When Falls the Heart:

Art as Moral Self-Revelation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Abigail Leali

Dr. Dwight Lindley

ENG 575: Senior Thesis

November 13, 2020

Contents

Introduction

In *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton wittily expresses the popular Victorian view of Wilde's hedonism: "Oscar Wilde said that sunsets were not valued because we could not pay for sunsets. But Oscar Wilde was wrong; we can pay for sunsets. We can pay for them by not being Oscar Wilde."[1] Chesterton, like many others, sees in Wilde an alarming tendency to understand the world only in terms of its value for pleasurable experience—a criticism not entirely undeserved. Yet, in many ways, his interpretation of Wilde's moral-aesthetic philosophy ignores the nuanced moral conscience simmering beneath Wilde's shocking and apparently blasé contrarianism.

For instance, Wilde's quote on sunsets, found in his dialogue, "The Decay of Lying," comes not from Wilde but Wilde through the character of *Vivian*, a figure whose first philosophical act is to defend lying.[2] Vivian says, "Nobody of any real culture … ever talks nowadays about the beauty of a sunset. Sunsets are quite old-fashioned. They belong to a time when Turner was the last note in art … And what was [the sunset]? It was simply a very second-rate Turner, a Turner of a bad period, with all the painter's worst faults exaggerated and over-emphasized."[3] Rather than a reliable barometer of Wilde's ethical code, Vivian operates as an exploratory character, whose dubious decadent voice allows Wilde to examine the boundaries between perception, art, and reality—to play with the possibility that "Life" may be "Art's best, Art's only pupil," not the other way around.[4] In this instance as in many others, scholars have read into Wilde's fluid, paradoxical, and often self-contradictory thought a level of moral certainty that he himself did not possess. And no evidence more strongly confounds their

---

[1] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy,* (Waiheke Island: The Floating Press, 2008), 85.
[2] Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying: An Observation," in *Oscar Wilde: Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1991), 74.
[3] Wilde, "Decay," 92.
[4] Wilde, "Decay," 87-88.

assessment of his character than the final act of his own life: in 1905, three years before *Orthodoxy* was published, Wilde converted to Catholicism on his deathbed.

True always to form, Wilde's path to conversion was riddled with moral indecision and an aphoristic delight in paradox that was formally, if not thematically similar to Chesterton's own. Wilde vacillated between hedonistic excess and agonizing penitence, sexual escapades and lover's regret, voracious materialism and abortive asceticism, an endless appetite for desire itself and an anxiety that it would never be fulfilled. Despite his indecision, however, one point remains fixed: he, like all people, came to face the reality of death as the end of mortal pleasures.

Thus, instead of inquiring after every witty remark—chances are it was elsewhere contradicted—it seems better to focus on his destination, not his ever-shifting path. Was his conversion a last-ditch effort to avoid the fear of hell? Or was it the end of a much longer trajectory towards the Church? The evidence of his works, as well as the Decadent movement as a whole, suggests the latter. Wilde, perhaps better than any other author, understood the strange bonds that entwined the Decadent movement and the Catholic Church, and his divided attraction between the two—especially in his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* published in 1890—indicates his constant struggle to reckon not only with the metaphysical implications of pleasure but also with human suffering and mortality. At once a hedonist, heretic, and penitent, Wilde's artistic interpretations of his own moral journey thus offer a uniquely rich picture of what it means to love in a world marred by evil, institutional and individual alike.

Decadence and Catholicism

On the surface, one would be hard-pressed to find any similarity between nineteenth-century Decadence and Catholicism: though many aesthetes attended Oxford soon after the time of John Henry Newman, it would be optimistic to call them his disciples. In contrast with

Catholicism's strong moral-ascetic tradition, aesthetes valued sensual pleasure, beauty, glamour. As Ellis Hanson defines it in his book, *Decadence and Catholicism,* the Decadent movement was

> a late-romantic movement in art and literature... characterized by an elaborate … often torturous style; it delights in strange and obscure words, sumptuous exoticism, exquisite sensations, and improbable juxtapositions; it is fraught with disruption, fragmentation, and paradox; it has a tendency to vague and mystical language, a longing to wring from words an enigmatic symbolism or a perverse irony. Decadent writing is also commonly defined by its thematic preoccupation with art.[5]

Decadents were fascinated not only by Roman Catholicism, but also by Satanism and other ritual religions; they were drawn to decay and "addicted to [their] own longing, [their] desire to desire without respite."[6] They were preoccupied by beauty, melancholy, sin, contradiction, the sublimely impossible possibility of redemption and sacrificial suffering. And even when they did convert, their orthodoxy was often questionable.[7]

Even so, broadly speaking, the Decadent movement constantly grappled with the Catholic Church: it admired it, questioned it, even participated in its ritual; it was attracted to its art, laden with religious fervor and symbolism, its mystical communion with Christ, its attribution of Beautiful significance to otherwise mundane realities.[8] In fact, in addition to Wilde, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Aubrey Beardsley, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Lionel Johnson, Lord Alfred Douglas, and numerous other aesthetes converted to Catholicism towards the end of their lives. Others, like Walter Pater, proclaimed their respect for the Mass without

---

[5] Ellis Hanson, Introduction to *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.
[6] Hanson, *Decadence,* 7. See also Hanson, *Decadence,* 4.
[7] See, for instance, Wilde's statements in "*De Profundis,*" (New York: Penguin Random House, 1991), 545-650. His religious views will be discussed in more depth below.
[8] See Joris-Karl Huysmans, *En Route,* rev. ed. (Cambridgeshire, UK: Dedalus Ltd., 2002). Huysmans details a black mass in the preceding novel, *Là Bas*, the first of four to feature the character Durtal, an autobiographical figure who would ultimately convert to Catholicism and become a Benedictine oblate over the course of *En Route, La Cathèdrale,* and *L'oblat*. His journey from aestheticism to Catholicism, while perhaps an extreme example, is in another way almost typical. Even Hanson, himself quite aesthetic in his interpretation of the church, points out that "decadent satanism, when not simply laughable, belies a paradoxical piety, since it is a mystical indulgence in evil and abjection that would be sheer nonsense apart from the moral authority of the Church." Hanson, *Decadence,* 7. The Decadent fascination with ritual religion, however perverted, tended to end in conversion to a more orthodox form.

ever converting.[9] Hanson, for his part, argues, "Decadent writing is often a literature of Christian conversion, but a conversion that never ends, a continual flux of religious sensations and insights alternating with pangs of profanity and doubt."[10] This may be true, in the sense of the aesthete's near-obsessive rumination on internal sensations of desire. However, in likening Catholic conversion to a never-ending doubt, he limits the debate to an aesthetic worldview and fails to consider the Church's own acknowledgement and understanding of continual conversion, in which religious sensations are an impetus for a love that transcends them in joyful self-denial.

John Henry Newman, for instance, argues that meditating on the beauty of Christ's sacrifice leads to greater love of him.[11] He says,

> after enjoining this habitual preparation of heart, let me bid you cherish, what otherwise it were shocking to attempt, a constant sense of the love of your Lord and Saviour in dying on the cross for you. "The love of Christ," says the Apostle, "constraineth us;" not that gratitude leads to love, where there is no sympathy, (for, as all know, we often reproach ourselves with not loving persons who yet have loved us,) but where hearts are in their degree renewed after Christ's image, there, under His grace, gratitude to Him will increase our love of Him, and we shall rejoice in that goodness which has been so good to us. Here, again, self-discipline will be necessary. It makes the heart tender as well as reverent. Christ showed His love in deed, not in word, and you will be touched by the thought of His cross far more by bearing it after Him, than by glowing accounts of it.[12]

---

[9] Hanson, *Decadence,* 11-14.
[10] Hanson, *Decadence,* 10.
[11] I refer to Newman as emblematic of Catholic teaching because Wilde himself was a devotee of his work. See Kimberly J. Stearn, "The Priest," in *Oscar Wilde: A Literary Life* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 83-132, which discusses this episode in light of his childhood and subsequent literary experiences. She explains that Wilde at Oxford was both apprehensive of and "visibly taken with Catholicism. Lord Ronald Gower … described Wilde in his journals as: 'A pleasant cheery fellow, but with his long-haired head full of nonsense regarding the Church of Rome. His room filled with photographs of the Pope and of Cardinal Manning.' …. Other sources report that Wilde surrounded himself in the 1870s with images of Cardinal John Henry Newman" (99). Wilde's youthful passion for the Church, however, was diverted by his professor and mentor, J.P. Mahaffy, who deflected him from his planned trip to Rome and convinced him instead to travel to the pagan monuments of Greece (96). Wilde would not make it to Rome until much later in life (108-109). Even so, despite his obstacles to religion, Stearn further acknowledges that "Wilde's preference for mysticism over certainty—for speculation over dogma—also finds its roots in his reading of John Henry Newman," whom he continued to read extensively throughout his life, even taking Newman's books with him on voyages to America (106).
[12] John Henry Newman, "Sermon 23: Love, the One Thing needful," in *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 5:338.

In Newman's conception, which follows Paul's meditation on love in 1 Corinthians,[13] it is the Christian's constant re-encounter with Christ's most beautiful act of love that allows her to love him, thereby rendering her good deeds salvific rather than empty.[14] Beauty, for Catholics as for aesthetes, is the beginning and the end. In-between, however, Catholics strive for moral growth in ascetic virtue as that which allows one best to encounter Beauty, whereas aesthetes strive for deeper, more introspective appreciation of pleasure itself as a form of beauty. Even so, the two philosophies' joint recognition of beauty as integral to existence—at once the impetus and the prize of "virtue," however defined—sets them apart from many contemporary moral philosophies.[15] Aesthetes, then, must necessarily have vacillated between faith and doubt: as secular lovers of beauty, they stood on the fault line of a culture torn between two opposed moral worlds—the atheistic-agnostic and the mystical—that clashed throughout the nineteenth century.

Thus, the aesthetic fondness for paradox becomes even more essential; though in many respects Roman Catholicism and Decadence share common values, they are fundamentally irreconcilable. Decadence thrives on the repudiation of traditional values in favor of fringe lifestyles based on pleasure and minute introspection. Catholicism instead requires that one reject those same lifestyles, purifying sensory experience through ascetic practice and subordinating the body to the self-abnegating life of a soul reformed in love. Both are enraptured with union, yet, at its core, aestheticism longs for the sensational experience of union; Catholicism, for the spiritual giving and receiving of self found within it.[16] Put in religious

---

[13] The epigraph to the sermon is, "'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.' 1 Cor. xiii. 1." Newman, "Sermon 23," 327.

[14] See Newman, "Sermon 23," 331-332. "It is possible to obey, not from love towards God and man, but from a sort of conscientiousness short of love; from some notion of acting up to a *law*; that is, more from the fear of God than from love of Him. Surely this is what, in one shape or other, we see daily on all sides of us; the case of men, living to the world, yet not without a certain sense of religion, which acts as a restraint on them."

[15] See, for example, Wilde's critique of philanthropy in *De Profundis*, 620.

[16] See John Henry Newman, "Sermon 14: Religious Emotion," in *Parochial and Plain Sermons,* 1:180-185: Contrasting the inconstancy of emotional experience in faith as separate from religion itself, he says, "Now that

terms, Catholics long for God; aesthetes for his Beauty.

Hanson, however, while he also recognizes the central importance of union, instead suggests that the Decadent movement attempted to recall to the Church a homosexual tendency he saw as present in certain mystical interpretations of Scripture and tradition.[17] Though he offers several valuable insights about the nature of sexuality in the Church, he seems to miss the most important: the Catholic emphasis on spiritual union with Christ as the foundation and fulfillment of faith.[18] In the Church, spiritual union is indeed often described in terms of marriage, with erotic undertones that range from subtle to shocking. Yet sexual love, for the Catholic, is a *symbol* of the ultimate union with Christ; union with Christ is not an outpouring of sexual love.[19]

---

perfect state of mind at which we must aim, and which the Holy Spirit imparts, is a deliberate preference of God's service to every thing else, a determined resolution to give up all for Him; and a love for Him, not tumultuous and passionate, but such love as a child bears towards his parents, calm, full, reverent, contemplative, obedient."

[17] Hanson, *Decadence*, 18. "Since decadent writing is all about aberrant aesthetics and aberrant sexuality, it logically follows in this argument that it must also be about aberrant religious experiences—and therefore have nothing important to say about orthodox art, orthodox sex, or orthodox religion …. The literature of decadent Catholicism is the documentation of a border war that the Church has lost in modern times—that is, the battle to maintain the paradox as such, to maintain the distinction between the spirit and the flesh, the Word and mere words. Decadent writing exposes the sexual and aesthetic dimension of Catholicism …. It raises the possibility of a purely performative and textual foundation for faith, the possibility of religion as the most spiritualized form of aestheticism."

[18] Hanson, *Decadence,* 17. "Anyone who has learned about sexuality from the Bible or the lives of the saints must surely be in for a grave disappointment upon encountering the real thing …. There is nothing more decadent than the sensuality of the chaste and the art of the artless. Nevertheless, in the tradition that we call Pauline, we are asked to appreciate saintly *jouissance* without ever analyzing it. We are obliged to define the spiritual through a turning away from sex and a turning away from art. Any degree of erotic or aesthetic pleasure therefore immediately disqualifies a sensation as heterodox and irrelevant to any serious discussion of Catholicism." One must wonder to which aspects of the Catholic Church Hanson is here referring. Though the Victorian aversion to sexual discussion does come to bear on aesthetes' perception of Catholicism, the Church and even the Bible itself often use erotic imagery as analogical to the ultimate end of man: union with God. See, for example, *Song of Songs,* or Bernini's beautiful sculpture, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa of Avila*, in Cornaro Chapel, Rome (1647-1652). Hanson's argument, while valuable in understanding the nineteenth-century perception of the Church, thus fails to capture its actual philosophy.

[19] See, as one example among many, John Henry Newman's understanding of asceticism in "Sermon 7: The Duty of Self-Denial," in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 7:86-101. He says, for instance, "Self-denial of some kind or other is involved, as is evident, in the very notion of renewal and holy obedience. To change our hearts is to learn to love things which we do not naturally love—to unlearn the love of this world; but this involves, of course, a thwarting of our natural wishes and tastes. To be righteous and obedient implies self-command; but to possess power we must have gained it; nor can we gain it without a vigorous struggle, a persevering warfare against ourselves. The very notion of being religious implies self-denial, because by nature we do not love religion" (86). In other words, Catholic asceticism is not a socially sanctioned capitulation to desire but a radical rejection of impure or even

Wilde himself, who faced incessant internal conflict between Decadence and faith, exhibits this dichotomy between Catholic aestheticism and aesthetic Catholicism at least as clearly as his contemporaries, often holding both views in tension simultaneously. It does not seem just to say with Hanson that Wilde was merely projecting his decadent philosophy onto Catholicism, that his faith was a capitulation to traditional morals or a culmination of his experience. Wilde himself does not frame it so in one of his final works, his prison essay *De Profundis*. In that essay, though he remains intimately aware of sensuality's pleasures and pitfalls, his conviction of an objective moral ideal—of God—shines through his apparent resignation to human weakness. Take, for example, this passage:

> [It] is when he deals with a sinner that Christ is most romantic, in the sense of most real. The world had always loved the saint as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of God. Christ, through some divine instinct in him, seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man. His primary desire was not to reform people, any more than his primary desire was to relieve suffering. To turn an interesting thief into a tedious honest man was not his aim …. But in a manner not yet understood of the world he regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful holy things and modes of perfection….
> Of course the sinner must repent. But why? Simply because otherwise he would be unable to realize what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation. More than that: it is the means by which one alters one's past…. Christ, had he been asked, would have said—I feel quite certain about it—that the moment the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept, he made his having wasted his substance with harlots, his swineherding and hungering for the husks they ate, beautiful and holy moments in his life.[20]

Wilde's Christ, in his recognition of human fallenness as itself a call to repentance, is somewhere between that of Newman and Hanson. Wilde is not afraid to shock readers with the paradox of sin as the perfection of an imperfect being; he is fascinated by the dark and confusing aspects of faith, those that many Victorian Christians—especially, he argues, the philanthropists of his own day—ignored. His is a theology at once firmly aesthetic in its emphases on decay, imperfection,

---

merely comfortable sensations as hindrances to love of Christ, which is both the fulfillment of those desires and often incompatible with their unbridled earthly expression.

[20] Wilde, "*De Profundis*," 620-621.

and beauty, yet aware of its Catholic metaphysical implications, in which each person's actions are sanctified through continuous reliance on Christ. He is not, and never would be, a perfect Catholic. But neither can it be said that he was not a Catholic, that he paid lip-service to faith as just another something beautiful. In faith, and in the stories and art of faith, he sees an encounter with Christ, with a moral good that reveals each person's soul to herself for the purpose of repentance and growth in holiness. This same idea pervades the entirety of *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*[21]

When one examines *Dorian Gray* from this tenuously Catholic perspective, Wilde, like most aesthetes, seems to depict the end of artistic encounter as self-transformation. But unlike most aesthetes, he does not limit himself to reveling in the desire for an ideal out-of-reach. Rather, he uses his art as a mirror for his readers, reflecting their own moral selves via narrative allusions to dramatic Christian works such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Christopher Marlowe's *Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*. These allusions invite the reader to interpret Dorian's spiritual trajectory in conversation with Marlowe's more traditional theological questions regarding God's agency in damnation. Wilde thereby creates a dichotomy of first principles, in which one must either respond to God as a "terrible power" who presents a threat to one's autonomy or as the most fundamental Good upon which one's fulfillment depends.[22] Dorian and Basil's trajectories imperfectly represent the two ends of this dichotomy: Dorian,

---

[21] See Stearn, "The Priest," 85-89. She argues that "Religious thought was indeed a vital source of aesthetic reflection and inspiration for Wilde. But it is precisely for this reason that we must consider Wilde's deep and abiding investment in religion, not as a cultural ornament but rather as devotional and intellectual practice …. J.P. Mahaffy once remarked that theology is 'broad and has many sides … it is even better to do it inconsistently as regards the various sides.' …. we can begin to see Wilde's relationship to faith as at once typical, for [it] reflected the questions and impulses shared by his contemporaries, and singular, for he gives to [it] a distinct and illuminating form" (85). Her assertion of Wilde's paradoxical relationship to faith as at once common and unique draws in the fluctuating atheistic, pagan, and Christian influences of his childhood, framing him as a free thinker, not in the sense of belligerent heterodoxy but in the sense of having a commitment first to the moral truths underlying dogma. Wilde she argues, was a deeply integrous thinker, devoted to moral truth almost to the exclusion of religious doctrine. Even so, over time his thought seems to have grown more and more compatible with it.

[22] See Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* ed. Robert Mighall (London: Penguin Group, 2008), 102-103.

spurred on by Lord Henry, remains a true, if tortured aesthete; Basil becomes an aesthetic convert. And Wilde forces the reader, too, often without her even realizing it, to take a stance, to recapitulate the core debate surrounding the human condition: to decide for herself whether she will repudiate the world or God.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

The Preface

The best expression of Wilde's conception of art as a mirror can be found in his preface to *Dorian Gray*. In it, he accosts the reader with a baffling series of aphorisms, each of which, like the facets of a diamond catching and reflecting the light, reveal a small portion of his artistic theory. For this reason, I quote the preface in full:

> The artist is the creator of beautiful things.
> To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.
> The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.
> The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.
> Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.
> There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.
> The nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.
> The nineteenth century dislike of romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.
> The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.
> No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved.
> No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.
> No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything.
> Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art.
> Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art.
> From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type.
> All art is at once surface and symbol.
> Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.

> Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.
> It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.
> Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.
> When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself.
> We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.
> All art is quite useless.[23]

On the surface, these aphorisms seem cryptic and contradictory: art, he suggests, is fundamentally both moral and amoral. He opposes artists' "ethical sympathies" and moral proofs but at the same time insists that the "moral life of man forms the subject-matter of the artist" and that "Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art." In true Decadent form, Wilde is posing a paradox: art is at once moral and aesthetic, realistic and romantic, surface and symbol, discordant and unified.

Through these juxtapositions, Wilde signals to his readers that this book is placed, like the Decadent movement itself, on the line between aesthetics and ethics—between Decadence and traditional morality. His obscurity compels them to search for a solution in the story itself, providing a framework within which to analyze the work without "giving away" a desired conclusion. In this way, Wilde reasserts his clear and consistent opposition to the philanthropic groups of Victorian England, whom he saw as barraging audiences with kitsch moral messages.[24] In an extreme rejection of such imposed morality, Wilde instead asks his reader to be skeptical of all moral dimension to art.

Even so, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is deeply infused with moral language. Not only does Wilde posit vice and virtue as the artist's materials, but he even insists that "Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty." "The elect" evokes the black-and-white

---

[23] Wilde, *Dorian Gray,* 3-4.
[24] In *De Profundis,* Wilde even goes so far as to claim that "[Christ] would have thought little of the Prisoner's Aid Society and other modern movements of the kind." Wilde, *De Profundis,* 620.

salvific justification of Calvinist moral theology, which suggests that a love of Beauty *is* moral. But is it moral in the Decadent mode that rejects traditional morality and revels in desire? Or rather in the Catholic mode, in which ascetic virtue is the path to beauty and total fulfillment? To put it one way, both are heretical to each other. Wilde revels in their incompatibility.

Wilde further taunts his reader's reason by posing an ambiguous critical framework by which one might resolve these two modes: "The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things. The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography …. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." What is the moral life of man as expressed in art, that which is most perfectly perceived as Beauty itself? It is the reflection that the critic sees of his own moral biases. It is not moral teaching, but moral revelation: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all…. The morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium." Wilde here insists upon the reflective capacity of art; good art is a well-constructed mirror, in which the spectator becomes known to himself without the need for moralizing. "Diversity of opinion about a work of art" thus comes to "[show] that the work is new, complex, and vital" as different critics see in it their own reflections and argue for them. The ethical interplay between author, novel, and reader—or, more broadly, between artist, art, and beholder—thus forms a kind of moral self-revelation. Wilde's story, as a mirror, reveals its readers' moral states without imposing a specific perspective upon them. It remains to be seen how, if at all, he as author attempts to shape, guide, or influence his readers' perception of themselves—how he navigates the line between Decadence and Catholicism.

Dorian

This form of moral self-revelation through artistic encounter is exactly what the portrait facilitates for Dorian in *Dorian Gray*. In fact, Dorian even refers to the portrait as a mirror.[25] It uses the Dorian mode of experiencing the world—external beauty—to lay bare his moral conscience, which he would otherwise attempt to reject. The arresting visual of his own increasingly distorted image forces him to make a choice between the pleasures of aestheticism, to which traditional morality and the self-sacrificial charity of virtue are hindrances, and an objective moral ideal embodied in the novel's peripheral references to the Catholic Church.

From the beginning of *Dorian Gray,* Dorian's moral trajectory seems completely determined by his own choices, influenced as they may be by Lord Henry Wotton. The portrait is therefore both the catalyst and the indicator of those choices. Every time Dorian looks at it, he is faced with an opportunity to either continue to pursue hedonistic desires in the vein of Huysmans' *À Rebours* or to repent and cultivate compassion and self-sacrifice—a path that he ultimately acknowledges as good, even if only through hatred of his own selfishness.[26] Though Dorian's life experiences evoke a variety of critical interpretations, it is difficult to deny that the portrait posits a moral objective that he has failed to attain. Every time he encounters himself in it, he has a choice to change; every time, he chooses momentary pleasure over love, until the option to love is, if not unavailable, at least no longer practicable. As Dorian's encounters with art reveal his habituation to sin, he is forced to reckon with his own moral state.[27] And the same mirror that could have saved him, Wilde seems to suggest, leads to his damnation.

---

[25] Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 195. "For it was an unjust mirror, this mirror of his soul that he was looking at."
[26] See Wilde, *Dorian Gray,* 195. "'I wish I could love,' cried Dorian Gray, with a deep note of pathos in his voice. 'But I seem to have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself.'"
[27] For Wilde on moral habit, see Wilde, *De Profundis,* 595. "I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the house-tops …. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility."

Furthermore, in opposition to other Decadent novels like *À Rebours*, Wilde is more interested in the spiritual implications of Dorian's sins than in the sins themselves. Rather than dwelling on Dorian's moral decline, it occurs during a time lapse in which he summarizes Dorian's moral degradation, moving rather quickly to his tragic end.[28] Notably, one of the only vividly described instances in this montage occurs when Dorian visits a Catholic church. Wilde narrates:

> 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. He loved to kneel down on the cold marble pavement, and watch the priest, in his stiff flowered dalmatic …. The fuming censers, that the grave boys … tossed into the air like great gilt flowers, had their subtle fascination for him." (128)

In this passage, Wilde contrasts the Catholic spirituality of the scene—awful and otherworldly as it is—with Dorian's decadent fascination with it. Ancient paganism is pitted against medieval Catholicism, and Dorian implicitly acknowledges Catholicism's aesthetic, dramatic superiority.[29] And yet, as Shushma Malik argues, "Dorian's materialism is demonstrative of his inability to transcend the bounds of his physical body into the realms of his soul. His soul is captured in a painting, and therefore all that he can identify with are the physical aspects of what he desires, the priest in his 'stiff flowered vestment', the 'bread of angels', and the 'grave boys'; these are the aspects of his flirtation with Catholicism that provoked his 'fascination.'"[30] According to Malik, Dorian's encounter with the Catholic Church thus seems to highlight a split in his

---

[28] See Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 123-140.

[29] Compare Dorian's perspective with Lord Henry's previous statement on the Church: "in the Church they don't think. A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen, and as a natural consequence he always looks absolutely delightful." Wilde, *Dorian Gray,* 7. Dorian, unlike Lord Henry, senses a deeper, non-superficial spirituality to the Church, yet, like Lord Henry, he waves it off as another aesthetic mode of experience.

[30] Shushma Malik, "All Roads Lead to Rome?: Decadence, Paganism, Catholicism and the Later Life of Oscar Wilde," *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 80 (2014), 15.

consciousness between his body and his soul that allows him to see only the physical elements of the world around him.

Though the physicality of Dorian's perception at church reveals his hedonistic tendencies, the portrait itself need not be solely responsible for it, as if it were a locked box holding hostage his spiritual sensibilities. Rather, it is possible that Dorian is experiencing the Church as he does everything in his life: as something meant to provoke subtle aesthetic sensations without actually influencing him—any moral influence at all being oppressive and terrible.[31] Wilde may indicate that Dorian is being habituated to see the world for what it can do for him, rather than for what it truly is. By choosing not to emphasize the debauched experiences themselves (as one would expect from a book advocating Decadence) but the consequences of those actions, Wilde reveals the aesthete's habitual tendency to use material things for his own hedonistic benefit, a tendency that will ultimately lead to Dorian's botched attempt at repentance, when his conversion is forestalled by a conviction that salvation is impossible. The aesthete's love of beauty, he begins to suggest, is merely another misguided human attempt to control God.

To better understand the nature of this control, one must begin with Lord Henry's initial temptation; he posits that youth, the foundation of all material pleasures, is the only thing worth having[32] and derides charity and moral influence:

> to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of some one else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for.

---

[31] See Lord Henry's discussion of "influence" in Wilde, *Dorian Gray,* 20: "to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of some one else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him."

[32] Wilde, *Dorian Gray,* 25.

> People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to one's self. Of course they are charitable. They feed the hungry, and clothe the beggar. But their own souls starve, and are naked. Courage has gone out of our race. Perhaps we never really had it. The 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. (20)

Following this doctrine of radical self-determination, he lays out a sensuous picture of aesthetic hedonism, in which "self-denial" is that which "mars our lives," while experiences of feeling and thought allow one to "forget all the maladies of mediævalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal"—to eschew, in other words, Catholic morality for pagan excess (21). Though Lord Henry asserts what both aesthetics and Catholics would consider a fundamental truth ("To realize one's nature perfectly—that is what each of us are here for"), he insists that *any* outside influence makes one a puppet. God becomes terrible; morality, a social construct; charity, a sham. The only way out, he declares, is self-determination, the exploration of *all* sensations, good and evil.[33] This is the rhetoric of Milton's Satan,[34] couched in Decadent language. Decadence, Wilde reveals, is merely another form of rebellion against God.

And Dorian accepts this Satanic rebellion. As he gazes upon his own perfect, youthful portrait, he declares: "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! …. I would give my soul for that!" (28). The pact has been made: Dorian's soul for eternal youth. This is the moment of the fall, in which Dorian tacitly accepts Lord Henry's violent and oppressive vision of the world. For the first time, he engages his will, and, rather than being stirred by Basil's repressed affection for him,

---

[33] It is worth noting that Lord Henry posits *two* terrors here: "The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion." An "unrepentant" aesthete, then, might advocate for social reform as a way to overcome shame—or else advocate for the downfall of religion. A Catholic, however, would likely emphasize the need to reform the individual. Already, Wilde is setting up the various modes in which this work of literary art can reflect the reader's own moral biases.

[34] Famously, Milton's Satan declares that it is "Better to reign in Hell, than service in Heav'n." John Milton, *Paradise Lost,* ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Random House, 2008), I.263.

which he barely even recognizes, he chooses a life of excess of hedonism that will ultimately be loveless.

Wilde thus further emphasizes that Decadent pleasure-seeking really reflects a skewed perception of God as one who will take pleasure away and offer nothing in return. Dorian muses:

> [The portrait] had changed in answer to a prayer; perhaps in answer to a prayer it might remain unchanged. And, yet, who, that knew anything about Life, would surrender the chance of remaining always young…? Besides, was it really under his control? Had it indeed been prayer that had produced the substitution? Might there not be some curious scientific reason for it all? …. But the reason was of no importance. He would never again tempt by a prayer any terrible power. If the picture was to alter, it was to alter. That was all. Why inquire too closely into it? (102-103)

The reference to prayer suggests that Dorian believes God has sent him this painting, rather than a demon. But he refers to God as a "terrible power" whom he would "tempt" through his prayer. Like Lord Henry, his is a God of domination, not love. Additionally, it seems that he sees prayer as something that, if it exists at all, would allow him to control God. Though he recognizes the portrait as his conscience, he does not recognize the divine being who presents it to him as possessing transcendent goodness. He is unwilling to relinquish earthly pleasures, but he fears God will take them from him by force. Dorian's fatal flaw, Wilde thus elaborates, is a desire for control over his life and, in tandem with it, an inability to recognize God as anything but a threat to that control.

Wilde takes pains, however, to insist that neither the portrait itself nor God is to blame for Dorian's "fall." Richard J. Walker argues that Dorian, rather than actively choosing the aesthetic path, becomes "an automaton – a possibility alluded to by Wilde in his discussion of the 'passion for sin' that strips the individual of 'the freedom of their will.'"[35] However, though Dorian does

blame his passions, Walker's perspective does not offer much room for his numerous attempts at repentance, half-hearted as they may be, nor does it respond to his moral uncertainty. For instance, his first resolution upon seeing the portrait change is to insist that "he would not sin. The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry any more" (89). Dorian intuitively senses Lord Henry's immoral vision of God, and, in doing so, reveals to the reader that, though the portrait has opened a path for sin, it has also opened a path for redemption and growth in virtue if he chooses to cooperate with his conscience. This acknowledgement, however, only makes it all the more tragic when he allows himself to be influenced by Lord Henry once more. He then concludes, "the time had really come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him—life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins—he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame; that was all" (102). Wilde's emphasis on Dorian's careful attempt to distance himself from his own decision only serves to highlight once more his free will. Though Dorian tries to disguise his choice to become an aesthete by attributing the blame to "life" and his own passions, it was he who allowed Lord Henry into his home; it was he who allowed himself to be swayed by base temptation after the portrait had spurred him to a higher moral good.

Finally, as Dorian approaches his own demise, Wilde shifts his imagery from that of *Paradise Lost* to that of *Doctor Faustus*, providing a framework in which the reader can consider Dorian's fall.[36] In Marlowe's account of Faustus's final moments, on the one hand, Faustus,

---

[35] Richard J. Walker, "The Psychopathology of Everyday Narcissism: Oscar Wilde's Picture," in *Labyrinths of Deceit: Culture, Modernity, and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 103.

having become accustomed to demonic power over twenty-four years, finds himself unable to turn towards God and repent, despite the clear signs from God that it is still an option. When demons come to take away his soul, he prays for salvation, first to Nature, then to Christ himself.[37] But he finishes with the cry, "O spare me, Lucifer!", invoking the devil rather than God.[38] Though God goes so far as to offer him a vision of Christ's blood, Faustus seems to have lost the ability to repent.[39] He calls with his last breath for Mephastophilis, just as he always did in life.[40] While some have argued that this scene is Marlowe's depiction of the death of a reprobate soul, the episodic nature of his sins[41]—parallel to Dorian's own affairs with Sibyl and other impressionable men and women—suggests that he is unable to accept God's proffered love to which he has slowly blinded himself. Faustus, who always pursued power in life, aligns himself with the one who asserts his authority, Lucifer, rather than with the God who humbly offers love.

Where Marlowe's message is clear, however, Wilde more ambiguously translates Faustus's fall into the nuanced machinations of the aesthete's artistic rebellion. After Dorian's encounter with James Vane but before he learns of Vane's death, for instance, he laments "with a deep note of pathos in his voice": "I wish I could love … But I seem to have lost the passion, and

---

[36] Oscar Wilde was not only familiar with Marlowe's play, asking for it while in prison, but he also lauded Marlowe as a legitimate rival of Shakespeare. Though Marlowe was more interested in the question of predestination—whether man really had a choice in sin at all—analyzing Dorian as a Marlovian Faust-figure brings into sharp relief the nature of his moral decisions, not merely in their secular but in their religious implications. Wilde's allusions to *Dr. Faustus* in *Dorian Gray* are subtle, yet they further stress the role of habituation in Dorian's moral decline, shedding more light on Wilde's overall picture of moral encounter in art. See Oscar Wilde, "*Oscar Wilde to Robert Ross, January 6, 1896,"* in *De Profundis*, (Anglo-American Authors' Association, 1909), 103 and Giles Whiteley, "The Woman in the Moon," in *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum: The Truth of Masks,* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 238.

[37] Christopher Marlowe, "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* 10th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 13.62-72.

[38] Marlowe, *Faustus*, 13.73.

[39] See Marlowe, *Faustus,* 13.70-71, as well as Marlowe, *Faustus*, 5.194-197: "My heart's so hardened I cannot repent! / Scarce can I name salvation, faith, or heaven, / But fearful echoes thunder in mine ears, / 'Faustus, thou art damned.'"

[40] Marlowe, *Faustus,* 13.113.

[41] See, for example, Marlowe, *Faustus,* 7.57-99, 10.8-41, 11.1-32.

forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself. My own personality has become a burden to me. I want to escape, to go away, to forget" (195). He resolves to do good, to learn to step outside of his aesthetic experience and love selflessly. Dorian still, it seems, has the capacity and even the will to repent and turn to God. Yet his response to James' death is telling: "As he rode home, his eyes were full of tears, for he knew he was safe" (199). This notion of safety is tied to another of Dorian's interactions with the portrait earlier in the novel: as Dorian chooses a life of pleasure, he muses, "What did it matter what happened to the coloured image on the canvas? He would be *safe*. That was everything" (103, emphasis added). Dorian's preoccupation with safety, in light of his fear of God and of societal control, recalls his love of the physical world and his desire to experience its pleasures to the fullest. It is a desire to control the consequences of his actions, to live as he pleases without fear of divine retribution. Though Dorian, like Faustus, has realized the precarious state of his immortal soul, Wilde's narration is foreboding: Dorian still finds at least some relief in the physical safety that allows him to continue his life in complacent comfort.

From this moment on, however, Dorian allows his free will to be compromised by Lord Henry's "influence"; in attempting to control his pleasure, he loses control of his soul. Lord Henry's final temptations begin, ironically enough, with Dorian's attempt to reform his life: Dorian chooses not to seduce Hetty, a country girl who reminds him of Sibyl Vane. Lord Henry mocks him, claiming that he has ruined the girl for any man of her own class. And, though Dorian doubles down on the goodness of his deed, he also allows Lord Henry to plant a seed of doubt in his mind. He says, "I know I was right in acting as I did. Poor Hetty! As I rode past the farm this morning, I saw her white face at the window, like a spray of jasmine … don't try to persuade me that the first good action I have done for years, the first little bit of self-sacrifice I

have ever known, is really a sort of sin. I want to be better. I am going to be better'" (202). Dorian here affirms the value of self-sacrificial love, as broken and stunted as his own may be. Yet he also admits the imperfection of his good act with a certain listlessness ("Poor Hetty!"), which hints that he has begun to doubt his capacity to do good. Hetty, through Lord Henry's influence, becomes his Helen of Troy: what he intended for good, he lets Lord Henry twist into evil.[42]

His reliance on Lord Henry's will as a replacement for his own is further exacerbated after his oblique confession that it was he who murdered Basil, when he becomes unable to distinguish between bad actions and good. Lord Henry dismisses him, saying "It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder. I am sorry if I hurt your vanity by saying so, but I assure you it is true. Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders … I should fancy that crime was to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations" (203). Dorian mimics him, allowing the words to enter fully into his consciousness: "'A method of procuring sensations?'" (203). Dorian allows Lord Henry to remind him that crime, too, can be aestheticized, and the apparent inescapability of Dorian's pleasure-seeking habit reasserts itself. Though he is able to resist Lord Henry on some matters, he is ultimately unable to forbid himself his company or his influence, and thus he continually falls prey to his temptation to aestheticize reality, just as Faustus fell prey to Mephastophilis's temptations to ignore the hellish death that awaited him.[43] Though Dorian came so close to repentance as to begin actively willing the good

---

[42] Cf. Marlowe, *Faustus,* 12.69-78. Mephastophilis distracts Faustus from his desire to repent with a demon in the guise of Helen of Troy.

[43] It is worth pointing out that Lord Henry, unlike Mephastophilis, does not actively intend Dorian's damnation; like a more sinister counterpart to the neutrality of the portrait itself, he is apathetic, devoid of love for Dorian and interested in him only as a scientific study, though that study itself indicates his own *libido dominandi.* See, for example, Wilde, *Dorian Gray,* 56-57. After contemplating his interest in "vivisecting" himself and others ("What matter what the cost was? One could never pay too high a price for any sensation"), Lord Henry delights in the idea that "[to] a large extent [Dorian] was his own creation." Dorian's slow, painful descent, therefore, is likewise one

of another, after this last encounter with Lord Henry his habituation to aestheticism convinces him that he is shackled to sin.

Dorian, therefore, despairs of his virtue, despite Wilde's insistence that he could still turn back. As he ponders his murder of Basil and the reality of his soul, he longs for "the unstained purity of his boyhood—his rose-white boyhood, as Lord Henry had once called it" (209). Even now, alone and contemplating his youthful purity, Dorian is unable to escape Lord Henry's aestheticizing influence. It has become his habit to distance himself from the messiness of reality, seeking refuge in the safety of elegant physical symbols, which comfort him even when he urgently needs to feel the terror of his spiritual position. Furthermore, he remains caught in his false vision of God as a "terrible power" that seeks dominion over him. At last, the very prayer that might have saved his soul, he twists to resonate with his own hedonistic fear. He laments:

> Ah! in what a monstrous moment of pride and passion he had prayed that the portrait should bear the burden of his days, and he keep that unsullied splendor of eternal youth! All his failure had been due to that. Better for him that each sin of his life had brought its sure, swift penalty along with it. There was a purification in punishment. Not "Forgive us our sins" but "Smite us for our iniquities" should be the prayer of man to a most just God. (210).

Dorian approaches the boundary that is his love of safety—a love that is ultimately little more than a desire for control, a desire to do as he pleases without the threat of divine wrath. He admits the value of punishment for reformation, coming so near to a penitent spirit … then rewrites the Lord's Prayer to reflect his own vision of God, whose terrible justice he has feared throughout his sinful life.

Like Faustus calling upon Lucifer, Dorian cannot escape his desire to control God, nor can he see God as he is. And he never comes closer to God than this. He next blames his youth:

---

not into pure moral evil but into moral doubt and confusion. Lord Henry is a broken compass whose needle has been lost altogether; he points neither north nor south, but Dorian is still dependent on him as his moral guide.

"It was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he had prayed for. But for those two things, his life might have been free from stain … Youth had spoiled him" (210). Dorian recognizes that internal beauty is superior to external beauty, but he is unable to remove his focus from the external. Instead, he accuses the gift of eternal youth for his fall. It is God who is to blame. He then realizes: "A new life! That was what he wanted. That was what he was waiting for. Surely he had begun it already … He would never again tempt innocence. He would be good" (211). He is right: he does want a new life—the ironic implication seems to be a Christian rebirth. But the portrait shows no change: conversion is not an instantaneous event. And Lord Henry's words sneak in again, dealing a death blow to Dorian's faith in his own conscience: "Had it been merely vanity that had made him do his one good deed? Or the desire for a new sensation, as Lord Henry had hinted, with his mocking laugh?" (211). The red stain grows larger, yet Dorian chooses not to confess his murder of Basil, fleeing once again to the comfort of safety and control. In fact, he even goes so far as to call the portrait itself "an unjust mirror," blaming once more God's gift instead of himself. Finally, he concludes, "It had been like conscience to him … He would destroy it" (212). At last, Dorian makes a final choice to place the material world over his conscience, following once again his desire to control God. He has become his own Mephastophilis, and he calls upon his own powers to destroy his own soul. In this moment, Wilde reveals most definitively the horror of Decadence: it is nothing more than a desire to efface a spiritual reality that cannot be ignored. It is a desire to separate one's body from one's moral and spiritual self, which is nevertheless inescapable. As the knife plunged in his own heart attests, Dorian, by destroying the portrait, ironically unifies his body in death with the very tattered conscience he had so vehemently abused and rejected in life.[44]

---

[44] See John Henry Newman, "Sermon 18: Obedience the Remedy for Religious Perplexity," in *Parochial and Plain Sermons,* 1:228-243. Newman explains that growth in holiness is a process and that too strong a reliance on

Dorian, then, like Faustus, rejects God in favor of his own desire for control; he fails to grasp the love that is being offered to him. Yet Wilde, appropriating this Faustian framework that has its true roots in the likes of Augustine and Aristotle, expands it to reveal the more subtle intricacies of an obstinate soul that hardly even recognizes God as its enemy. Dorian, through his Faustian rejection of love in favor of worldly goods and his inability to see beyond his desire for control, ultimately destroys the very mirror that ought to have revealed him to himself—and thereby revealed his need of God. The Decadent path, Wilde at last insists, is an illusion. One cannot harden one's heart against suffering without hardening it also against love.

Basil

But could Dorian have chosen differently? Though he takes a clearly Faustian stance against God, it is, on the surface, somewhat justified. After all, it *was* the portrait that enabled him to sin as he did; in a way, God does seem to be complicit in his debauchery. In making God's role so apparently morally neutral, Wilde eschews Marlowe's method, by which God's agency was always portrayed as a positive call to reform, in favor of a much more unnerving picture of the divine.

---

improvement can hinder it. For example, in a passage on the examination of conscience—for which Dorian's portrait offers a loose analogy—he says, "impatience leads us to misuse the purpose of self-examination; which is principally intended to inform us of our sins, whereas we are disappointed if it does not at once tell us of our improvement …. we are apt to forget that a Christian spirit is the growth of time; and that we cannot force it upon our minds, however desirable and necessary it may be to possess it …. [When men cannot achieve the heights of virtue], then they are discouraged, and tempted to despair. Added to this, sometimes their old sins, reviving from the slumber into which they have been cast for a time, rush over their minds, and seem prepared to take them captive. They cry to God for aid, but He seems not to hear them, and they know not which way to look for *safety*" (232-233, emphasis added). Newman, too, connects the faith of these men, afflicted with religious despondency, to the notion of safety; their attempts to be holy are founded on a fear that they are lost, rather than a love of God. Yet, rather than condemning them, he gives them this advice: "since they must act in some way, though they cannot do what is really good without His grace, yet, at least, let them do what seems like truth and goodness. Nay, though it is shocking to set before their minds such a prospect, yet even were they already in the place of punishment, will they not confess, it would be the best thing they could do, to commit then as little sin as possible? Much more, then, *now*, when, even if they have no hope, their heart at least is not so entirely hardened as it will be then. It must not be for an instant supposed I am admitting the possibility of a person being rejected by God, who has any such right feelings in his mind. The anxiety of the sufferers I have been describing, shows they are still under the influence of Divine grace, though they will not allow it" (242). A Catholic, then, might tell Dorian that he, in his despondency, ought to have persevered, keeping his eyes on the goodness of his deed rather than his apparent lack of moral improvement.

That being said, Wilde does seem to indicate a path not taken in the voice of the man Dorian comes to hate the most: Basil Hallward. In the opening scene of the novel, Wilde distinguishes the two figures vividly in his allusions to *Paradise Lost*, in which Dorian is placed in the role of Adam and Lord Henry in that of Satan.[45] Basil, then, would be God, yet he is too entrenched in his work to realize the fall that is taking place under his very nose. Walker argues that, in addition to the Miltonic imagery, Lord Henry "provides the Mephistophelean role in the Faustian compact he makes with the portrait," and Basil "arguably inhabits the role of a Frankensteinian creator who, by virtue of creating the idealized image of Dorian, initiates Dorian's obsessive identification of outward identity with beauty and longevity."[46] Basil, in other words, elevates Dorian's character, then leaves him to his own guidance and Lord Henry's influence. Walker further suggests that Basil is thus implicated in the portrait's destructive capacity—after all, he himself admits that he has "put too much of myself into it" (6). He says that Dorian, who calls Basil a Philistine, sees within Basil a materialist tendency that relegates him below even the role of an aesthete to that of a utilitarian "wage-labourer."[47] Yet, when one to

---

[45] Wilde places the figures, for instance, in a garden. Among the many parallels, Wilde's description of Dorian ("All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world" Wilde, *Dorian Gray,* 19) mirrors the innocent simplicity of Milton's first descriptions of Adam and Eve:

> Then was not guilty shame, dishonest shame
> Of nature's works, honor dishonorable,
> Sin-bred, how have ye troubled all mankind
> With shows instead, mere shows of seeming pure,
> And banished from man's life his happiest life,
> Simplicity and spotless innocence.
> So passed they naked on, nor shunned the sigh
> Of God or angel, for they thought no ill.

Milton, *Paradise Lost,* IV.313-320. By juxtaposing Dorian's initial purity with that of Adam, furthermore, Lord Henry's speeches can in turn be read in light of those of Milton's Satan.

[46] Walker, "Psychopathology," 97-98.

[47] Walker, "Psychopathology," 97.

compares Basil's aesthetic materialism to his own admission of emotional attachment to his work, a different picture emerges.

Rather than coming at art from a point of objective utility, as Walker posits, Basil seems to be aware in himself of a heretical tendency—heretical, that is, for an aesthete. As he himself says, "'every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul'" (9). Basil's manifesto is that art is for the artist; it reveals nothing except his own self. He goes further, insisting, in true aesthetic fashion, that "An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them" (14). Unlike the Christian God, Basil's ideal creator does not breathe life into his art. He creates but does not sustain. What, then, is Basil's idolatry? It seems that he fears his portrait of Dorian because he *has* breathed his life into it—his very heart and soul, in fact. Heretical from a Decadent perspective, he stumbles instead closer to Catholic belief. For the Decadent, Wilde implies, one must be in some way emotionally distanced from one's experiences and one's art; otherwise, it is impossible to dissect them, to maintain a sense of longing. However, lost in the work of creation and refusing the draw of his love for Dorian, Basil fails to forestall or even to notice Lord Henry's temptation (20). It is this absent-minded rejection of spiritual, non-aestheticized love, not his supposed "idolatry," that seems at last to "implicate" him in Dorian's fall. Despite Basil's own rebellion, however, he, unlike Dorian and Lord Henry, does sense the call to a deeper love.

And so, when he encounters his idolatrous work in its distorted state, Wilde uses him to show the reader what Dorian cannot see: the portrait's call to repentance and reunion with a loving God. What his soul always intuited, his mind realizes at last. He says:

> "Good God, Dorian, what a lesson! What an awful lesson!" There was no answer, but he could hear the young man sobbing at the window. "Pray, Dorian, pray," he murmured. "What is it that one was taught to say in one's boyhood? 'Lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our sins. Wash away our iniquities.' Let us say that together. The prayer of your pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered also. I worshipped you too much. We are both punished." (151)

When Basil sees the distorted portrait, it immediately reveals to him his sin in worshipping Dorian and inspires him to repent. Chastened, he takes on a role less like a god and more like God's messenger, witnessing to the reality of the divine love that both have spurned. Unlike Dorian, he does not alter the Lord's Prayer; instead of fighting spiritual realities to suit his own desires, he chooses to conform himself to them and encourages Dorian to do the same—to unite with him in repentance rather than pleasure or idolatry. This response, Wilde seems to say, is what the portrait ought to elicit from Dorian's soul, as well. Though God does not force repentance upon Dorian, each glance upon the portrait, Basil's reaction reveals, could be an opportunity for him to embrace his spiritual life and make it at least as beautiful, fulfilling, and unifying as the material things that he loves. It is God's love letter to him, reaching out through the very aesthetic reality for which he fears he will be punished.

But Dorian, in killing Basil, wreaks upon Basil his interior rejection of God. Wilde writes, "An uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas … The mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him, and he loathed the man who was seated at the table, more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything" (151). Dorian, through Basil's eyes, is forced to see the portrait's call to repentance. But, caught as he is in his fear of domination, the very love that

ought to save him leads to loathing and fear. His experience with Basil thus foreshadows his own final moments, when he attempts to kill his conscience with the same knife with which he killed Basil: "As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace" (212). At the end of his life, Dorian rejects the call to love that Basil saw in the portrait, the call that warns him that the pleasures of his body are not safe for his soul. Refusing to relinquish control of his life and repent of his sins, he instead attempts to remove the proximate cause of his suffering: the external phenomena that pound on the gate of his fortified conscience. As he has always favored external beauty over internal, so at last he favors the mere appearance of peace over the painful, self-sacrificial path to true peace. Decadence is once more shown to be a desperate, impossible attempt to ignore the constraints of love upon the soul, to obliterate God's agency in the hope that one might thereby find refuge in material things. In killing Basil and himself, it is God whom Dorian attempts to kill.

There linger, therefore, in Basil's story the remnants of a path not taken for Dorian; until his final resolution, he is torn between the seductive pleasures of this earth and the distant call of divine love. The solution to the problem of suffering and mortality, Wilde thus seems to suggest, lies not in ignoring them, like Dorian, but in emulating Basil's willingness to humble himself and accept that his pain is just. By relinquishing control over his own sensations in this way, Basil, at least, is at last able properly to love.

The Critics

However, though this reading of *Dorian Gray* is consistent with a Catholic perspective, it is easy to develop such a controversial reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* but difficult to

defend it.[48] The book, like the portrait it describes, seems to draw forth each reader's own individual values and internal struggles. There are as many opinions about the novel as there are scholars that study it. In which case, no analysis of Wilde's work can be complete without at least a cursory discussion of competing perspectives, undertaken on the understanding that Wilde, ever a devotee of paradox, may have intended none or all at once.

Morgan Fritz, for example, among other socialist and utopian critics, argues that Wilde uses *Dorian Gray* to further his interest in economic reform.[49] He and other such interpreters take as their scholarly foundation Wilde's 1891 essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism,"[50] in which Wilde advocates socialism as an antidote the Victorian philanthropic charity that he so detested: "Just as the worst slaveowners were those who were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the horror of the system being realized by those who suffered from it, and understood by those who contemplated it, so, in the present state of things in England, the people who do most harm are the people who try to do most good …. Charity creates a multitude of sins."[51] In

---

[48] See Wilde, *Dorian Gray,* 4: "Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital."

[49] Morgan Fritz, "Utopian Experimentation and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," *Utopian Studies* 24, no. 2 (2013), 283-311. For a helpful description of the cultural surroundings that led to and formed Wilde's utopian thought, see also Matthew Beaumont, "Oscar Wilde's Concept of Utopia: 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,'" *Utopian Studies* 15, no. 1 (2004), 13-29. Beaumont argues that Wilde enters into the common socialist conversation of his day in his attacks on philanthropic charity, but that he departs from them in his avoidance of a "paternalistic" approach to the poor: "The opening paragraphs of 'The Soul of Man' are a flat rejection of the 'practical' concerns of philanthropic socialism of the kind practiced not only by Christians but also by Fabians. Wilde dreams instead of rendering the conditions in which charity is considered an adequate mode of social reformation entirely anachronistic. '*The proper aim,*' he insists, "*is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible*" (15-16). Wilde, he argues, desires a world in which all people achieve their human vocation, a view compatible with both Fritz's perspective as well as, broadly speaking, the objectives of Catholicism.

[50] Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," in *Oscar Wilde: Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems,* 389-421.

[51] Wilde, "Socialism," 390. Ironically, Edward S. Brinkley conversely argues that the aesthetes indirectly caused the fascist movement that followed them: "try as I may, I cannot rid [my argument] of the conviction that an overwhelming incitement to *literary* fascism in Europe was the terror of the dandy—the rapidly cohering fantasy that Western high culture was falling increasingly under the mastery, the custodianship, of the effeminate male." Edward S. Brinkley, "Homosexuality as (Anti) Illness: Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray and Gabriele D'Annunzio' s Il Piacere," Special Issue, *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 22, no. 1 (1998), 1. Brinkley's observation, though perhaps offering too simplistic an understanding of twentieth-century fascism, nevertheless sheds light on the nuanced political and cultural shifts towards idealism fomenting at the time of Wilde's writing. Wilde benefitted from much more fluid cultural beliefs about politics than those of, say, 1930s Germany. His

"The Soul of Man," he proposes the abolition of private property, which he sees as a form of slave-ownership over the poor, and insists that a liberated Individualism, rather than Authoritarianism, would be the end result of such an economic plan.[52] It would, he says, lead to the "true personality of man," an idea he connects to Christ's own mission to earth:

> A Nihilist who rejects all authority because he knows authority to be evil, and welcomes all pain, because through that he realizes his personality, is a real Christian …. Pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection. It is merely provisional and a protest. It has reference to wrong, unhealthy, unjust surroundings. When the wrong, and the disease, and the injustice are removed, it will have no further place. It was a great work, but it is almost over. Its sphere lessens every day.[53]

In contrast to many orthodox forms of Christianity, which take a Boethian approach to the cycle of history as unable to erase the mark of human concupiscence, Wilde here believes that it is possible to have heaven on earth.

Fritz contends that Wilde maintained this reformist bent long into his later writings. He says,

> While Lord Henry, the passive aesthete, claims that it is in 'the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place,' Dorian's pursuit of the so-called 'experimental method' of the passions brings the New Hedonism … into contact with boundaries and obstacles … Because he temporarily becomes freed of the pressure of the public opinion that Wilde so dreaded (while he nonetheless sought to master it), Dorian comes into horrifying contact with the poor."[54]

Fritz thus places *Dorian Gray* in light of Wilde's larger interest in improving economic conditions; Wilde, he argues, is able to see poverty for what it truly is through his liberated moral ideology. And this perspective need not be limited to poverty; many of Dorian's sins and seductions would lose much of their moral weight without the social ostracization that they entail for those he has influenced. In this way, then, one can easily see the novel's message as a call

---

understanding of socialism carries little of the historical baggage currently associated with it, as is evidenced by his striking conviction that it will lead to radical individualism rather than imposed collectivism.

[52] Wilde, "Socialism," 393, 401.

[53] Wilde, "Socialism," 396-397, 420.

[54] Fritz, "Utopian Experimentation," 292.

not for individual virtue but for social and economic reforms that allow the "true personality of man" to exhibit itself most brilliantly.

"The Soul of Man Under Socialism" does seem to support Fritz's claim, but the complexity of Wilde's social reform efforts nevertheless lend themselves also to his appreciation for Catholicism. As Wilde himself puts it, "the message of Christ to man was simply, 'Be thyself.' That is the secret of Christ. When Jesus talks about the poor he simply means personalities, just as when he talks about the rich he simply means people who have not developed their personalities."[55] The materialist tendencies of the Victorian capitalist economy, he argues, stifle the development of individual expression and keep people from following Christ. In fact, Wilde even alludes to the connection between wealth and an underdeveloped moral personality in the last sentences of *Dorian Gray*: "[Dorian's corpse] was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was" (213). That being said, it seems impossible in "The Soul of Man" to separate Wilde's political from his religious thought. Though Fritz and most utopian scholars do not substantively engage with the question of Wilde's religion, his clear insistence on socialism as Christlike only enriches his intellectual interplay between Catholicism and Decadent morality. While he was certainly not orthodox in advocating for socialism, an ideology the Church would reject, his interpretation of Christ as aware of and inverting the role that class can play in individual development suggests that Dorian's own journey into the wealth and excess of aestheticism takes him, like the Biblical rich man, further from the face of God. Desire for wealth corrupts first the individual; the moral goods of the rich and the poor, therefore, are in reality aligned. In this way, Wilde's utopian vision also finds a place in an ethical philosophy

[55] Wilde, "Socialism," 397.

tied to but subtly deviating from Catholic Social teaching. One sees, at least, a progression of political thought that would lead him to convert.

Other critics, however, drawing from Wilde's aesthetic lifestyle and social justice efforts, propose another theory that focuses on the role of homosexuality in the novel's relationships As Edward S. Brinkley puts it, "There is no question … that *Dorian Gray* implicitly mounts an attack on Victorian violence against people who would engage in same-sex sexual contact."[56] Henry Alley, for his part, paints a picture of Basil Hallward as a pure but ultimately ineffective lover, who "finds his tragedy in his inability to bring his love into the context of his contemporary society."[57] Basil is unwilling, he argues, to stain the purity of his love for Dorian by bringing it into the present but views Dorian instead in light of an ancient Grecian ideal, placing him in a time when his desires would have been more acceptable. The portrait, in this interpretation, becomes a symbol of

> what a contemporary, healthy gay love might be, both sensual and spiritual in nature," and Dorian's attempt to destroy it becomes "[the] catharsis of pity and fear with regard to Hallward … when Dorian turns into his own Nemesis and stabs the painting in a final act of internalized homophobia. But quite beyond Dorian's intentions, poetic justice manifests itself when the result is the slaying of corruption and the resurrection of beauty and therefore of gay desire.[58]

In Alley's reading, then, Basil's attraction to Dorian reveals Dorian's own homophobia, an aberrant internal state caused by the moral restrictions of his Christian Victorian setting. The tragedy of Dorian's fall remains, as does his opposition to healthy love. Alley thus subverts the Faust narrative entirely, turning God's love into homosexual love and society (as well as perhaps Lord Henry, who preaches lust rather than "healthy" love) into Satan. By removing God as a

---

[56] Brinkley, "Homosexuality," 63.
[57] Henry Alley, "The Gay Artist as Tragic Hero in *The Picture of Dorian Gray,*" *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11, no. 2 (2009), 4.
[58] Alley, "Gay Artist," 4, 6. Fritz, too, argues that "Nearly everyone familiar with Dorian Gray recognizes that Basil is punished partly for revealing his homosexual love for Dorian in the portrait." Fritz, "Utopian Experimentation," 300-301.

real, albeit peripheral entity in *Dorian Gray,* Alley, like Fritz, shifts the burden of morality fully onto society, which has a duty to contribute to the moral freedom of the individual.

That being said, Basil's invocation of the Lord's Prayer and condemnation of his own idolatry complicate this critical approach; the inciting act for Dorian's violence against Basil is not a homosexual advance but rather a final repudiation of homosexual "worship."[59] It is this scene that Dorian recalls in his final moments; as he contemplates it, "He looked round, and saw the knife that had stabbed Basil Hallward …. As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace" (212). Brinkley, on the one hand, interprets this scene: "the text enjoins the reader … to *desire to see* the homosexual act and then entraps the reader in a position of complicity with the deformation of, and violence against, Dorian."[60] For him, the reader, rather than encountering a mirror that leads naturally to empathy, is "entrapped" in a sympathetic experience of homosexual desires akin to Dorian's. Yet Dorian is not here thinking of his relationship with Basil but of his conscience itself: though he does not try to repudiate homosexual attraction, Wilde does not seem to imply that homosexual inclinations are the impetus for his suicide. Rather, in true Decadent fashion, Wilde seems even at the end of this novel to be wrestling with two opposing ethical perspectives—one in which society's morals hinder individual development, another in which an individual's hedonistic habits keep him from the peace of conscience only achievable by virtue, the only mode by which personality may be fully expressed.

---

[59] Dorian, for instance, thinking on Basil's insistence on repentance (Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 151) concludes, "Basil had painted the portrait that had marred his life. He could not forgive him that. It was the portrait that had done everything. Basil had said things to him that were unbearable, and that he had yet borne with patience. The murder had been simply the madness of a moment." Wilde, *Dorian Gray,* 210-211.
[60] Brinkley, "Homosexuality," 63.

Though Wilde clearly struggled with the social, economic, and religious implications of his decadence and homosexuality, he seems reticent in *Dorian Gray* to be nailed down, to take a stand either for pleasure or denial, for virtue or vice. His work instead encourages the reader to accept all these readings at once; a good reader, he hints, will expand beyond her own critical framework to hold all perspectives in paradoxical tension, hoping against hope for a resolution.

Wilde and the Aesthetic Conversion

For that resolution in Wilde's own life, I contend, one must return to his deathbed. For such an open-minded, multifaceted thinker, one would have expected him to vacillate on the question of faith to the very end. Yet, at the end of his life, he seems to have reconciled for himself at last the question of suffering that loomed so large in Decadent thought. As Arthur H. Nethercot points out:

> There is a Wilde, and there is an anti-Wilde; that is, there is on the one hand the character which he has shown to the outer world—the character, in fact, which he has worked so hard to establish in the outer world: the dandy, the wit, the sophisticate, the cynic, the paradoxer, the brazen sinner; and there is on the other hand the character known to few but himself: the ordinary human being, *l'homme moyen sensuel*, the sentimentalist, the tortured sinner, the penitent.[61]

The two paths taken by Dorian Gray, then, were Wilde's two paths, laid bare for the reader's inspection and judgment. Like Dorian, Wilde seems to have felt keenly the tension between his fear of God and his physical desires. And, by revealing the depths of his own spiritual division in Dorian's tortured life and death, Wilde in turn mirrors the drama of every human soul: the reader can find in the pattern of Dorian's duality the image of his or her own rebellion against God, whatever form it may take.

In this way, Wilde's "decadent" encounter with God—and God's earthly presence in the Catholic Church, in particular—seems to have been one of self-transformation, in the sense that

---

[61] Arthur H. Nethercot, "Oscar Wilde and the Devil's Advocate," *PMLA* 59, no. 3 (1944), 843.

it was where the aesthetic fascination with transience, with longing, with sexuality were not simply acknowledged in human terms but revealed to be symbols gesturing towards the deeper longing for God, who, rather than merely one beautiful thing out of many, is the source of Beauty itself. Wilde provides a primitive reconciliation of these tensions in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," suggesting that "he who would lead a Christlike life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself."[62] He connects self-actualization to following Christ, albeit instrumentalizing faith in the process. By the time of his writing *De Profundis,* however, he recalls his own quote from *The Young King,* "'Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art?'" "A great deal of [this phrase]," he muses, "is hidden away in the note of doom that like a purple thread runs through the texture of *Dorian Gray* …. in *The Soul of Man* it is written down, and in letters too easy to read … At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been. Art is a symbol, because Man is a symbol."[63] Not only does Wilde critique the simplistic expression of his ideas in "The Soul of Man," but he posits a new source for man's identity: a source determined by his destiny—the suggestion is his heavenly destiny—as much as his present moral position. Self-actualization remains the goal, but its focus has been shifted to heaven rather than to earth.

It is in this shift of focus, it seems, that Wilde at last offers a solution that draws together all his moral observations, all his searching for truth. In *De Profundis,* he dwells on Christ as the supreme "individualist"—the term used in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" to describe the truly self-actualized man. Yet, rather than a personality that comes about via social reform, he says,

> Christ is the most supreme of individualists. Humility, like the artistic acceptance of all experience, is merely a mode of manifestation. It is man's soul that Christ is always

[62] Oscar Wilde, "Socialism," 399.
[63] Wilde, *De Profundis,* 607.

> looking for. He calls it 'God's Kingdom', and finds it in every one. He compares it to little things, to a tiny seed, to a handful of leaven, to a pearl. That is because one realizes one's soul only by getting rid of all alien passions, all acquired culture, and all external possessions, be they good or evil.[64]

Wilde, taking an anti-decadent stance, here poses humility and asceticism as the modes by which one may achieve self-actualization: in a final, complete paradox, one becomes oneself only by emptying oneself—or, as another once put it, "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt 10:39, KJV).[65]

Perhaps this is the attraction of Catholicism for the decadents. They desired subversion, and here they found it. It is not the subversion of society that leads to happiness, but rather the subversion of identity itself, a subversion made possible only in suffering. "Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art?": for the aesthete, as for Basil, it is only in confronting the brutal reality of sin—a reality mediated like a portrait of humanity in the real and symbolic sacrifice of the Church—that one might come to realize that all the pleasures of the world are like the wealth of the Biblical rich man: deprived of the true, sacrificial love without which it is impossible for man to know his true nature. This, in turn, may be why Wilde's Christ sees sin as the nearest perfection of man. Man, like Art, is a symbol of his eternal future, a future that can only be seen through total commitment to self-sacrificial love.

Conclusion

In the end, Wilde is not willing to ignore the problem of evil nor to offer a hedonistic balm for it. Instead, he insists on both realities: man's inherent addiction to sin and the goodness of the reality towards which he ought to tend. Wilde demonstrates to the reader the attitude one might take up in the face of one's own overwhelming moral insufficiency. What Dorian ought to have done, Wilde attempts to do: to identify himself humbly with the portrait of his own sin

---

[64] Wilde, *De Profundis,* 611.
[65] See footnote 27.

embodied in his art and, through that "true" personality—that real individualism—to begin a new life. The attentive reader of Wilde is left with the image of a sinner, gathering up his weak will in his dying moments to reject Dorian's Faustian terror and repent. In the face of the most overwhelming evil, the evil of his own soul, Wilde exerts his full artistic power to crack open a door to love. Despite his many failures and inconsistencies, perhaps this effort, at last, is how he paid for all his sunsets.

Bibliography

Alley, Henry. "The Gay Artist as Tragic Hero in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11, no. 2 (2009).

Beaumont, Matthew. "Reinterpreting Oscar Wilde's Concept of Utopia: 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism.'" *Utopian Studies* 15, no. 1 (2004), 13-29.

Brinkley, Edward S. "Homosexuality as (Anti) Illness: Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray and Gabriele D'Annunzio' s Il Piacere." Special Issue, *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 22, no. 1 (1998), 1-22.

Chesterton, G.K. *Orthodoxy*. Waiheke Island: The Floating Press, 2008.

Fritz, Morgan. "Utopian Experimentation and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." *Utopian Studies* 24, no. 2 (2013): 283-311.

Hanson, Ellis. *Decadence and Catholicism.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Huysmans, Joris-Karl. *En Route,* revised edition. Cambridgeshire, UK: Dedalus Ltd., 2002.

Malik, Shushma. "All Roads Lead to Rome?: Decadence, Paganism, Catholicism and the Later Life of Oscar Wilde." *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 80 (2014).

Marlowe, Christopher. "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus." In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* 10th edition, B:680-715. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost.* Edited by William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon. New York: Random House, 2008.

Nethercot, Arthur H. "Oscar Wilde and the Devil's Advocate." *PMLA* 59, no. 3 (1944): 833-850.

Newman, John Henry. *Parochial and Plain Sermons.* 8 vols. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907-1908.

Stearn, Kimberly J. "The Priest." In *Oscar Wilde: A Literary Life*, 83-132. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Walker, Richard J. "The Psychopathology of Everyday Narcissism: Oscar Wilde's Picture." In *Labyrinths of Deceit: Culture, Modernity, and Identity in the Nineteenth Century,* 91-116. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007.

Whiteley, Giles. "The Woman in the Moon." In *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum: The Truth of Masks,* 223-238. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Wilde, Oscar. “The Decay of Lying: An Observation.” In *Oscar Wilde: Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems,* 71-99. New York: Penguin Random House, 1991.

Wilde, Oscar. “*De Profundis*.” In *Oscar Wilde: Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems,* 545-650.

Wilde, Oscar. “*Oscar Wilde to Robert Ross, January 6, 1896.”* In *De Profundis,* 99-104. Anglo-American Authors’ Association, 1909.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* Edited by Robert Mighall. London: Penguin Group, 2008.

Wilde, Oscar. “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” In *Oscar Wilde: Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems,* 389-421.