

## Catholicism, Decadence, and Dorian Gray

Candidate Number: 371659

Word Count: 5,296

Despite Oscar Wilde's insistence on the separation of aesthetics and spirituality<sup>1</sup> in the famed Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the basic conceit of the novel—a work of art that contains the souls of its creator and its subject—undermines this strict delineation. Indeed, the novel's central image, the portrait of Dorian Gray, crucially inhabits a liminal place between art and life, and the body and the soul. It refuses a symbolic reading that is either purely aesthetic, or purely spiritual. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* likewise defiantly asserts that the dichotomy between aesthetic values and spiritual ethics is irreconcilable, and that the role of art is not to resolve but to embody this impossible dualism.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* traces Dorian's endeavor to “elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles, and find in the *spiritualizing of the senses* its highest realization.”<sup>2</sup> This close association of aesthetics and spirituality, inherited from the philosophies of John Ruskin and Walter Pater, reverberates throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and manifests itself in sensual Catholic imagery, language, and symbolism. These overt and implicit Catholic motifs in the novel are frequently elided into other interpretative discourses, particularly the

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<sup>1</sup>I use the word ‘spirituality’ here, juxtaposed with ‘aesthetics,’ because it encompasses not only the ethical and intellectual aspects of human nature, but also the metaphysical and religious. More commonly, critics refer to the dichotomy of ‘aesthetics/ethics,’ or ‘aesthetics/morality,’ but as Catholicism is a central topic of this paper, it is appropriate to acknowledge the link between religion and ethics, particularly considering Wilde's own emphasis on ‘sin’.

<sup>2</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2003) 126

Gothic.<sup>3</sup> The Gothic and Catholicism are undeniably closely allied forces in the cultural mindset of the *fin de siècle*—as Patrick O’Malley convincingly argues, the Gothic is a significant discursive medium for issues of religious and sexual deviance for nearly a century before the Oxford Movement brought Catholicism from the Continent to England.<sup>4</sup> But *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which Wilde published in 1891, is only tenuously a Gothic text, rendering an interpretation of its Catholic elements in the context of the Gothic unnecessarily twice removed. While the novel certainly alludes to Gothic tropes and language, it is worthwhile to consider Catholicism as an independent force in the context of Decadence.<sup>5</sup>

For Wilde, Catholicism is first and foremost a hybrid religion—it is both Roman and Christian; aesthetic and symbolic; barbaric and enlightened. Moreover, in the wake of the Oxford Movement, Catholicism as an English phenomenon is also both an ancient foreign enemy and a modern domestic threat. Wilde embraces and capitalizes on this hybridity of Catholic imagery in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in keeping with his insistence on interpretive indeterminacy.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Catholicism had acquired new and specific social, ethical, and religious associations, having weathered decades of Evangelical attacks. Indeed, for Decadent writers—like Wilde, and Huysmans

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<sup>3</sup> Knight, Mark. Rev. of *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture* by Patrick R. O’Malley. *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Autumn, 2007) 98

<sup>4</sup> O’Malley, Patrick, *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 3

<sup>5</sup> Ellis Hanson’s *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) is a *tour-de-force* of analysis of eroticism, aestheticism and Decadent Catholicism. I consulted it throughout my research of this topic.

before him—embracing Catholicism during the *fin de siècle* was the equivalent of rallying behind a banner of nonconformity, a statement of rejection of mainstream morality.<sup>6</sup> They envisioned Catholicism as a decaying but glamorous relic, which lent legitimacy to their own Decadent cultivation of images of aristocratic decline. The fact that a whiff of stigma hung around Catholicism only made it more alluring and fashionable to these Decadents, who were as attracted to its old-world heritage, as to its contemporary associations with perversion and corruption.

The controversy surrounding the resurgence of Catholicism in England came to a head in December of 1863, when Charles Kingsley published a scathing denunciation of ‘Romanism’, directed at John Henry Newman, the former vicar of the Oxford University church who had famously converted to Catholicism in 1845.<sup>7</sup> Kingsley’s *ad hominem* attack not only accused Newman of religious hypocrisy and deceit, but also made aggressive insinuations about the motivations behind his conversion and celibacy, implying that Catholicism provided a screen for his inappropriate influence over vulnerable young male students.<sup>8</sup> As Patrick O’Malley keenly observes, Newman’s articulate defense of his conversion to Catholicism, *Apologia pro vita sua*,<sup>9</sup> is rather telling in how it deals with these implications of sexual impropriety. Rather than disputing his influence over his students, Newman specifically clarifies the ages of these men, denying that they were “hot headed fanatic young men,” but rather “past

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<sup>6</sup> O’Malley 189

<sup>7</sup> Chadwick, Owen, *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement: Tractarian Essays* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1995) 105

<sup>8</sup> O’Malley 83

<sup>9</sup> Newman, John Henry, *Apologia pro vita sua* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864)

forty...forty-six...forty-three; and most of the others were on one side or other of thirty. Three, I think, were under twenty-five.”<sup>10</sup> His strenuous clarification of the ages of his students reads rather like a case of protesting too much—even as it repudiates Kingsley’s overt accusation, it acknowledges the subtext of a broader accusation of pederastic influence.<sup>11</sup>

Wilde makes liberal use of the sexual implications of the ‘influence’ of an older man on a younger man in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Indeed, like Wilde, Lord Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward are both Oxford-educated, which overtly places their influence over Dorian Gray in the context of the controversial pederastic relationship of teacher and student. Moreover, a case can also be made for a sexual innuendo in the etymology of the word ‘influence,’ which literally refers to the flowing of fluids,<sup>12</sup> lending particular significance to Lord Henry’s claim that “There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr Gray. All influence is immoral.”<sup>13</sup>

This perceived entanglement of the spiritual and the erotic is also at the heart of nineteenth century Evangelical attacks on Catholic dogma. Anti-Catholic rhetoric focused on the seemingly fluid boundary between the body and the soul, and, on this score, roundly attacked the doctrine of Transubstantiation. The symbolic implications of Transubstantiation—the conversion of the Eucharist into the literal body and blood of Christ without

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<sup>10</sup> O’Malley 87

<sup>11</sup> O’Malley 87

<sup>12</sup> “influence, n.”, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press. March 2012)

<sup>13</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 20

any visible change to its physical elements—were denounced as barbaric and heretic, as well as homoerotic, and even vampiric.<sup>14</sup>

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde wholeheartedly embraces and appropriates the tangled symbolism of Catholic dogma and ritual, reveling in the macabre and erotic implications of synthesizing the spirit and the senses. Indeed, Transubstantiation provides the symbolic and linguistic framework for Wilde's exploration of the elusive and ambiguous relationship between the body and soul. The central event in the novel—when, in answer to Dorian's prayer, the portrait becomes the embodiment of his soul while his body remains unchanged—is an aesthetic reenactment of Transubstantiation, in which the Eucharistic elements are substituted for a work of art.

Moreover, Dorian finds himself drawn to Catholicism precisely because of the ambiguity of Transubstantiation:

Certainly the Roman ritual had always a great attraction for him. The daily sacrifice, more awful really than all the sacrifices of the antique world, stirred him as much by its superb rejection of the evidence of the senses as by the primitive simplicity of its elements and the eternal pathos of the human tragedy that it sought to symbolize.<sup>15</sup>

Crucially, Wilde deliberately emphasizes that Catholicism is “Roman”, like the anti-Catholic rhetoric of Evangelical tracts, placing it within a Classical as well as a Christian context. And indeed, Catholicism figures in the novel as a synthesis of Hellenism and Hebraism, the two competing ideologies of

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<sup>14</sup> O'Malley 133

<sup>15</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 128

aesthetics and spirituality put forth by the famed Victorian critic, Matthew Arnold.<sup>16</sup> According to Arnold:

The final aim of both Hellenism and Hebraism, as of all great spiritual disciplines, is no doubt the same: man's perfection or salvation... Still, they pursue this aim by very different courses. The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience.<sup>17</sup>

The Hellenistic ideal—to see things as they are—consists of harmony between the body and soul in which the physical form reflects the nobility of spirit.

Greek artistic representation of gods as physically superlative human forms illustrates this conceptualization of the body as the expression of inner perfection and strength. In contrast, the Hebraic ideal—which emphasizes conduct and obedience—requires the subordination of the body and its senses to the soul. Fittingly, as Wilde points out in *Salome*, “The Jews worship a God that one cannot see.”<sup>18</sup> Since the Hebraic conception of perfection is based in the spirit's domination of the body, God, as representative of perfection, is formless and inapprehensible by the senses.

As Ellis Hanson keenly observes, Wilde was contemplating the relationship between the body and soul in the context of art as early as his undergraduate days, when he copied the following Hegel quotation into an Oxford notebook: “The sensuous and the spiritual which struggle as opposites in the common understanding are revealed in the truth expressed by art.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Arnold, Matthew, *Culture and Anarchy: an essay in political and social criticism* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1869) 143-4

<sup>17</sup> Arnold 145

<sup>18</sup> Wilde, Oscar, “Salome”, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 66

<sup>19</sup> Hanson 238

Considering the influence of Walter Pater on Wilde's early studies of aesthetics, Renaissance art informed many of Wilde's associations with Catholicism and its own artistic expressions of the sensuous and the spiritual. And indeed, despite Arnold's claim that Christianity is a pure offshoot of Hebraism, Catholicism actually incorporates both ideologies of man's "perfection or salvation". This hybridity is most clearly represented by the central aesthetic iconography of Catholicism—the Passion of Christ—which simultaneously celebrates the body of Christ, while denigrating it and sacrificing it to the soul.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that the crucial difference between Greek and Christian art is that, while the subject of each is "male flesh," the aim of Greek art is "unphobic enjoyment," whereas Christian art tries to "surround its attractiveness with an aura of maximum anxiety and prohibition."<sup>20</sup> This is certainly true of the image of the Passion of Christ, a bloody scene of torture, murder, rendered as phobic and prohibitive art. This interpretation of the 'Passion' is explored by the classicist Amy Richlin, who points out that the word from which 'passion' derives—the Latin '*patior*', to suffer—is a deponent verb, which is active in meaning but passive in construction.<sup>21</sup> It thereby idiosyncratically denotes active passivity—(in fact, it is also the root of the word 'passive')—or intentional suffering. In its original Latin context, *patior* was used meaning "undergo" or "suffer force" and even "be raped," and was

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<sup>20</sup> Smith, Andrew, quot. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Victorian Demons* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) 159

<sup>21</sup> Richlin, Amy, "Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus* and the Roman Law against Love between Men", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Apr., 1993) 531

frequently the word used to describe male-male sexual activity.<sup>22</sup> It is also the cognate of the Greek *'pathos'*. This meaning of 'passion' at the very least etymologically suggests a correlation between homoeroticism and the spiritual triumph of the Passion of Christ, as each involves the willing penetration of the body. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this duality of 'passion' is crucial, as it invites a reading of homoeroticism that is exalting, rather than perverse. Through the character of Dorian Gray, who both inspires and indulges passions of both kinds, Wilde plays on the idea of 'passion' as a bridge between Classical homoerotic aesthetics and Christian spiritual ethics.

Indeed, Dorian Gray is introduced in the novel as the potential for the embodiment of both Hellenistic and Hebraic ideals of body and spirit—a Christ-like figure who, according to Basil Hallward, was “made to be worshipped.”<sup>23</sup> Basil’s own ‘worship’ of Dorian is simultaneously erotic and aesthetic:

Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body – how much that is!<sup>24</sup>

This ‘fresh school’ is ostensibly an aesthetic philosophy, but as Robert Mighall puts it, “the aesthetic bears the burden of (or provides a mask for) the erotic.”<sup>25</sup>

Dorian, according to Basil, embodies both Christian “passion”—violent, dominated emotion—and Greek “perfection”—integration of body and spirit.

This language Basil uses to describe Dorian is strikingly similar to Wilde’s

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<sup>22</sup> Richlin 531

<sup>23</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 111

<sup>24</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *Dorian Gray* 13

<sup>25</sup> Mighall, Robert, “Introduction” *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2003)

description of Christ in *De Profundis*, written in the depths of his own degradation and despair: “we can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfection which forms the real distinction between the classical and romantic movement in life.”<sup>26</sup>

Crucially, the unity that Dorian represents of untarnished spirit and extraordinary beauty is achieved “unconsciously.” Dorian’s lack of self-awareness is what enables him to be natural and pure: self-awareness, by Cartesian logic, splits the self into subject and object, thus destroying its unity, and replacing it with a double. Ironically, it is Basil’s own portrait of his effortless muse that occasions Dorian’s first experience of self-awareness—with some prodding by the proverbial snake in the grass, Lord Henry Wotton—which sets into motion the disastrous events of the novel.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, not unlike Genesis Chapter 3, opens on an artist’s studio with a lush, blossoming garden. The metaphor of God as artist is compounded by the presence of Lord Henry Wotton, cast opposite Basil Hallward as Satan. Indeed, in this opening scene, Wilde plays with the ambiguously Olympian and Biblical image of the two complementary but opposing forces, Creator and Destroyer, discussing the work of art that is Man. (Incidentally, as Lord Henry is also called ‘Harry’ in the novel, it bears noting that the name ‘Lord Harry’ is a familiar English term for the Devil.<sup>27</sup> Wilde clearly enjoys the neatness of name-games: it is no surprise that ‘Dorian Gray’ connotes Greek architecture, and the mixture of lightness and darkness.) At this point, Lord Henry, breathing out “thin blue wreaths of smoke that curled

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<sup>26</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *De Profundis* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1909) 65

<sup>27</sup> "Harry, n.2". *OED Online*. (Oxford University Press: March 2012.)

up in such fanciful whorls from his heavy opium-tainted cigarette,” teases out a fateful confession from Basil: “I really can’t exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it.”<sup>28</sup>

This idea that the artist puts his own soul into his creation directly parallels the theological concept of the *imago dei*, that God made man in his own image, investing him with the divine spirit.<sup>29</sup> By imbuing the painting with his own soul, Basil becomes at least partially responsible for the supernatural transformation that takes place later in the novel. The piece of artist’s soul inside the painting may even explain why Dorian is unable to distinguish between art and life when he sees himself so vividly alive in it—the painting is already alive before Dorian’s fateful Faustian pact. Indeed, by invoking the notion of the *imago dei* here, Wilde cheekily (and perhaps with some reference to Milton) implies that Man’s Fall into Original Sin is the unavoidable casualty of being endowed with God’s spirit, and therefore possessing curiosity and the tendency toward hubris. Moreover, in terms of aesthetics, this issue echoes significant issues explored in the Preface about the ethical responsibility of the artist in creating art of any kind.

In response to Basil’s confession—and that it is, indeed, a ‘confession’ is highly significant—Lord Henry laughs, and chides him: “Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus.”<sup>30</sup> This is the first time that Dorian Gray is mentioned by any name in the novel, since Basil has been keeping his true identity a secret, and it immediately initiates the recurring motif of names figuratively mapping the

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<sup>28</sup> Wilde, Oscar *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 6

<sup>29</sup> Gen 1:27–28; Gen 5:1–3; Gen 9:6

<sup>30</sup> Wilde, Oscar *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 6

ways that true identity is withheld, veiled, discovered and confessed. Indeed, it is entirely appropriate that in the artist's Garden of Eden, the creation is not Adam or Eve, but rather, Narcissus—implying that the Original Sin of the aesthete is the inordinate desire for beauty, rather than the desire for knowledge.

Narcissus, in Ovid's version of the myth, is a demi-god of extraordinary beauty, who falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water, and pines away and possibly commits suicide.<sup>31</sup> His fate effectively warns of the danger of a break in the harmony between the inner and outer self—Narcissus' desire for his own reflection simultaneously reveals his inability to recognize the difference between art and life, and also constitutes a fissure between his body and his soul. When Dorian first sees his portrait, the unity of his innocent and child-like nature is similarly ruptured:

When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time.<sup>32</sup>

Dorian's self-awareness effectively splits the 'harmony of body and soul' that he had 'unconsciously' represented to Basil.

Crucially, the break in his body and soul causes him pleasure in the contemplation of his own beauty. Indeed, another prevailing version of the myth of Narcissus reinforces this complex interplay of narcissism and auto-eroticism: the Greek writer Pausanias reinterprets Ovid's story, suggesting that Narcissus actually mistook his own reflection in the pool of water for his twin

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<sup>31</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Hugo Magnus. (Gotha: Friedr. Andr. Perthes. 1892) l.435-434

<sup>32</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 27

sister.<sup>33</sup> In each version, the crucial detail is that narcissism effectively fragments the self, and turns it inward. But Pausanias' account, in providing a heterosexual albeit incestuous explanation for Narcissus' predicament, underscores the degree to which this doubling creates selves which are 'Other' to one another. Indeed, Dorian's awakening of self-consciousness is quite unlike that of Adam and Eve—he experiences pleasure, rather than shame, in the contemplation of his own body. His self-awareness is a narcissistic experience of self-love, in which he is both Adam and Eve (or Narcissus and his twin sister), locked together in solipsistic, shameless adoration.

The homosexual implications of Narcissus' attraction to himself are literalized by the indistinguishability of Dorian from his portrait. Indeed, from the moment that Dorian falls in love with his image, and makes the Faustian trade of his soul for eternal youth, Wilde plays with the idea of Dorian's affinity for the portrait as a form of homoerotic self-love. In a touch of uncharacteristic prurience and bitterness, Basil tells Dorian: "Well, as soon as you are dry, you shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home. Then you can do what you like with yourself."<sup>34</sup> And in fact, Dorian does take the portrait home to continue his love affair with himself:

Once, in boyish mockery of Narcissus, he had kissed, or feigned to kiss, those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him. Morning after morning he had sat before the portrait wondering at its beauty, almost enamoured of it, as it seemed to him at times.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. W.H.S. Jones, Litt.D., and H.A. Ormerod, M.A., in 4 Volumes. (London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1918.) 31.7

<sup>34</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 29

<sup>35</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

But as the portrait registers the decay of Dorian's soul, and becomes monstrous and grotesque, Dorian's narcissistic erotic love for it shifts markedly in tone. Lest anyone see it, he hides the portrait in an attic room, conceals it under a sheet, fits the door with bars and carries the key with him so that no one but he can access it. This conspicuously Gothic trope of the veiled secret and the panic of exposure, as Sedgwick interprets it, invites a reading of Dorian 'in the closet', living a double life that becomes increasingly isolating, as he stops spending time away from London in order to be nearer to the portrait.<sup>36</sup> But now, Dorian's love affair with the painting has changed—as it becomes ugly, he revels in its abjection, and derives pleasure from fixating on its degeneration:

He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs.

O'Malley shrewdly observes that Dorian's sadistic mocking of the grotesque body of the portrait is indistinguishable from masochism, since Dorian is actually taking pleasure in the denigration of his own image.<sup>37</sup> This association of narcissism, masochism, and homosexuality is rooted in the *fin de siècle* psychological discourse, in which all were considered sexual 'deviations' arising from a split between the body and the soul.<sup>38</sup> Wilde draws attention to the unnaturalness, not of homoeroticism, but of the guilt that conventional morality imposes on such romance, which produces masochistic self-

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<sup>36</sup> Sedgwick 165

<sup>37</sup> O'Malley 182

<sup>38</sup> O'Malley 183

destructive impulses. In this way, he prefigures Havelock Ellis' case study of John Addington Symmonds in *Sexual Inversion* (1897), in which Ellis concludes:

A believes firmly that his homosexual appetite was inborn... He has no moral sense of doing wrong, and is quite certain that he suffers or benefits in health of mind and body according as he abstains from or indulges in moderate homosexual pleasure. He feels the intolerable injustice of his social position.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, it is not particularly revelatory to suggest that Dorian's relationship to his portrait in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a veiled manifestation of homoerotic impulses—after all, the novel was submitted as evidence in Wilde's trial against the Marquess of Queensberry. But it is important to recognize how the portrait also functions as a Christian, and specifically Catholic, symbol of the twisted art of the mortified male body. Dorian's descent into narcissism and the stress of a double life only increases his interest in the Catholic Church, which supports the idea that the more he indulges his masochistic impulses, the more he identifies with Christ. He even considers becoming a priest in the pivotal eleventh chapter, under the influence of the 'Yellow book'. Critics tend to write off the passages about Dorian's (and Wilde's) interest in the Church as merely dandiacal fetishization of Catholic rituals and costumes.<sup>40</sup> But in fact, they reveal a crucial association between Dorian's homoerotic, masochistic, and Catholic affinities:

He had a special passion, also, for ecclesiastical vestments, as indeed he had for everything connected with the service of the Church. In the long cedar chests that lined the west gallery of

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<sup>39</sup> Ellis, Havelock "Case XVIII", *The Fin de Siècle*, eds. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

<sup>40</sup> These critics include Joyce Carol Oates and Eve K. Sedgwick; see works cited.

his house he had stored away many rare and beautiful specimens of what is really the raiment of the Bride of Christ, who must wear purple and jewels and fine linen that she may hide the pallid macerated body that is worn by the suffering that she seeks for, and wounded by self-inflicted pain. [...] In the mystic offices to which such things were put, there was something that quickened his imagination.<sup>41</sup>

Dorian's desire to join the priesthood is illuminated by his "special passion" for these "rare and beautiful" robes—he envisions them as wedding clothes in the priest's homoerotic marriage to Christ. The sexual tone is hammered home by the switch in the gender of the pronouns, which renders the priest—and Dorian, in his fantasy—feminized by his relation to Christ. Dorian also projects his own narcissistic/masochistic auto-erotic/homoerotic sexuality onto this marriage of Christ and priest: the priest experiences his/"her" union with Christ through self-inflicted pain, hidden beneath a lavish and beautiful exterior. Extraordinarily, Dorian's image of the priest and Christ as sharing the same body (an image reinforced by the Eucharist) also echoes Pausanias' Narcissus, whose reflection becomes feminized in an entangled spiritual, heterosexual, homosexual, and auto-sexual union. By this formulation, moreover, Dorian's desire to join the priesthood also implies a desire to marry Christ (along with the myriad of implications *that* entails).

The trope of Dorian's identification with Christ reaches its climax at the end of the novel, as Dorian decides to make amends and steer his life back onto a moral path.

Better for him that each sin of his life had brought its sure, swift penalty along with it. There was purification in

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<sup>41</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 134

punishment. Not “Forgive us our sins” but “Smite us for our iniquities” should be prayer of man to a most just God.<sup>42</sup>

Dorian’s tragic failure in his desire to be purified by punishment is the externalization, once more, of morality outside of himself. In wishing for God to punish him and purify him, he fails once more to grasp that the true symbolic strength of Christ’s Passion is the active nature of his passivity—not only his willingness to die, but the self-inflicted selflessness of the sacrifice. For this reason, when Dorian rushes to see the positive changes in the portrait after his petty moral triumph in denying himself the corruption of Hetty Merton (a sacrifice that the reader cannot imagine Dorian agonized over too much, given his predilection for young men), he is sorely disappointed: “He could see no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite.”<sup>43</sup>

Crucially, Wilde makes a clear distinction here between living a double life and living the life of a hypocrite. Living a double life is an unfortunate consequence of social restriction, in which both lives being led are experienced as natural. Hypocrisy, on the other hand, is a lie and a betrayal not only to society, but also to oneself. As Dorian, confronted by Basil about the nature of his secret life, fumes: “And what sort of lives do these people, who pose as being moral, lead themselves? My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite.”<sup>44</sup> Robert Mighall points to the fact that Wilde himself was living a double life by 1890—he had been married for six years, was devoted to his two sons, and moved in fashionable circles; but he had begun to indulge

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<sup>42</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 210

<sup>43</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 211

<sup>44</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 145

in activities that he was compelled to keep secret.<sup>45</sup> Wilde's revisions to the 1891 version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which he removed the overt physical contact between the male characters, testify to his poignant awareness of the distinction between a double life and hypocrisy: though he was willing to obscure and muddy the deviant subtext of the novel, he was unwilling to remove it altogether. Moreover, his performance in his defense (technically his prosecution) against the Marquess of Queensberry was similarly a feat of tenacity to adhere to his own moral code even at his own expense.

For Dorian, the sight of the hypocrite's sneer in the portrait is ultimately unbearable—for all his willingness to mock his own soul, the sight of his soul mocking him is too much. Foucault's theory of confession as self-subjection—in which the confessor loses power by telling the truth about himself—illuminates Dorian's final conundrum.<sup>46</sup> The picture has been his conscience, and his pleasure in watching it corrupt has been a form of confession and truth-telling. After all, "it is the confession, not the priest, that gives us absolution."<sup>47</sup> Having confessed all his sins to the portrait, Dorian is now faced with a monster of his own creation, which has borne witness to all his crimes, and now holds all the power over him. Moreover, Dorian's hypocrisy blinds him to the fact that the portrait is part of him—he has lost himself, and now only desires to be free from his conscience, rather than shackled to it. The portrait, as a work of art, is incapable of hypocrisy—"it is the spectator, not life, that art really mirrors."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Mighall xi

<sup>46</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality* Vol. 3, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 63

<sup>47</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 94

<sup>48</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 4

As the object of undeserved violent outrage, the work of art becomes a martyr. Like Christ, the portrait bears the burdens of sins that it did not commit—Art, Wilde insists, is incapable of evil. And indeed, the signs of Dorian's degeneration, previously rendered in terms of age and ugliness, now manifest as another kind of stigmata<sup>49</sup>—that of Christ.

And why was the red stain larger than it had been? It seemed to have crept like a horrible disease over the wrinkled fingers. There was blood on the painted feet, as though the thing had dripped—blood even on the hand that had not held the knife.<sup>50</sup>

The work of art becomes the Passion of the Christ, in which the blood from Basil's murder covers his hands and feet. As Dorian lunges at the painting with the knife, he crucially administers the final stab wound of the centurion. In stabbing the painting, Dorian simultaneously commits murder and suicide—he means to act as Pilate, proverbially washing his hands of this gruesome Christ-figure, but actually kills himself instead. The significance of the stab-wound is furthermore the pinnacle of Dorian's auto-erotic desires—self-penetration consummates his narcissistic relationship with his own image in a decisively 'Passionate' mix of activity and passivity, sadism and masochism, murder and suicide.

Ultimately, after Dorian's death reinstates the distinction between art and life and reunites Dorian's body with his soul. The painting, which, like Christ, was subjected to hostility, mockery and finally crucified, is resurrected in perfect beauty. It is difficult not to read the end of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* self-referentially, as the final image of the novel is of the eponymous picture re-

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<sup>49</sup> Notably, Max Nordau will refer to the signs of degeneration as 'stigmata' in *Degeneration* (1895)

<sup>50</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 211

born, washed clean, and untainted by the man to whom it was once so vitally attached. The novel's powerful embodiment of the dichotomies of art and life, body and soul, surface and symbol is only heightened by the despicable use to which it was put in Wilde's own sodomy trial, in which it mutely neither confirmed nor denied the claims for which Wilde himself was ultimately martyred. The novel's contextualization of Dorian's sins in the context of the wider discourse of the body and soul renders it an abstract story of the dangers of repressive morality and intolerance—aesthetic, religious, and sexual. The picture of Dorian Gray—like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—is ultimately a martyr, crucified on behalf of all those behind veils, in attics, or in closets.

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