ended his contact with the country girl Hetty, he expects the painting to register what he sees as a good

⁸⁸ Mighall *PDG* xviii.

⁸⁹ August Apel, “Die Bilder der Ahnen,” *Cicaden, Vol. I* (Berlin: Im Kunst- und Industrie-Comptoir, 1810), 11-108.

⁹⁰ Beckson 76.

⁹¹ In the last chapter, Dorian says of the painting that “when that was dead he would be free” (*PDG* 187).

⁹² *PDG* 185.

deed. Lord Henry interprets Dorian's motivation for sparing the girl as a part of his decadence, as it simply produces another new experience,⁹³ and indeed, just as with Sybil's suicide, the painting grows more ugly, implying that Dorian did not repent at all. He realises this too, and admits to himself that “[t]hrough vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity's sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognized that now.”⁹⁴ After the scene of Sybil's death, Wilde gives a vital clue to how Dorian's vanity in connection to the painting should be interpreted. Lord Henry pokes fun at Dorian's piety when he says he will be good, after supposedly repenting of his cruelty to Sybil:

“I know what conscience is, to begin with. It is not what you told me it was. It is the divinest thing in us. Don't sneer at it, Harry, any more--at least not before me. I want to be good. I can't bear the idea of my soul being hideous.”

“A very charming artistic basis for ethics, Dorian! I congratulate you on it.”⁹⁵

Of course, Lord Henry thinks Dorian's statement of his “soul being hideous” is a metaphor; he does not know it has become a reality through the painting. Here Wilde reveals the basis for Dorian's repeated interest in reforming; he does not regret his sins because they are evil, or immoral, but because the painting shows them to be ugly, which Dorian, in his vanity, cannot bear to be. This apprehension is made sufficiently clear in the numerous thoughts and conversations Dorian has about growing old and ugly.⁹⁶ Dorian's vanity is so great that he actually feels sorry for the painting:

Was it to become a monstrous and loathsome thing, to be hidden away in a locked

⁹³ PDG 177, 186.

⁹⁴ PDG 187.

⁹⁵ PDG 83.

⁹⁶ Of which the most extended are PDG 25 and 104.

room, to be shut out from the sunlight that had so often touched to brighter gold the waving wonder of its hair? The pity of it! the pity of it!⁹⁷

This vanity is the reason why the painting “had given [Dorian] pleasure to watch it changing and growing old,” as it brought out his own beauty all the more, but that “[o]f late he had felt no such pleasure,”⁹⁸ because he could not bear its ugliness. Dorian concludes that “[i]t had been like conscience to him,” and resolves to destroy it.⁹⁹ Dorian’s conscience is not the typical one reserved for sin, but one that relates to beauty. Through the medium of the painting, beauty and ugliness replace the good and evil that prevailed in *Apel*, which completely subverts its morality. In the end, Dorian is punished for his vanity, not for his sins, which undermines the conventional theme of the changing portrait, and Victorian morality as a whole. Again, Wilde subverts a stock figure by seemingly copying from others, while sending out a radically different message.

PDG distances itself from these old stock themes, however, because of its affinity with scientific progress, thereby moving more to the field occupied by novels such as Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (JH) (1886). Wilde has Dorian contemplate the extent to which heredity, revolutionised by Darwin at that time, determines his fatal personality and motivation for his evil deeds,¹⁰⁰ while Stevenson explores the possibilities and dangers of scientific discovery. Dr Jekyll invents a potion that transforms him into the evil Mr Hyde, which allows him to commit his vices under the protection of another name. Although Dorian creates his own double by prayer, he wonders if there is some scientific reason behind the change in the portrait, such as a connection between the atoms of his soul and the canvas,¹⁰¹ thereby moving away from the supernatural which was so predominant in earlier Gothic tales.

⁹⁷ *PDG* 91.

⁹⁸ *PDG* 187.

⁹⁹ *PDG* 187.

¹⁰⁰ *PDG* 121-22.

¹⁰¹ *PDG* 82, 91.

Many critics have noticed that both novels deal with double lives, grouping the two novels together, sometimes in a debate on possible plagiarism by Wilde,¹⁰² and the matter continues to be discussed by present-day academics.¹⁰³ Although critics vary on the precise extent of the similarities between the two novels, one is undeniable: *PDG* reads like a curious hybrid of the Faustus theme and *JH*, as Dorian exchanges his soul for a portrait that functions as Dorian's double. Although many critics have commented on the similarities between *PDG* and *JH*, Wilde was severely attacked on the immorality of his novel, while Stevenson was hailed as a genius, with critics divided into three camps: most thought of *JH* as a moral tale, some thought of it as a psychological study, and others "who saw no lesson or moral at all."¹⁰⁴ It is curious to see that Wilde vainly advocated art without morality in his Preface,¹⁰⁵ while some granted this more easily to Stevenson. The reason for this acceptance of Stevenson in favour of Wilde might be twofold; foremost is probably *PDG*'s homosexual tone, but no less important are its subversive qualities, which *JH* also possesses, but to a lesser extent.

Firstly, *PDG*'s homoerotic allusions are far more overt than *JH*'s, which caused the Victorian public to balk at the former, while possibly missing the suggestions made in the latter. On this point, Stevenson was perhaps more insightful than Wilde in foreseeing the problems such references might cause. Dury points out that in successive drafts, *JH* moves away from hints at homosexuality,¹⁰⁶ but the studious academic will still be able to find some references to homosexuality in *JH*, such as Jekyll and Hyde's effeminacy, the anal associations of Jekyll's back door, and Sir Danvers Carew seemingly asking Hyde for directions — or perhaps sexual favours — in the middle of the night.¹⁰⁷ Their covertness,

¹⁰² Beckson 70, 86. Penguin *PDG* 219.

¹⁰³ Mighall *PDG* xiii. Mighall *JH* xxxiii-xxxiv. Bristow *PDG* xi.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Dury, "Introduction," *The Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson: The Centenary Edition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004), xxiv.

¹⁰⁵ Oscar Wilde, "Preface," *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 3.

¹⁰⁶ Dury xxii.

¹⁰⁷ Dury xxx-xxxi.

however, together with the denouement that reveals Jekyll's peculiar interest in Hyde to be of a non-sexual nature, probably cleared the novel of the more serious doubts. Wilde also cut out some references to homoerotic feeling in his drafts, but the majority of his revisions came in the 1891 edition of the novel.¹⁰⁸ In these revisions, Wilde toned down Basil's feelings for Dorian significantly. In the 1890 version, e.g., Basil admits that he "had never loved a woman,"¹⁰⁹ and that he adored Dorian "madly, extravagantly, absurdly."¹¹⁰ In the 1891 version, these outbursts were replaced by more intellectual and artistic statements:¹¹¹ "I was dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream."¹¹² These revisions came too late, however, as the public caught the first edition's homosexual overtones, which would eventually be used against him in his trial.¹¹³

Ultimately, the published version of *JH* still contains some homoerotic behaviour, demonstrated particularly by Hyde,¹¹⁴ but this is virtually non-existent in the other major characters in the novel. These characters are not faultless, as even the exemplary gentleman Utterson has his sins: "His past was fairly blameless; few men could read the rolls of their life with less apprehension; yet he was humbled to the dust by the many ill things he had done."¹¹⁵ "[I]ll things" do not include criminally punishable homoerotic behaviour, however, and Wilde's foregrounding of homosexuality in *PDG* subverts the conventional message *JH* sends out. *PDG*'s three main characters are implied to be homosexual: Basil in particular by his excessive love for Dorian, and Lord Henry and Dorian by subtle hints, such as the mentioning

¹⁰⁸ *PDG* 190, 229.

¹⁰⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Joseph Bristow. Vol. 3. (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 90.

¹¹⁰ *CW* 90.

¹¹¹ Penguin *PDG* xvii.

¹¹² *PDG* 97-8.

¹¹³ *PDG* xxxi.

¹¹⁴ Dury xxx.

¹¹⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror*. Ed. Robert Mighall (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 17.

of their shared houses in Trouville and Algiers.¹¹⁶ Homosexuality seems to be the norm in the novel, instead of a deviance; not only committed by the seemingly immoral Dorian and Lord Henry, but also by the apparently good and moral Basil. Although Stevenson makes clear that everyone lives a secret life of sin to some extent,¹¹⁷ in reserving certain unpardonable vices — such as homosexuality — for the evil characters exclusively, *JH* still adheres to Victorian morality. Contrary to Stevenson, however, Wilde does not give a closing chapter like *JH*'s “Full Statement of the Case”¹¹⁸ to clear up any ambiguous homosocial behaviour in his novel.¹¹⁹ Indeed, he foregrounds it, thereby undermining *JH*'s division between the moral and the immoral characters.

Stevenson also has a more conventional approach to morality in general. Jekyll wants to use his double as a means to rid himself of the small vices he commits: “Many a man would have even blazoned such irregularities as I was guilty of; but from the high views that I had set before me, I regarded and hid them with an almost morbid sense of shame.”¹²⁰ Of course, the truthfulness of Jekyll’s narrative can be questioned, but the fact that because of this repression of sin, the evil Hyde is small and young when first split off from Jekyll,¹²¹ seems to corroborate that his sins are indeed slight. Dorian, on the other hand, creates his double out of vanity, not out of a hyperbolic sense of morality, because it is only later that Dorian sees his portrait as a means of getting away with committing vice. Stevenson’s Jekyll can be seen as a critique of the Victorian over-emphasis on morality, which causes its hypocrisy, but Wilde, on the other hand, describes how Dorian “felt keenly the terrible

¹¹⁶ PDG 119. Algiers was a popular retreat for homosexuals then (Penguin PDG xiv).

¹¹⁷ Wilde clearly echoes this idea, when Dorian says: “Each of us has heaven and hell in him” (PDG 132).

¹¹⁸ The last chapter in *JH* is named “Henry Jekyll’s Full Statement of the Case,” and clears up many of the mysteries of the novel, (*JH* 55-70).

¹¹⁹ Mighall *JH* xiv.

¹²⁰ *JH* 55.

¹²¹ Jekyll states that Hyde is much “smaller” than he is (*JH* 58) but Utterson also notices that he is “small” (*JH* 14), and calls him “young” (*JH* 19).

pleasure of a double life,”¹²² and mentions the many pleasures the portrait enables him to indulge in. Of course Dorian’s double-life ends, not as in Jekyll’s case because his evil side has taken him over, but because Dorian cannot stand its ugliness. In this way, *PDG* does not attack an excessive sense of morality, but morality itself. Wilde undermines this morality by foregrounding aestheticism in the story, as Dorian is motivated by a sense of beauty to create and ultimately destroy the portrait.

Wilde’s imitation of stock themes and contemporary works is not, as might appear at first, an attempt to be conventional in order to achieve commercial success, but a careful strategy which allows his work to be labelled unoriginal and harmless while being deeply subversive at heart. In *PDG*, the popular Victorian stock character of the unfortunate orphan is completely subverted as Wilde shows the society’s tendency to romanticise the lives of orphans, which served at the same time to soothe the guilt of social injustice. The subversion continues with the picture. In the conventional story of the magic painting, the protagonist learns a moral lesson from the portrait. In *PDG*, however, the portrait only depicts beauty or ugliness, which defies the Victorian assumption of didactic art: the portrait should teach Dorian a moral lesson, just like *PDG* should contain a clear moral. Finally, many critics also noted a strong similarity between *JH* and *PDG*, but again, Stevenson proves to be much more conventional than Wilde, who questions many of the values *JH* adheres to. *PDG*’s homoerotic allusions are clearer than *JH*’s and not limited to the wicked characters only, thereby questioning the division between good and evil. In addition, Jekyll creates his double to escape the stern gaze of society, whereas Dorian prays for the portrait to change out of vanity. While Stevenson is unconventional in criticising the Victorian obsession with morality, Wilde undermines morality completely by turning morals into aesthetics.

¹²² *PDG* 147.

Chapter 3 – Art as a Mirror

In the first two chapters, little mention has been made of the Preface that Wilde published in March 1891 and added to the second edition of *PDG* when it was published a month later. It is, however, an important addition to the text, and deserves critical attention. The Preface features some of Wilde's best aphorisms, many of which had already appeared in his letters and works as direct replies to the attacks the journalists had made on the first edition of his novel.¹²³ Together, these aphorisms defended his views on art and criticism, which went straight against conventional assumptions, while at the same time serving to make the critics "mend their wicked ways."¹²⁴ He replied to these critics with such phrases as "[t]he highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography,"¹²⁵ and "[t]hose who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming,"¹²⁶ which imply that the journalists' reviews exposed their own beliefs, instead of Wilde's. While some parts of the Preface were probably created to teach the journalists a lesson, it still provides an interesting basis for an evaluation of how *PDG* reflects these maxims.

The Preface is typical for the period in which Wilde published many of his radical theories on art and the function of criticism. *Lord Saville's Crime and Other Stories* (1891), and *Intentions* (1891), a collection of four essays on aesthetics, and appeared at that time. According to Beckson, both were published after the second edition of *PDG*,¹²⁷ but Mighall reveals that the writing of these works largely coincided. He points out that "The Critic as Artist" ("CAA"), one of the essays in *Intentions*, had already appeared in slightly different

¹²³ *PDG* 190-91.

¹²⁴ Beckson 8.

¹²⁵ *PDG* 3.

¹²⁶ *PDG* 3.

¹²⁷ Beckson 7-13.

form in 1890, under the name of “The True Fiction and Value of Criticism,” and “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” (“WH”) had originally been published in 1889, only later to be republished with some of Wilde’s other fiction in *LSC*.¹²⁸ In these two works, Wilde developed much of the material that would later resurface, sometimes verbatim, in *PDG*. To better understand how Wilde’s novel undermines conventional attitudes towards art and its criticism, it is fruitful to explore which ideas *PDG* shares with “CAA” and “WH,” and how these underlying themes help the novel undermine the position of the conventional art-critic, and subvert the Victorian assumption that art can be autobiographical.

It is perhaps useful to first ascertain how “WH” portrays the subjectivity of art-criticism. The story deals with Cyril Graham’s theory that the mysterious W.H. in Shakespeare’s sonnets is a boy-actor named Willie Hughes. According to Graham, Shakespeare worshipped the young boy,¹²⁹ and the narrator hints at the homoerotic nature of his love.¹³⁰ It seems, however, that these critics project themselves onto the sonnets, Wilde included.¹³¹ The narrator, Graham, and his friend Erskine are very likely homosexuals, thereby investing the sonnets with homoerotic overtones they do not necessarily possess. Hughes is a projection of Graham, who was also a boy-actor,¹³² while the older Erskine identifies himself more with Shakespeare in his adoration for a young boy, just as Erskine once adored Graham.¹³³ Lewis Poteet remarks that the homosexual Wilde resembles these characters, in writing a story in which his fellow author, Shakespeare, is in love with a young

¹²⁸ Penguin *PDG* xxxvi.

¹²⁹ “WH” 160.

¹³⁰ Lewis J. Poteet, “Romantic Aesthetics in Oscar Wilde’s ‘Mr. W. H.’,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 7.1 (Winter, 1970): 459.

¹³¹ Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars, “Introduction,” *The Author as Character: Representing Historical Writers in Western Literature*, ed. Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, and London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 22-23.

¹³² “WH” 155.

¹³³ “I was absurdly devoted to him” (“WH” 155), Erskine says about Graham.

man.¹³⁴ All in all, the story asserts that the interpretation of a work of art is entirely subjective, and questions, according to Franssen and Hoenselaars, the validity of all biographical criticism.¹³⁵

Graham steadfastly believes in the truth of his theory, even commissioning a forged painting of Willie Hughes to prove it, and when Erskine finds out about the forgery, Graham commits suicide to become a martyr to “the secret of the Sonnets.”¹³⁶ The narrator and Erskine, however, fluctuate in their belief. The story ends with Erskine trying to be a martyr to the theory by disguising his death as a suicide, but he does not succeed in convincing the narrator, who is once again sceptical about Graham’s hypothesis. The central message is that the truth of the theory is not important, it only matters that it evokes beauty in those who contemplate it.¹³⁷ In this way, the story comes full circle, as it started with the statement that “to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem.”¹³⁸ In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde would further develop this “problem,” but “WH” already establishes that art should not necessarily be truthful.

The varied reactions the Shakespearean sonnets and the (forged) painting produce establish the subjectivity of interpreting art, while also asserting that truth and art are two realms that should be kept separate,¹³⁹ which goes directly against the Victorian belief that art-criticism could find a true meaning in the text.¹⁴⁰ Poteet argues that its mode of “fiction as criticism”¹⁴¹ would resurface in *PDG*, and indeed, in addition to the obvious similarity between the titles of the two works, “WH” contains many ideas that would mature in *PDG*.

¹³⁴ Poteet 460.

¹³⁵ Franssen and Hoenselaars 24.

¹³⁶ “WH” 166.

¹³⁷ Poteet 464.

¹³⁸ “WH” 152.

¹³⁹ Poteet 458.

¹⁴⁰ The belittled Ernest mentions this belief to his conversation partner Gilbert (“CAA” 366).

¹⁴¹ Poteet 458.

Graham seems to be a forerunner of Dorian; the fabulously good-looking boy is orphaned and raised by his maternal grandfather, who dislikes the boy whose mother married beneath her.¹⁴² This prefigures Dorian being raised by his grandfather, Lord Kelso, who resented that his daughter had married to a pitiless soldier in a foot regiment.¹⁴³ Like Dorian, Graham is admired for his good looks by an older friend, Erskine, who even makes a short appearance in *PDG*.¹⁴⁴ Considering the many resemblances these two works share, it is interesting to explore whether *PDG* also questions the veracity of art.

In *PDG*, the subjectivity of criticism is portrayed by the three main characters, who see their own personalities reflected in Dorian's portrait. Lord Henry simply sees it as a pretty picture, which coincides with his view of art for art's sake. Dorian initially only sees his own beauty, which mirrors his narcissism, but after his prayer for eternal youth and beauty, he sees all of his sins displayed directly on the canvas, where they are also visible to others. Even after the painting has become an actual mirror, albeit of the soul, Dorian's narcissism still warps his perception so much that it causes him to see in the portrait a "caricatured picture of old-age."¹⁴⁵ Basil, in his turn, thinks the canvas reveals "the secret of [Basil's] own soul",¹⁴⁶ instead, but it is by his own admission that others become aware of this secret, as they never see it in the portrait itself. These projections are not limited to the painting only: Sybil lives her life like that of a character in a play, which Lord Henry makes clear to the reader in the clever metafictional observation that she was "less real" than a character in a work of art; her death "a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy."¹⁴⁷ In addition, Mighall notes that Dorian recognises his own life in the novel Lord Henry has given him,¹⁴⁸ and seeks to

¹⁴² "WH" 155.

¹⁴³ *PDG* 31.

¹⁴⁴ *PDG* 35.

¹⁴⁵ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, "The Phenomenon of Aging," repr. in Gillespie 482.

¹⁴⁶ *PDG* 8.

¹⁴⁷ *PDG* 89.

¹⁴⁸ Penguin *PDG* xxiii.

live like the protagonist. Ironically, like Basil, Wilde also identified himself with his own work of art in a letter to Ralph Payne, writing that “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.”¹⁴⁹ By saying this, Wilde asserted his position as an artist, while at the same time showing that he was aware of the projection artists make on their work.

Interestingly, this story functions as a *mise en abyme*, a mirror of itself, because what is said about the portrait, and other works of art, can also be said about the novel; “[e]ach man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray,”¹⁵⁰ Wilde argued, and added that “[h]e who finds them has brought them.”¹⁵¹ “CAA” echoes this when the pedantic Gilbert explains that it is an error to assume that “the proper aim of Criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is,”¹⁵² because this “takes no cognisance of Criticism's most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another.”¹⁵³ Similarly, in “WH,” which Ellmann appropriately calls “fiction within fiction that anticipates Borges,”¹⁵⁴ the sonnets have a different impact on Graham, Erskine, and the narrator, depending on when and how they receive the theory. The Preface of *PDG* neatly summarises all these statements in the phrase: “[i]t is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors,”¹⁵⁵ which effectively deprived *PDG*'s critics of their moral objections to the novel or its author, as it asserts that the sins they believed to have found were not Wilde's but their own. This leads to the conclusion that art criticism, instead of art, is really the realm of autobiography. In this way, the Preface openly attacks critics, while the novel slyly undermines their function as its judge.

¹⁴⁹ *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Harcourt, 1962), 352, repr. in Gillespie ix.
¹⁵⁰ SL 82.

¹⁵¹ SL 82.

¹⁵² “CAA” 366.

¹⁵³ “CAA” 366.

¹⁵⁴ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, (London: Hamilton, 1987), 280.

¹⁵⁵ *PDG* 3. This line also appeared earlier in a letter to the editor of the Scots Observer (SL 83).

It is striking that this novel is essentially about a painting, thereby belonging to the “fiction within fiction” Ellmann mentioned, and the events surrounding the painting are arguably the most important of the novel. It is no surprise then that the abrupt ending of *PDG* is one of the most widely interpreted aspects of the novel, but also one of the most important in understanding what the book has to say about art. Critics disagree on why Dorian stabs the painting, and often avoid commenting on why the painting ultimately changes back to its original form.¹⁵⁶ John Paul Riquelme, although he does not explain the change in the portrait completely, offers a more inclusive interpretation of the ending when he states that it “re-establishes the difference between art and life, between the inanimate and the living, between the beautiful and the ugly,”¹⁵⁷ but he adds that this is the extent to which the complex ending lends itself to interpretation.¹⁵⁸ Riquelme’s interpretation, however, corroborates a reading of the novel in which the painting’s regeneration serves to assert the division between fiction and reality, and consequently between art and autobiography.

Like in *PDG*, the characters in “WH” assume that they can find autobiographical information in a work of art, but in *PDG*, they are not fully conscious of their assumption. Although Basil invests his portrait with autobiographical qualities, he nevertheless complains that “[w]e live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography,”¹⁵⁹ thereby also attacking the Victorian assumption that art should be truthful instead of merely beautiful. In “WH,” however, the veracity of the sonnets’ autobiographical material is never established, while Dorian’s portrait displays his sins to the world, instead of mirroring the observer only, which suggests that art possesses the ability to be at least to some

¹⁵⁶ Ragland-Sullivan argues that Dorian wants to destroy the painting because he finds it “impossible to sustain his own narcissistic ideal image in the light of the harsh judgment meted out by the social order,” (Gillespie 481) but she does not explain the painting’s transformation. The same goes for Gillespie, whose analysis of the novel’s ending is limited to the conclusion that Dorian’s self-destruction is caused by his failure to follow Lord Henry’s New Hedonism completely (“Picturing Dorian Gray: Resistant readings in Wilde’s Novel,” 407).

¹⁵⁷ John Paul Riquelme, “Oscar Wilde’s Aesthetic Gothic,” repr. in Gillespie 513.

¹⁵⁸ Gillespie 513.

¹⁵⁹ *PDG* 13.

degree autobiographical. It is curious that Wilde thought it necessary to include this remarkable property of the painting in the novel, but a closer look at “WH” sheds some light on the problem.

In “WH,” Graham’s theory is never validated, affirming that art is not autobiographical, or that at least art-critics cannot treat it as such, and that each reading is only a projection of the reader onto the text. The same goes for *PDG*, in which the portrait mirrors each spectator differently. When by some strange power, however, Dorian’s portrait shows his secrets objectively to any spectator, and thus becomes autobiographical, the situation becomes so anomalous that it cannot last, and the painting dutifully returns to its original state on the final page of the novel. This change does not take place, as Mighall suggests, because of the plot’s debt to Gothic tales of magical mirrors,¹⁶⁰ but because the mirroring must be revoked, as art will ultimately fail to function as autobiography. In the end, Dorian is restored to the realm of life, ceasing to be the work of art Lord Henry thinks him to be when he says that “[l]ife has been [Dorian’s] art,”¹⁶¹ and the painting is restored to the realm of aesthetics, where it belongs. The restoration of the painting at the end of the novel is by no means a moral lesson; it only affirms the assumption that art does not imitate life.

Wilde not only subverts themes he imitates, as Eltis suggests for his plays, he also undermines morality through the form of his novel, which can be deciphered when contrasted to his other works. Wilde reverses the traditional position of the art-critic as someone who could discover a true meaning behind a text. By claiming that critics include their own views and secrets in the interpretation of the novel, Wilde argued that criticism is a mode of autobiography, and any sins the reviewers found in his novel were their own. This view did not rule out the autobiographical nature of art, however, and on a deeper level, the novel

¹⁶⁰ Penguin *PDG* xviii-xxi.

¹⁶¹ *PDG* 182.

comments on the problems of art revealing the author. By writing a story that deals with the implications of treating art as autobiography, Wilde points out the fallacy of seeing a work of art as the *artist's* autobiography, and shifts art's revealing quality to the reader or critic. This also satisfactorily explains why the portrait must be restored to its original form at the end of the novel, and why Dorian has to die; a painting is merely a painting, not an objective mirror of one's soul, and Dorian is merely a man, not a work of art. Wilde suggests that a work of art is simply an aesthetically pleasing object, instead of a mode of autobiography, as was the Victorian consensus.

Conclusion

Many of Wilde's contemporary critics named *PDG* either immoral or moral, while only a few mentioned the complexity of the novel. Upon reading it, the majority of the critics discovered either so much dirt and perversity that they thought the novel unsuitable for a Victorian readership, or they saw in it an excellent warning of the dangers of living such a life of excess and sin. It appears that both parties had a valid point, and it is rash to assume that the book is one-sided in its take on morality. Present-day academics have already granted Wilde's novel a little more complexity, allowing that the novel has multiple layers, or that it distances itself completely from any moral standpoint, but they have not discussed the full extent of any subversion that takes place in the novel.

The diversity of opinion about Wilde's work in general has also been noticed by Eltis, who has developed an interesting argument that unites the different views critics have on Wilde's plays. Eltis argues that Wilde imitates many sources, thereby giving off an appearance of conventionality, but at the same time subverting this conventional appearance on a wholly different level. Her theory accounts for the great discord among critics, as it shows that they simply read different layers of the text. Eltis did not discuss *PDG*, but her findings also apply to this work. On the surface, *PDG* seems to be a moral tale about sin and the punishment that the protagonist must eventually receive. Beneath this moral surface, however, is a much more complex story that subverts many Victorian assumptions and ideals, while also reflecting on its own function as a work of art.

Wilde was acutely aware of the period he was writing in. At first glance, *PDG* seems to be set in a much older London than Wilde was living in, but the scientific and philosophical table-talk betray its modernity. Wilde works within a framework of novel ideas, such as

Darwin's theory of evolution and Nietzsche's claim that God had ceased to exist. Darwin's ideas on heredity serve to question the extent to which Dorian is responsible for his actions, but it is through the Nietzschean Lord Henry that Wilde is able to subvert many conventional Victorian ideas about religion and morality. To the uncritical eye, *PDG* might just be a morality play in the guise of a novel, but in reality, Lord Henry's radical ideas about the existence of morality and religion serve to severely question the values that underlie such moral stories. At the same time, Dorian is a very Faustian character, as he barters away his soul for some supernatural gift, but Basil and Lord Henry do not fit in this picture so easily. While Basil may seem to be Dorian's good angel, and Lord Henry his Mephistopheles, they both have a bad influence on the young man, and Lord Henry remarks that all influence is immoral, thereby questioning if such a thing as good influence exists at all. Furthermore, Basil feels he has to be punished for his bad influence, and his punishment duly arrives when Dorian murders him, but Lord Henry remains unpunished, and even unjudged throughout the novel.

Wilde did not rely on older themes alone to appear conventional. The intertextuality in his novel also encompasses more contemporary sources. Magic paintings were fashionable in Victorian writing, as were destitute orphans who somehow made it from rags to riches. Wilde incorporated these popular stock features in his own novel, but again undermined the traditional messages these stories sought to convey. Dorian's portrait does not reform him, as was the usual case; indeed, it only makes him vain, as his motivation to do good stems from his desire to make the portrait less ugly. In this way, Wilde questioned the sincerity of repenting, and the value of morality as opposed to beauty. He also reversed the romanticised image orphans had in Victorian literature. Early in the story it is established that Dorian is an orphan who has suffered from a difficult childhood, but the resemblance stops there. Dorian has every chance of succeeding in life because of his social position and wealth, but the young

man soon sinks into a life of sin, which undermines the Victorian idea of self-help and upward mobility. The most daring resemblance, however, was probably to Stevenson's *JH*. Although Stevenson criticises Victorian England's excessive morality, he still adheres to the strict division between good and evil characters. In this respect, Wilde goes further than Stevenson, by blurring the distinction between good and evil in his novel. Wilde did not only undermine Victorian morality as such, but also as it appeared in works of fiction.

However, Wilde did not only subvert other sources, some of his other works also shed some light on *PDG*, as they elaborate on the function of art and its criticism. The novel itself deals with a portrait that literally becomes a mirror of the soul, thereby supporting the Victorian assumption that art was a reflection of the artist and thus a mode of autobiography. However, Wilde shows that both Basil and Lord Henry also see their own reflection in the painting, which is invisible to others. This seeming paradox in the novel can be solved by its ending, in which the portrait returns to its original state, thus being just a work of art, while Dorian turns from a work of art into an ordinary man. Interestingly, much the same can be said for *PDG*. The novel is a work of art, and Wilde argues in the preface that it is thus merely a mirror; readers project their own personalities, desires and sins onto it. This undermines the role of the Victorian art-critic, whose comments that *PDG* was full of immoral behaviour were now made irrelevant.

Of course, the scope of this thesis dictated that not every aspect of *PDG*'s subversion of Victorian morality could be dealt with. *PDG* has been compared to a few works by, among others, Stevenson and Dickens, but there are many more texts that *PDG* subverts, and which have not been discussed here for practical reasons. Insightful comparisons might be made with *Vivian Grey*, *La Peau de Chagrin* or *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Another notable omission has been a discussion of Dorian's romantic interest, Sybil Vane, and her family. Wilde added much room for these characters to develop in the second version, and it might be interesting to

explore their function in the story. As Eltis noticed in Wilde's plays, female stereotypes are often subverted, especially those of the caring mother and the virtuous young maiden,¹⁶² which might also be true for *PDG*. Furthermore, the last chapter is too brief to deal with *PDG*'s mirroring to the full extent that it deserves, and future research could be done on what the function of the painting is in subverting Victorian morality, and what the novel has to say about art as autobiography.

Nevertheless, it has been established that, with his novel, Wilde created a multi-faceted work that inverts many common Victorian assumptions to see if the opposite could also be argued, and often with greater success. However, *PDG* not only uses intertextuality to subvert morality, as Eltis argued for Wilde's plays, the novel is also an experiment of taking the imagery of the ugly soul literally, thereby exposing the vanity that underlies many good deeds. The novel is modernistic in the sense that it mirrors itself, as it is a work of art that makes a statement about the function of such a work of art. In this way, *PDG* goes further than many of Wilde's plays, as its form is as subversive as its content.

¹⁶² For Wilde's treatment of Mrs Erlynne as a fallen woman and mother, see Eltis 65-66; and for the seduction of a virtuous maiden Eltis 96.

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