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The Picture of Dorian Gray

OSCAR WILDE

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

Oscar Wilde

Introduction and Notes by
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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

Both Oscar Wilde and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* cast long shadows. Readers frequently come to the novel intrigued and forewarned about Wilde – with knowledge of his wit, say, or of some scandal attaching to his life, perhaps of what is now freely labelled his homosexuality – or they may come to it possessed of the central premise of the plot – something about a devil's bargain, a man who sells his soul to remain forever young, while a picture of him turns old and hideous. Some readers may also begin the novel with a notion that the hero's story somehow represents a prefiguring in fiction of important features of Wilde's own experience, reading for both kinds of reputation at once. An introduction to *Dorian Gray* can do little more than clarify, comment and expand on such half truths, setting the life and the work into an appropriate narrative and offering a set of facts and observations: yet it

should also be possible to indicate in the process some of the novel's superb ironies and complexities, and some of the feats of personal and artistic daring by means of which Wilde propounds his brilliant conundrum.

Before Dorian

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854, to parents who were both prominent citizens. In her youth, Wilde's mother had achieved a transatlantic reputation as the author of inspiring nationalistic poetry, published under the *nom de plume* 'Speranza'. Wilde's father, William, knighted by the British queen in 1864, was a medical specialist in complaints of the eye and ear, who, although a staunch Protestant, showed his nationalism in collecting and preparing for print tales of Irish folklore. Their household in Merrion Square was a respected focal point for culture in Dublin society – but also for rumours and slander, when, in 1864, Lady Wilde found herself in court to defend herself against libel charges brought by a female patient of her husband's, who had been hinting publicly that he had drugged and raped her two years before. Knowledge of this doubtful case, and of the genuine cover-up associated with Sir William's fathering and maintaining of three illegitimate children, seems to have filtered through to Wilde and given him an insight into the tensions and contradictions of 'good' society: perhaps also prompting his lasting artistic interest in the themes of mysterious birth and the ruin of reputations, as his biographer speculates (Ellmann, p. 13).

Wilde attended public school at Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, and gained undergraduate degrees in classics at Dublin's Trinity College and Oxford's Magdalen College. As a student, he showed promise not simply as a linguist, but as a witty exponent of the ideas and philosophy of life which he found in the writings of the ancients. These he combined with his own admiring response to modern critics and writers such as Ruskin, Pater and Swinburne and (initially) members of the 'Pre-Raphaelite' movement in English painting and decorative art. At Oxford, Wilde assumed, as if by divine appointment, the character of dandy and poseur, capable of disarming critics with an epigram or charming them into one-sided conversation. As leader of Oxford's young 'Aesthetes', his pronouncements ('I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china') were mocked and marvelled at in equal measure, first in Oxford, and then in the national press. When challenged about his ambitions in life, Wilde replied prophetically: 'I'll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I'll be famous, and if not famous, I'll be notorious.' The recollections of Oxford contemporaries have, however, posthumously established a more 'earnest'

persona, a Wilde troubled by spiritual matters and seeking a safe haven for his soul.[1] In 1877, a vacation tour of Italy and an audience with Pope Pius IX led friends to anticipate his conversion from the Protestant to the Roman Catholic Church, but it was a conversion postponed (to the last few days of Wilde's life, as it turned out) by an unexpected invitation to visit Greece with his former Trinity tutor, the Revd J. P. Mahaffy. Wilde's later remark of Dorian Gray, that 'he never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system' (p. 106), parallels but oversimplifies his own love affair with the church of St Peter. The visit to Greece confirmed in Wilde a new Hellenism – an appreciation of the Greek outlook and intellectual stance, of the Platonic formula connecting friendship, (same-sex) love, and beauty[2] – which, in different ways, was informing the writings of Ruskin and Pater on art and the Renaissance in modern Europe. It was with talk of the 'perfection of spirit that is Greek' and 'the Hellenic ideal' that Wilde would later begin *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Success, in the shape of an Oxford double first in classical literature and philosophy, and the award of the coveted Newdigate Prize for his poem 'Ravenna' (a mosaic of allusions to the city's colourful past) propelled Wilde towards London in 1878, where, given a disappointingly small inheritance following the death of his father in 1876, it was clear he would have to work for a living. In the decade between his first appearance on the London scene and his writing of *Dorian Gray*, he chanced his hand at a variety of traditional forms and modes of address – poetry, drama, public lectures, essays and reviews, short stories – but consistently and daringly based his claim for a space in the literary marketplace on stylish provocation of his customers. Thanks to burlesques of his unconventional dress and opinions in the press and theatre productions such as Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* (April 1881), his reputation preceded him even before his first work, a book of poems, was published.[3] Though openly sensual in a manner reminiscent of Keats and Swinburne (the erotic poem 'Charmides' even included a lingering description of necrophilia) and ambivalent in its use of Christian iconography, Wilde's verse

1 See Mikhail, Vol. 1, pp. 5–15. For details of this and other publications referred to, see Further Reading at the end of this Introduction.

2 The key text for Wilde was Plato's *Symposium*, in particular the views of Pausanias about the potential nobility of Uranian love between men (cf. Sections 181a–185c, 208e–210e; trans. Jowett, 1871); Wilde's knowledge of the *Symposium* is attested in *Letters*, pp. 702, 1019.

3 Gilbert's Bunthorne, 'the fleshly poet', was clearly a caricature of Wilde, the first of many in turn-of-the-century English literature and drama.

in *Poems* (1881) was skilful and at times innovative.[4] Yet its reception by critics anticipated the exaggerated hostility with which *Dorian Gray* would later be greeted. The copy of *Poems* which he inscribed to the library of the Oxford Union, at the request of its secretary, was ignominiously rejected by the society on grounds of 'immorality' and 'plagiarism', and returned to the donor.

With the proceeds of an exhaustive and at times controversial lecture tour of the United States in 1882,[5] Wilde treated himself to a memorable five-month residence in Paris, during which he met and conversed with leading exponents of the Decadent and Impressionist movements, such as Edmond de Goncourt, Verlaine, Maurice Rollinat, Degas and the Pissarros. Their anti-naturalism and ingenious interconnecting of art with perverse desires fascinated him, but as yet he had not hit upon a suitable form in which he could explore his fascination. Instead, he continued work on two relatively lifeless stage dramas, one of which, *Vera, or The Nihilists*, he finally saw produced in New York in 1883. On his return to London, still without a fixed income and approaching his thirtieth year, Wilde married a well-off heiress, Constance Lloyd, by whom he had two sons. Turning to journalism in 1885 to support his extravagant lifestyle, he contributed a series of miscellaneous reviews and essays to the *Pall Mall Gazette* and other periodicals, before taking on the salaried editorship of the fashionable magazine *Woman's World* (1887–9).

Wilde's first experiments with fiction – the enigmatic, anti-realist fairy-stories collected in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) – coincided, as various critics and biographers have noted, with the period immediately following his 'seduction' by young Canadian Robbie Ross in 1886, and hence with Wilde's first experiments in practising the Uranian ideal: 'Homosexuality fired his mind,' his biographer comments, as though Wilde's first active experiences of a love which his philosophy sanctioned, but which his society and church forbade, stimulated his creative faculty. Wilde's experience of living a double or multiple life in order alternately to hide and indicate his secret is frequently felt to underwrite directly Wilde's presentation of Dorian's secret life in the story he began writing down perhaps as early June 1889 (p. 139). As one of his new characters argues, 'there are certain temperaments that

4 See Anne Varty's introduction to *The Collected Poems of Oscar Wilde*, Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1998.

5 Wilde spoke widely on Aesthetic subjects such as 'The English Renaissance', 'Decorative Art' and 'The House Beautiful', and although the press reception was often hostile, Wilde persevered and afterwards boasted that he had 'civilised America' (Ellmann, p. 195).

marriage makes more complex... They are forced to have more than one life' (p. 61). The complexity of these issues is also explored fully in Wilde's challenging tale of July 1889, 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.', in which a trio of aesthetically inclined men debate the theory that Shakespeare's sonnets were love letters written to a beautiful boy actor called Willie Hughes.[6]

The Writing and Reception of Dorian Gray

The idea to which Wilde gave literary form in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was one which had occurred to him some years before he considered making a long story of it, and one which he would tell – perhaps as a cautionary tale, perhaps as a riddle – to young male admirers.[7] In later life, Wilde liked to pretend that he wrote down his version of the story 'in a few days' and that, like his plays, it was 'the result of a wager', but research has demonstrated the painstaking care and attention to detail which he bestowed upon it, through several comprehensive rewrites.[8] Prompted by a request from J. M. Stoddart (a representative of the American publisher, Lippincott) in December 1889, Wilde first completed a manuscript version of the tale on which he had been working, then corrected it while making a fair copy, from which in turn a typescript was prepared, which Wilde then corrected and forwarded to Stoddart. The latter made corrections himself to the typescript before the novel was published, complete, in the issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* for July 1890.[9] The text had therefore passed through several versions before its first publication, but Wilde was still dissatisfied. A month before its magazine appearance, he wrote to an unidentified publisher asking if he would like to 'publish it, with two new chapters, as a novel... I think it will make a sensation'.[10]

Sensation was perhaps too weak a word. Wilde's plans for minor expansion were overtaken by an extraordinary furore in the British press over the *Lippincott's* version, led by newspaper and magazine reviewers whose knee-jerk reactions of outrage and condemnation may well strike modern readers as bordering on hysteria. The *St James's Gazette*, for example, announced on 24 June that 'not being curious in ordure, and

6 *Blackwood's Magazine*, 146 (July 1889), pp. 1–21; see Note 7 for an example of how Wilde focuses on paintings of young men of great personal beauty as starting points for debate both in this essay and in *Dorian Gray*.

7 W. B. Maxwell, *Time Gathered*, p. 97

8 André Gide, *Oscar Wilde*, 1951, p. 29n.

9 XLVI, No. 71 (July 1890), pp. 3–100, issued on 20 June

10 *Letters*, p. 425

not wishing to offend the nostrils of decent persons, we do not propose to analyse *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'. Instead, the anonymous reviewer[11] proceeded to insult the author, who 'airs his cheap research like any drivelling pedant, and . . . bores you unmercifully with his prosy rigmaroles about the beauty of the Body and the corruption of the Soul'. Though the premise of the novel could have provided other writers with material for good writing 'it has been reserved for Mr Oscar Wilde to make it dull and nasty'. Such novels, the reviewer opines, draw their root from 'malodorous putrefaction' and ought to be 'chucked on the fire', not so much because they

> are dangerous and corrupt (they are corrupt but not dangerous) as because they are uncurably silly, written by simpleton *poseurs* (whether they call themselves Puritan or Pagan) who know nothing about . . . life . . . and because they are merely catchpenny revelations of the non-existent . . . revelations only of the singularly unpleasant minds from which they emerge. [repr. in Beckson, pp. 68–71]

Such an unpleasant critique, with its hinting at scatological obscenities in the novel and its unmistakable animosity, forced Wilde to write in protest to the editor of the *Gazette* that 'your [critic's] article contains the most unjustifiable attack that has been made upon any man of letters for many years', and to take issue politely with the reviewer's 'critical method'. A series of defensive letters from Wilde and offensive editorial notes were published in the *Gazette*, but other papers soon joined the fray. On 30 June, the *Daily Chronicle* reviewer introduced the novel as

> a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents* – a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction – a gloating study of . . . mental and physical corruption . . . which might be horrible and fascinating but for its effeminate frivolity, its studied insincerity, its theatrical cynicism, its tawdry philosophisings, and the contaminating trail of garish vulgarity which is over all Mr Wilde's elaborate Wardour Street aestheticism and obtrusively cheap scholarship. [Beckson, p. 72]

A few days later, a notice in the *Scots Observer* rhetorically demanded, 'Why go grubbing in muck-heaps?' and, while noting that *Dorian Gray* was 'ingenious, interesting, and full of cleverness', declared it 'false art . . . false to human nature . . . false to morality' (repr. Beckson, p. 75).

11 Samuel Henry Jeyes (1857–1911)

To understand such reactions, it is worth observing that press attitudes to the novel and its portrayal of male passions were probably prejudiced by the so-called 'Cleveland Street Affair' in the early months of 1890. This scandal, involving the trials of telegraph boys employed in a Cleveland Street brothel, allegations that members of the aristocracy and royal family were patrons and that Lord Salisbury's government was involved in a cover-up, reached a high point in January 1890 with the successful conviction of a newspaper editor for a libel on Lord Arthur Somerset.[12] Given that homosexual behaviour of any kind was still severely punishable under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, and that the *Lippincott's* version of *Dorian Gray* was relatively frank in its depiction of what Wilde would later call the 'more noble' form of 'Uranian love' (*Letters*, p. 1019), we can at least comprehend why the *Scots Observer* went on to announce that the story dealt 'with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing *in camera*' and that Wilde could 'write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys' (ibid., p. 75).[13]

Wilde's public statements about his novel were understandably skewed towards a defence based on aesthetic principles rather than on a defence of homosexuality *per se*. In face of accusations of obscenity and effeminacy, he could only assert that his accusers' reactions to the unnamed vices in which his hero indulges were reflections of their own corruption and not of the book's. Out of this heated and constrained debate grew Wilde's decision to expand the novel for volume publi-cation well beyond the two extra chapters he had previously proposed. It is this, longer version which forms the basis of the edition you are reading. Six entirely new chapters were added for the volume published by Ward, Lock & Tyler in April 1891 (Chapters 3, 5 and 15 through to 18), dealing principally with the melodramatic efforts of the moody sailor James Vane to avenge himself on Dorian for his callous treatment of his sister, and giving Lord Henry Wotton opportunities to display his dazzling conversational skills at social gatherings. The final chapter of the *Lippincott's* text was divided in two and slightly expanded, giving the current division of the book into twenty chapters.

12 See 'Reviews and Reactions', in Lawler, pp. 329–30&nn.

13 Other early notices and reviews are collected in Beckson, pp. 67–86, and Mason. British and American newspapers of the 1890s did not reserve their condemnation exclusively for 'homoerotic' literature: portraits of transgressive female characters could provoke similar reactions. See W. Archer's catalogue of press abuses of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1891), repr. in G. B. Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), or Sandra Gilbert's collection of hostile reviews of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) in her introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of 1986.

The signed Preface which enigmatically opens this longer version is also an addition, and was first published in the *Fortnightly Review* in March 1891 (pp. 480–1). It gathered together many of the epigrams and aphorisms which Wilde had brought into play in his earlier letters to the press, refashioned into a challenging manifesto of the 'Art for Art's Sake' movement, along the lines of Théophile Gautier's celebrated preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). It was to be a culminating riposte to the newspaper critics. 'Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault,' Wilde chided. Warned by such critics of possible criminal investigation resulting from his writing, Wilde in turn warned them that, 'All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those whose read the symbol do so at their peril.' What this 'peril' is, however, is not specified, for all that Wilde hoped his Preface would 'teach [these wretched journalists] to mend their wicked ways' (*Letters*, p. 475).

There are clear discrepancies between the positions Wilde adopts in this Preface and those taken up in his letters to the press, and between those and the implications of the novel he had written. The most obvious of these is his insistence in the Preface that 'there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book',[14] while in his first letter to the *St James's Gazette* he claims that *Dorian Gray* is in fact 'a story with a moral', namely that 'All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment' (*Letters*, p. 430). Wilde had inscribed this moral into the lives of his three central male characters from the outset (see below), and, as Donald Lawler demonstrates, had been trying to make it less obtrusive and more subordinate to aesthetic considerations through successive revisions even before the *Lippincott's* version appeared.[15] Hence his public admission that the book's 'terrible moral' might be considered 'an artistic error' and one that 'when the book is published in a volume I hope to correct' (*Letters*, pp. 430–1, 435). The further additions made for the 1891 edition can thus be read as the last of a series of corrections designed to suppress the moral so that

> it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself.[16]

14 Preface, p. 3. Lord Henry makes the same point in the novel (p. 172).

15 'Oscar Wilde's First Manuscript of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *Studies in Bibliography*, 25 (1972), pp. 125–35. Lawler looks at later adjustments in 'The Revisions of *Dorian Gray*', *Victorians' Institute Journal*, 3 (1974), pp. 21–36.

16 to the editor of the *Scots Observer*, *Letters*, pp. 430–1; to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, ibid., p. 435

At the same time, however – and particularly where revisions concerned the depiction of the painter Basil Hallward's relationship with Dorian Gray – Wilde's alterations could be read as suppressing not so much the *moral* of the story, but rather its more overt references to idealised love between men: 'muting the homoerotic overtones', as one modern editor puts it.[17] And this is how many of Wilde's contemporaries chose to interpret his revisions to the published text. In 1895, when Wilde was being cross-examined in the libel action he had unwisely brought against his male lover's father, his interrogator Edward Carson was able to refer to words and phrases changed or omitted for the volume edition as matter 'left out of the purged edition'. (Some of the most interesting revisions of this kind are indicated in the Notes.) Yet 'purging' hardly seems the right term for Wilde's last reworking of his novel. The entirely new description of Dorian's visit to East End opium dens and brothels, where, 'with stained mind, and soul hungry for rebellion', he seeks oblivion but encounters instead the wrecks of men and women whom he has corrupted or ruined (Chapter 16) is a phantasmagoria of decadent images and suggestions, hardly calculated to allay the fears of censorious readers. It multiplies and obfuscates the nature of Dorian's sins, rather than cleansing them. In other places, Wilde actually restored *risqué* phrases and words in the volume edition that been cut by J. M. Stoddart in the latter's corrections to the typescript (see Note to p. 115).

The Premise of the Novel

The central premise of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* remains the same, however, whichever version of the text is read, and it is one which requires scrutiny. (If you do not wish to know the end of the novel before you read it, then skip this paragraph.) In the opening scene, a beautiful young man has a wonderfully lifelike portrait painted of him by an artist who has fallen in love with his model. As the painting nears completion, the young man's simple view of life is confused by the words of an onlooker, a clever aesthete, who eloquently urges him to realise his youth fully, and explore every avenue of thought and sensation, even (indeed, particularly) those which society oppressively forbids. The young man accordingly exclaims that he would give his soul if, in return, he might remain forever young and the picture grow old instead. This wish is magically granted, for, as time passes, the young man's beauty remains undiminished, while the picture gradually, and hideously, changes. Sheltered, yet repelled, by this mask, and egged on by the influence of his clever mentor, the hero hides

17 Donald L. Lawler (ed.), *Dorian Gray*, 1988, p. 18on.

the painting and commences a life of sensation and self-expression, profligacy and crime (including the murder of the artist). Eventually his obsession with his secret drives him to destroy the painting in the hope of liberating himself from its visual reminder of past sins. The moment of destruction, however, becomes a moment of self-destruction as the magical relationship between the portrait and the man is tragically reversed, and horrified spectators arrive to discover the painting intact and the hero transformed into an old and wrinkled monster, dead by his own hand.

As Wilde himself admitted, the notion of a 'young man selling his soul in exchange for eternal youth' was 'an idea that is old in the history of literature, but to which I have given a new form'.[18] It has a clear affinity with the Faust story, whether presented as the tragedy of a Renaissance man, as in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (*c.* 1592), or the transfiguration of a Romantic individualist, as in Goethe's *Faust* (1808). The same complaint made about Marlowe's play – that it has a beginning and an inevitable end but no significant action in between – can be levelled at the novel. Powerful parallels can also be found in the literature of Wilde's own day. R. L. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, published in 1886, exploited public fears of scientific advances to touch on exactly what Pater called, in his perceptive review of *Dorian Gray*, 'that very old theme . . . of a double life: of Doppelgänger'.[19] The search for the key to life was the theme of numerous *elixir vitae* novels, such as H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), which had climaxed in a scene where an ageless Egyptian priestess urges her lover to accept the gift of eternal youth, only to be herself transformed into a hideous cadaver thousands of years old. Moreover, strong similarities have been noted between Dorian's dedication and strange martyrdom to the life of the senses, and the fates of Balzac's Lucien de Rubempré, Huysmans's Jean des Esseintes and Pater's Marius, the protagonists respectively of *Illusions perdues* (1837–43), *À Rebours* (1884) and *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). In fact, as one critic has recently complained, the list of possible influences has lengthened until, 'as if in two facing mirrors, the novel and its analogues seem to multiply towards . . . infinity, in a kind of self-perpetuating critical machine'.[20]

18 to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, *Letters*, op. cit., p. 435

19 *The Bookman*, 1891, p. 59, repr. Beckson, pp. 83–6. Pater reviews the 1891 version of *Dorian Gray*.

20 Jerusha McCormack, 'Wilde's Fiction(s)', in Raby (ed.), p. 110

Yet Wilde succeeds brilliantly in imposing a 'new form' and a highly original series of problems on to his universal theme. Notably, he directs the reader's attention away from the miracle by which his protagonist's wish is granted, in order to focus on its consequences. The novel reveals little either about the magical mechanism or the metaphysical implications which the painting's transformation predicates. Dorian does wonder whether or not there might be 'some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms [of the canvas] . . . and the soul that was within him', some 'curious scientific reason', but finally concludes that 'If the picture was to alter, it was to alter . . . Why inquire too closely into it?' (pp. 77, 86). He accepts the correlation without considering whether a good or an evil power has brought it about. When the artist eventually views what has become of his portrait, he simply exclaims, 'Christ! . . . It has the eyes of a devil', prompting Dorian to reply, echoing the proud desperation of Milton's Satan, 'Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him' (p. 125).[21] The gods of classical tragedy are also, initially, invoked in Basil Hallward's metaphor of life as a fateful drama performed before an audience of ordinary spectators by all those of 'physical and intellectual distinction'. 'We shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly,' he predicts, and Lord Henry passes on a similar warning to Dorian: 'the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away' (pp. 6–7, 21). The reader may choose to imagine Dorian as the object of a metamorphosis, transformed like an Adonis or a Tiresias at the behest of some jealous or benign god: but Wilde's narrative refuses to clarify. His telling of the story consigns the parameters both of orthodox Christianity (which in British fiction were supposed to form the framework within which character and plot interacted) and of classical worship to the status of passing comments in the mouths of his characters. The expected ethical superstructure is therefore cunningly collapsed and reworked as a decorative motif in the intricate pattern of language and debate with which Wilde distances Dorian's initial prayer for eternal youth from his final catastrophic attempt to 'kill the past' and free himself from 'conscience'. This weaving of ethics into aesthetics ensures that the debate in which Wilde's protagonists romantically engage canvasses not only the relationship between art and life (a well-worn theme in Wilde's journalism), but between art, life and suffering. This then is the 'new form' on which he premises his novel, one which integrates Christian theories of sin with classical principles of action, and submits both to the priorities of style and atmosphere.

21 'The mind is its own place, and in it self /Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n', *Paradise Lost* (1667), Bk. 1, ll. 254–5

The Personalities

Like many of Plato's philosophical dialogues, much of *Dorian Gray* is composed of discussion between differing personalities, each with clearly defined views about how best to live one's life and reconcile the conflicting demands of the soul and the senses. The principal participants are Basil Hallward, the 'rugged' painter, Lord Henry Wotton, the 'romantic' but world-weary aesthete, and Dorian Gray, the (initially) 'unspotted' beautiful youth. Basil is in many ways the most conventional of the three. His Uranian love for Dorian inspires him to the zenith of his creativity, but his fear of displaying his 'idolatry' to the (Christian) world by displaying the picture, indicates his limitations. Lacking both the daring and the emotional detachment of a true artist, he gradually becomes a model of Victorian conformity, and a disappointment to the Bohemian Lord Henry (see p. 168). In a sense, it is Basil's conventional definition of moral corruption which the painting comes to register, rather than Dorian's own, and his pious attempts to make Dorian repent finally provoke his friend to murder.

Lord Henry meanwhile remains ignorant – technically – of Dorian's crimes, but he is well aware of, and delights in, the younger man's passions. His keen observation of how Dorian responds to his attentions suggests at times the attitude of a musician to his instrument, at others that of an irresponsible scientist, at others that of the voyeur. His secret aim is to 'try to be to Dorian Gray what, without knowing it, the lad was to the painter who had fashioned the wonderful portrait. He would seek to dominate him' (p. 32). While Dorian quickly acknowledges Lord Henry's power, he is frightened of his 'poisonous theories' and of the way he 'cuts life to pieces with [his] epigrams', and later tries to convince himself that he has never succumbed to them as Basil has submitted to his own influence (pp. 63, 79, 93). The reader, however, may not be convinced, particularly when Dorian begins to have the courage of Lord Henry's convictions, and to commit heartless actions rather than simply muse on the artistic integrity of doing so. 'Domination' and 'influence' (whether stylistic, ideological or moral) are terms that echo and re-echo through the novel. Lord Henry's views are a subtle amalgam of subversive contradictions of comfortable bourgeois morality which Wilde collected like a connoisseur and refashioned in his own image.[22] Just as Lord Henry's listeners frequently doubt his sincerity or seriousness, his readers may wonder if his ideas carry full authorial endorsement or not,

22 See Notes for numerous examples of Lord Henry reworking Wilde's favourite epigrams, and vice versa.

and why he does not put into practice himself the precepts which he is so adept at teaching to others.

Dorian Gray is first presented to us as simple, elegant and chaste: like the Doric order of Greek architecture suggested by his forename. Indeed, as Wilde knew, 'Dorian' was the name Walter Pater had applied to one of two opposing influences in Greek art, that which opposed the 'centrifugal, the Ionian, the Asiatic tendency' with 'the Dorian influence of a severe simplification everywhere . . . under the reign of a composed, rational, self-conscious order', and which promised to complement the grace and wild skill of the former tendency with a 'revelation of the soul and body of man'.[23] Thus Wilde's Dorian is seeking above all to learn how to 'cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul' (pp. 20, 146). But as the Doric mutates into the more florid and elaborate Corinthian style, so Dorian becomes more complex and, in the eyes of Basil Hallward (and of proponents of cyclical patterns in art history), debased. At the same time, he loses his poise and peace of mind, until, in the final chapters of the expanded text of 1891, he is clearly cracking under the psychological strain of his secret and catastrophe becomes inevitable.

The fact that Dorian's figure and its image become more and more prominent as the story unfolds while those of Basil and Lord Henry recede, suggests who has 'won' the struggle for domination. Had Wilde cast a female beauty in the part – an artist's model who (unlike du Maurier's Trilby) breaks free from the passive stranglehold of male gazes, and asserts her right to action – the novel would have caused a sensation as 'New Woman' writing. As it is, Dorian's refusal to conform may well confuse. Like Basil Hallward, we remain unsure if it is Dorian's good looks or his personality that merit our attention, and if the latter, how someone so apparently prey to external suggestion, can be said to have a fascinating personality.

An answer may lie in Wilde's theatrical approach to characterisation, where characters are masks that both reveal and disguise the personality of the dramatist. Whereas in Plato's dialogues the discourse of Socrates is given authorial endorsement, in Wilde no one character's view is privileged. The novel seems ambiguous, deliberately designed as a challenge to readers to 'find the author'. Indeed, Wilde delighted to suggest that authoritative views were both present and not present in the text. 'You will find much of me in it,' he wrote to the painter Albert Sterner in 1891, 'and, as it is cast in objective form, much that is not

23 from 'The Marbles of Aegina', *Fortnightly Review*, February 1880, repr. in *Greek Studies* (1895)

me.'[24] In 1894, he announced to a different correspondent, '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.'[25] This tripartite division has fascinated biographers hoping to find a clue to Wilde just as much as it has interested critics of the novel. Yet in his first letter to the editor of the *St James's Gazette*, explaining how the too-obtrusive moral of the *Lippincott's* version of the story originally applied to this trio of errant characters, there is no suggestion that Wilde saw in them any positive aspects of himself or his public image:

> Basil Hallward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has raised a monstrous and absurd vanity. Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and . . . kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it. [*Letters*, p. 430]

Such inconsistencies are not accidental, however: they are bound up in Wilde's anti-essentialist conception of character/identity as something superficial and plastic, made up of appearances and styles, rather than deriving from a deep-seated, inner nature. At the height of Dorian's necromantic vivisection of the soul and the senses in Chapter 11, for example, Wilde has him 'wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives' (p. 113). 'Insincerity' and artifice, lying and disguise, are thus 'method[s] by which we can multiply our personalities' (p. 113). Just as Dorian comes to believe that the fabulous lives of the 'strange terrible figures that had passed across the stage of the world and made sin so marvellous . . . in some mysterious way . . . had been his own' (p. 115), so Wilde could easily envisage both positive and negative aspects of himself alternately living the multiple lives of his heroes. The presentation of personality in the novel clearly demonstrates both a decentring of the authoritative self, and the plasticity of character – two hallmarks of modernist writing.

24 *Letters*, p. 499
25 *Letters*, p. 585