

“What’s in a Name?”: Representing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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ROMEO’S cavalier denial of the significance of Juliet’s surname—“What’s in a name?”—seems at first glance to prefigure the deconstructive impulses of late twentieth-century literary criticism. When, however, he goes on—through implied analogy—to assert his belief in the stability of his perception of the thing itself—“that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” (2.2.42–43)—he articulates a more complex position: while deconstruction by its very nature finds language in an entropic condition, Romeo’s phenomenology accents the protean nature of words while reaffirming a faith in the power of the senses to comprehend what language cannot express.¹

This willingness to acknowledge multiplicity without succumbing to diffusiveness reflects a particular cultural/historical context that has led to the ontological duality facing contemporary readers of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: the novel clearly situates itself in a deterministic Victorian context. At the same time in a decidedly postmodern fashion it repeatedly introduces elements into its discourse that disrupt prescriptive interpretive impulses without clearly signaling the primacy of any alternative point of view.

Though apparently antithetical, both perspectives grow out of the Irish cultural environment from which Wilde emerged, and a reader’s sensitivity to that background provides an enabling transition into the mode of pluralistic interpretive responses that his novel demands. Despite applying the term postmodern to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I do not advocate the sort of ahistorical reading so often seen as synonymous with that movement. Rather, I use its aura of indeterminacy to underscore how personal, national, and cultural features surrounding the composition of Wilde’s novel exert extratextual influence upon the discourse open to our interpretation. While a latent postmodern disengagement may reside in the writings of many Victorians, Wilde’s own creative consciousness

surely felt an overt dissociation from social institutions unknown to his British contemporaries. Throughout his life, in his own eyes and in the eyes of his English neighbors, he remained the Irishman living in Britain, the outsider whose country stood in a subsidiary relationship to England and whose personal achievements ultimately remained the work of a colonial. These cultural perspectives—certainly more than his homosexuality—gave him a determinedly postmodern view of the world surrounding him.²

In my view, the decentered historical experience of a displaced Irishman seeking a continually deferred acceptance into English society finds analogues in the individual estranged from the institutions of contemporary life. By extension, Wilde’s narrative, composed over a century ago, directly addresses many of the interpretive assumptions that shape our current attitudes toward *Dorian Gray*. While I do not propose to examine the historicity of Wilde’s writing or to enforce a cultural determinism upon readings of his canon, I do feel it significant to note that the historical context from which his writings emerged replicates many of the features that characterize our society.

Certainly, whether conscious of it or not, we all approach *Dorian Gray* as readers conditioned by postmodern attitudes that reflect the values of New Hedonism foregrounded in Wilde’s novel. That is, we have become unavoidably exposed to a persistent view within our culture that calls into question the moral authority of social institutions, the competency of individual ethical systems, and indeed the very concepts of certitude and determinability. In my view roughly the same attitudes shaped the views of any thoughtful Irish writer of Wilde’s time.³ Thus, the postmodern outlook that has taken a prominent position among the ontological issues facing our society finds its parallel in Wilde’s Irish vision, a century apart but conditioned by similar historical conditions.⁴

Keeping in mind this sensitivity to postmodern indeterminacy and uncertainty, one finds *The Picture of Dorian Gray* posing immediate problems for contemporary readers similar to those which Romeo found in the name Capulet. In each instance the artifact under consideration makes interpretation more difficult by offering contradictory signals regarding the conventions shaping its structure. At first glance the very title of Wilde’s book—*The Picture of Dorian Gray*—seems to establish a position antithetical to contemporary hermeneutics, announcing unambiguously the central topic of the novel. As the complexities of the narrative emerge, however, the certitude initially inspired by that title becomes less justified and a range of alternative readings assert themselves with escalating in-

tensity. With the starkly definitive article that marks its opening and the richly ambiguous noun that follows, the title, and by extension the entire novel, mimicks Romeo's interpretive gesture by setting in dynamic tension the concepts of indubitability and uncertainty.

As a definite article, *the* always establishes the presence of a single, discrete entity. In this case it identifies the specific rendition of a particular figure that enjoys primacy over all other representations. This first word in the title concentrates our attention on a definite object, elevating its stature—at least in terms of immediate consideration—above all other similar items.

Picture, however, the word that immediately follows, works just as diligently to diffuse this intense concentration on definitive rendering. As a term linked to the concept of imaginative re-creation, it brings forward far more subjective and hence far less stable images. This condition becomes even more evident when one considers the implications of Wilde's decision to use the word *picture* rather than the apparently more precise designation, *portrait*. The term *picture* offers a broad, nonprescriptive concept of representation, one that immediately opens up the possibility of a number of alternative perspectives. By contrast, *portrait* signifies a fairly specific and narrowly defined form of depiction, subject to very specific generic conventions.

The *OED* offers several citations that clearly underscore the divergent force that these two terms carried for Wilde and his contemporaries, distinctions that by and large remain in effect for modern readers. It quotes John Ruskin, one of Wilde's teachers at Oxford, to illustrate the meaning of *picture* as the concept of "representation as a work of art": "Every noble picture is a manuscript book, of which only one copy exists, or ever can exist—*Arrows of Chace*." For the more specific sense of the term *portrait*, "a representation or delineation of a person, esp. of the face, made from life," the *OED* offers a range of Victorian views. Again turning to Ruskin, this time with a quotation from *Modern Painters*, it underscores the sense of portraiture as a subgenre of painting: "That habit of the old and great painters of introducing portrait into all their highest works." To give a more precise sense of the features of a portrait, the *OED* cites a passage from the *Daily Chronicle* of 15 April 1904: "A very excellent portrait-study, a tender and loving reminiscence of the high-spirited . . . noble-hearted woman."

A calculated uncertainty, then, remains inherent in Wilde's juxtaposition of the words *the* and *picture* to introduce his novel. Through its ambivalence, the title invites the reader to assume that a privileged and definitive view of Dorian Gray exists, yet it goes on to sug-

gest that the act of representation cannot avoid employing subjective interpretation as part of its creative process: the very idea of picture as embodiment rests upon the transmission of an image through an intermediary, someone who re-presents a likeness of Dorian Gray through a picture. This, of course, necessitates commitment to a particular perspective that directs the process of representation, and it begs the question how valid is the point of view chosen.

As the narrative of the novel itself unfolds, it becomes apparent that any one of a number of equally valid yet diverse points of view can make a legitimate claim to be the imaginative representation of Dorian Gray. Thus, the conjunction of *the* and *picture* introduces the contradictory impressions that will unite the aesthetic force of the narrative discourse: that a single, hegemonic interpretation of Dorian Gray (both the character and the novel) in fact exists and that one constructs any such interpretation out of a highly subjective response or series of responses.

Furthermore, the very structure of Wilde's work, a piece of prose describing the results of the act of painting, reminds us of the distance between representations as they appear in pictures and portraits and the written descriptions of those pictures and portraits. Just like the sedimentation of layers that accrues on and obscures an original picture/portrait, the accumulation of words over the course of the novel's narrative discourse illuminates and obscures the written picture/portrait. By the end of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* we discover that the painted picture is (mis)represented in Wilde's novel, now revealed to be not the realistic morality tale that we thought we were reading (a nineteenth-century version of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*) but rather a palimpsest of multiple, equally compelling readings.

An obvious question arises from this paradoxical duality and from this condition of myriad renderings. If a definitive representation of Dorian Gray exists but because various people throughout the novel see Dorian quite differently so that the logical choice of the most accurate point of view does not immediately emerge as apparent, which picture or point of view has the best claim to prominence? The way that one responds to that question will, of course, shape the way that one reads and interprets the rest of the novel, and one should survey the range of possible readings before turning to broader interpretations of the discourse.⁵

Perhaps the most direct source for our impressions of Dorian Gray's image comes from the piece of art that animates the action of the story. Basil Hallward opens the novel by introducing to his

friend Lord Henry Wotton, and by extension to the readers, a painting of Dorian that he has been working on. In Basil's secretiveness regarding the picture and in Lord Henry's response, we get a clear sense of powerful forces incorporated into its composition:

"I know you will laugh at me," [Basil] replied, "but I really can't exhibit [the painting]. I have put too much of myself into it." . . .

"Too much of yourself into it! Upon my word, Basil, I didn't know you were so vain; and I really can't see any resemblance between you, with your rugged strong face and your coal-black hair, and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves. Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus, and you—well, of course you have an intellectual expression, and all that. But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins."⁶

Lord Henry's banter makes good-natured fun of Basil's response, but in doing so he uncharacteristically betrays himself as a superficial reader in equating the self with physical characteristics. Basil corrects this oversimplification and offers us interpretive guidance regarding both what constitutes a picture and what a picture reveals when he goes on to say that "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" (5).

As the other characters offer their judgments of his work, it becomes increasingly clear to the reader that Basil's sense of himself in the painting reflects not simple solipsism but rather hints at the range of effects that all viewers feel when confronted with the picture. Dorian's reaction leaves little doubt as to the profound association that he makes with Basil's rendition:

When [Dorian] saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. . . . The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. (24–25)

And Lord Henry, though not specifically seeing himself in the work, appropriates its aesthetic essence into his consciousness by declaring it "the finest portrait of modern times" (24).

The dynamics of the painting in the narrative discourse—with its image evoked rather than described—brings us to close affiliation. As our imagination fills in the details of the work, it becomes our creation as much as Basil's, Henry's, or Dorian's. The novel heightens this association in a very short time as the narrative

makes both Dorian and the reader aware that the picture exercises a kinetic rather than a static appeal. After Dorian's bitter exchange with Sybil Vane and long night walking about the city, he returns home at daybreak and notices his portrait. "In the dim arrested light that struggled through the cream-colored silk blinds, the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly strange" (89–90).

The reader's imagination must continually reconstruct the painting to keep pace with narrative cues, for, as Dorian's nature coarsens, corresponding changes occur in the picture.⁷ At first the discourse records relatively minor changes, distinguishable to only the most discerning viewer. "Was the face on the canvas viler than before? . . . Gold hair, blue eyes, and rose-red lips—they were all there. It was simply the expression that had altered. That was horrible in its cruelty" (119). Later, however, the process accelerates, and the reader's need to accommodate changes in his or her imaginative sense of the painting becomes even more apparent through Dorian's comparison of the picture with his own countenance:

. . . he himself would . . . stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait . . . looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. (128)

It was true that the portrait still preserved, under all the foulness and ugliness of the face, its marked likeness to himself. (141)

Although the picture undeniably changes, the degeneration occurs for the individual reader precisely to whatever degree that his or her imagination participates in its refashioning.

As the novel comes to an end and images of the corruption of the picture continually intrude upon the reader's imagination, Wilde's narrative strategy actively resists a linear interpretation of its condition. Instead, the discourse raises ontological issues by underscoring the multiplicity of the painting's nature, taking care to remind us how beautiful it remains in the recollections of some. In his last meeting with Dorian, Lord Henry, in a reflective moment, recalls the painting as the triumph of Basil's career. "It was really a masterpiece. I remember I wanted to buy it. I wish I had now. It belonged to Basil's best period" (214). Wilde goes on to highlight the plurality of images constituting the picture by deftly contrasting this nostalgic impression with the rage that Dorian feels,

viewing the portrait privately a few moments later, at seeing that his putative good act had no effect upon the painting:

A cry of pain and indignation broke from him. He could see no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite. The thing was still loathsome—more loathsome, if possible than before—and the scarlet dew that spotted the hand seemed brighter, and more like blood newly spilt. (221)

As powerful and as necessary as this description may be, Wilde does not allow it to impose a form of entropic closure by giving his readers this grotesque image as their last view of the degenerated painting. When Dorian's servants burst into the attic schoolroom that housed the picture, they find the image exactly reversed, as Wilde uses a final comparison of Dorian and his representation to enforce upon our minds the enduring question of which image throughout the work actually embodies Dorian:

When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was. (224)

In addition to his vivid, protean, artistic representation of Dorian, Hallward also offers a highly personal, yet equally evocative, social view, one far less open to modification by the reader's imagination than was his painting. Although Hallward's sense of Dorian arises almost completely from impressions made by the young man early in their friendship, Hallward, nonetheless, articulates his views quite graphically over the course of the novel's narrative.

Furthermore, even allowing for its highly subjective slant, Hallward's discourse manages to reorient the common assumptions that we may have made about Dorian's nature. Basil, for example, describes his first meeting with Dorian in the tender terms that one would expect a lover to use:

I suddenly became conscious that some one was looking at me. I turned half-way round, and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would ab-

sorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. . . . Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life. I had a strange feeling that Fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. (6)

Despite certain obvious parallels between this description and various conventions found in declarations of romantic love, Basil's interest in Dorian proves to be more complex than simple homoerotic desire.⁸ Basil, in fact, sees Dorian as a source of artistic fulfillment—as an inspiration—rather than as an object of physical gratification:

The mere visible presence of this lad . . . defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. . . . Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art. You might see nothing in him. I see everything in him. He is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there. He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and subtleties of certain colours. (10–11)

Basil's focus on Dorian's evocative aesthetic powers, of course, does not and should not distract our attention from his physical charm. It does, however, remind us that a picture of Dorian depends as much upon the imaginative response of the viewer as upon the actual features of the model. Thus, when Lord Henry draws Dorian away from Basil for a night at the theater, we can understand that when Basil chooses to "stay with the real Dorian" (29) he refers not simply to the portrait but also to the unblemished image of Dorian that he retains in his mind.

Obvious limitations arise, however, when one's imaginative response becomes fixed and not subject to continual revision. The flaw in Basil's view comes not from its privileging his intellectual portrait of Dorian over all others but from his allowing it to fall into a static condition. Dorian's inchoate ingenuousness has made such an impression upon Basil that throughout his life it remains the defining feature of his image of his friend, and he literally cannot see Dorian any other way. Dorian's youthful nature remains the constant in Basil's impressions. Just as it inspired his best painting, he assumes that it continues—unsullied—to inspire the best in everyone it encounters.⁹

By allowing his initial, pluralistic impression to calcify into a static, prescriptive one, Basil shows a remarkable tenacity in holding on to this perception in the light of numerous instances that

would surely shift the opinion of a less devoted friend. Basil does not, of course, remain indifferent to the growing callousness that he sees in Dorian, especially after the death of Sybil Vane:

“Dorian, this is horrible! Something has changed you completely. You look exactly the same wonderful boy who, day after day, used to come down to my studio to sit for his picture. But you were simple, natural, and affectionate then. You were the most unspoiled creature in the whole world. Now, I don't know what has come over you. You talk as if you had no heart, no pity in you. It is all Harry's influence. I see that.” (108)

Nonetheless, as he listens to Dorian's simple response—“I am what I am. There is nothing more to be said” (110)—Basil exemplifies the failed reader, no longer committed to a critical assessment of his subject. Instead, he drops his probing tone and reverts to his initial view of Dorian:

The painter felt strangely moved. The lad was infinitely dear to him, and his personality had been the great turning-point in his art. He could not bear the idea of reproaching him any more. After all, his indifference was probably merely a mood that would pass away. There was so much in him that was good, so much in him that was noble. (110)

Even as Basil progressively sheds all vestiges of postmodern multiplicity, however, the narrative discourse continues to underscore pluralism. While Basil's impression of his friend never significantly changes, his own sensitivity to public opinion keeps before the reader these contrasting views of Dorian:

I think it right that you should know that the most dreadful things are being said against you in London. . . . Mind you, I don't believe these rumours at all. At least, I can't believe them when I see you. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. (149)

Indeed when confronted with the incontrovertible evidence of the once beautiful painting now a disfigured icon emblematic of Dorian's degraded nature, Basil still refuses to relinquish his vision of Dorian's earlier state or his belief that it could be regained. “It is never too late, Dorian. Let us kneel down and try if we cannot remember a prayer. Isn't there a verse somewhere, ‘Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them as white as snow?’” (158).

Although those final sentiments say much more about Basil's nature than Dorian's, the painter's tenacity in retaining his original

opinion of the young man provides an object lesson to us. Even as we discern the fallacies in Basil's argument, we still cannot ignore its evocation of the Dorian present at the novel's opening. No matter how Dorian has changed, the person that he has become has evolved from that earlier figure, and it remains a part of Basil's and of the reader's consciousness. Thus, we may easily see the blindness of Basil's insistence upon a prelapsarian Dorian, but more importantly the inaccuracies of this opinion provide an object lesson for others interpreting Dorian's character. Just as Basil adopts a foolish position in trying to exclude Dorian's present behavior from a picture of him, we appear equally benighted if we ignore his past.

With a self-confidence that surpasses even Basil's, Lord Henry Wotton too has an imaginative construction of Dorian that he delineates throughout the novel and relies upon as a true representation of his friend. While it assumes an undeniably different perspective of Dorian, Lord Henry's approach parallels Hallward's in several key areas. Specifically, it rests upon assumptions formed at Harry's earliest meeting with Dorian, and, with only minor modifications, it remains steadfastly true to those early impressions. Nonetheless, despite its rigidity, Lord Henry's view offers readers useful insights into Dorian's nature.

Like Basil's, the initial response that Lord Henry makes to Dorian underscores the powerful effect of the young man's physical beauty:

Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. 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. (15)

The way that each extrapolates from the recognition of physical perfection, however, takes on a far greater significance. Basil sees it as an indication of spiritual worth and an inspiration to his art. Harry correlates Dorian's youthful beauty and spiritual inexperience and sees this condition as a wonderful opportunity to observe human development. Thus even at this stage Harry has begun to shift attention from Dorian's physical attractiveness to his moral nature.

Basil, of course, considers Dorian's probity, but he does so with implicit faith, seeing Dorian's beauty as a testament to his goodness. From this perspective, as long as beauty endures, no questions can arise regarding goodness. Lord Henry, on the other hand, finds

the relationship more dynamic, and as the novel progresses this view increasingly differentiates his perception of Dorian from Basil's.

Almost from the start, Lord Henry counters Basil's idealized picture by drawing both Dorian's and the reader's attention to the natural human frailty of the young man's nature:

"You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame." (18)

The floral metaphors—"your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood"—enforce the fragile, transitory status of Dorian's beauty. Further, by conflating the description of the effect of Dorian's fantasies with references to his physical attractiveness Harry both reinforces and reshapes the relationship of beauty and goodness that Basil articulates. Just as good looks testify to purity, decaying beauty serves as a sign of moral degeneration; and this second half of the equation, implicitly posed though never articulated by Basil, sharply delineates Lord Henry's perspective.

Harry frankly acknowledges Dorian's beauty as both powerful and temporary:

"You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr. Gray. . . . And Beauty is a form of Genius—is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation. It is one of the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or spring-time, or the reflection in dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It cannot be questioned. It has its divine right of sovereignty. It makes princes of those who have it. . . . Ah! realize your youth while you have it. . . . Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing." (21–22)

Lord Henry emphasizes a *carpe diem* view, calling it New Hedonism and setting it up not as a way to forestall aging and decay but as a means to make the most of the brief time that one has before physical degeneration sets in. Dorian, because of his great beauty—his "form of Genius"—will suffer greatly when that beauty disappears. As a response to this predicament, the New Hedonism will allow him to build a recollection of pleasures to console him when aging inexorably takes its toll upon his attractiveness.

Indeed as he outlines the various attributes characterizing his impression of Dorian, Lord Henry relegates beauty to a secondary role, and takes pains to foreground the ambivalences in Dorian's

nature and the potential for shaping Dorian's consciousness that combine to attract him:

And how charming [Dorian] had been at dinner the night before, as with startled eyes and lips parted in frightened pleasure he had sat opposite to him at the club, the red candle shades staining to a richer rose the wakening wonder of his face. Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow. . . . There was nothing [Lord Henry] could not do with [Dorian]. He could be made a Titan or a toy. What a pity it was that such beauty was destined to fade. (35–36)

In fact, Harry has a sharper eye for psychological detail than Basil does for physical change. Scarcely a month after meeting Dorian, Lord Henry can describe his manner in the following fashion: "How different he was now from the shy, frightened boy he had met in Basil Hallward's studio! His nature had developed like a flower, had borne blossoms of scarlet flame. Out of its secret hiding-place had crept his Soul, and Desire had come to meet it on the way" (54–55).

This absorption with Dorian's inner nature becomes the feature distinguishing Lord Henry's perspective of Dorian. He as much as admits this to Basil in the comments that he makes after learning of Dorian's engagement to Sybil Vane: "I hope that Dorian Gray will make this girl his wife, passionately adore her for six months, and then suddenly become fascinated by some one else. He would be a wonderful study" (74).

Indeed, Harry's voyeuristic view of Dorian contrasts sharply with Hallward's genuine concern for his friend. Basil takes Dorian's physical beauty for granted, yet he worries a great deal about Dorian's goodness. Lord Henry on the other hand feels nothing, other than the pleasure of observation, with regard to Dorian's nature, yet he remains deeply concerned over Dorian's appearance. One sees this clearly in Harry's efforts to console Dorian after the death of Sybil Vane:

"Life has everything in store for you, Dorian. There is nothing that you, with your extraordinary good looks, will not be able to do. . . . you must keep your good looks. We live in an age that reads too much to be wise and that thinks too much to be beautiful. We cannot spare you." (104)

Nonetheless, certain key features of his relationship with Dorian parallel Basil's. Specifically, as the novel unfolds and the pic-

ture begins to change, Harry loses access to Dorian's innermost thoughts, for his metamorphosis stands as a secret that he would share with no one. Nonetheless, Harry seems unable to acknowledge this change. Just as Basil always looks upon Dorian as the beautiful friend whose purity inspires his art, Harry continues to see Dorian as the precocious pupil whose sophistication and worldliness remain at the level of the tutelage he gave Dorian after the death of Sybil Vane.

As the novel moves toward its conclusion, Harry's views of Dorian—in their own way as idealized as Basil's—counterpoint the brutal impressions that his actions have made upon readers. "You have everything in the world that a man can want. There is no one who would not be delighted to change places with you" (203–4). As ironic as those lines may seem, Lord Henry's continuing fascination with his friend remind us of the attractiveness and charm that adhere to impressions of Dorian and set them against any revulsion that we feel:

"You [Dorian] are the type of what the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found. I am so glad that you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture or produced anything outside of yourself! Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets." (217)

To comprehend these highly impressionistic views, Dorian also offers a representation of himself no less subjective, nor any less convincing, than any of the others. In many ways Dorian's view of himself, at least initially, echoes the impressions already articulated by his friends. When, for example, Lord Henry suggests that Dorian experiences an imaginative life far less placid than his demeanor would lead one to expect, Dorian responds with an unvoiced affirmation:

Yes; there had been things in his boyhood that he had not understood. He understood them now. Life suddenly became fiery-coloured to him. It seemed to him that he had been walking in fire. Why had he not known it? (19)

With this newfound understanding comes a sense of his own mortality every bit as intense as that felt by Lord Henry. "How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. . . . Lord Henry Wotton is perfectly right. Youth is the only thing worth having. When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself" (25–26).

While the narrative unfolds, Dorian gains a great deal of self-confidence. Nonetheless he remains susceptible to external influences. Though Basil quickly loses any ability to sway Dorian's feelings, Henry, especially in the period immediately following Sybil's death, proves still adept at illuminating Dorian's sense of himself. More significantly, however, the painting becomes an increasingly prominent force in his life:

As he often remembered afterwards, and always with no small wonder, he found himself at first gazing at the portrait with a feeling of almost scientific interest. That such a change should have taken place was incredible to him. And yet it was a fact. . . . He shuddered, and felt afraid, and, going back to the couch, lay there, gazing at the picture in sickened horror. (95)

The painting operates upon Dorian as a paradoxical duality, exerting both a liberating and an obsessing effect. On the one hand, it gives him the advantage of escaping the physical consequences of the growing depravity of his life. At the same time, its presence enforces with unremitting determination the consequences of his debauchery. Because he does not suffer the physical ravages that such a life would inflict upon others, there is little to restrain him from greater excesses. Nonetheless, his portrait constantly rebukes his behavior and the whole philosophy of New Hedonism.

Thus the picture confronts Dorian's consciousness with a sense of guilt and shame that he cannot easily escape, and manifestations of these feelings—even in the most incongruous of situations—enforce upon us the complexities of Dorian's nature. "The presence of Adrian Singleton [in the opium den] troubled [Dorian]. He wanted to be where no one would know who he was. He wanted to escape from himself" (188). A scene like this caps a series of vacillations—his temporary remorse over the death of Sybil Vane, his resentment over Basil's determination to see him as a character capable of repentance, his genuine sorrow over the necessity of blackmailing Alan Campbell—set Dorian apart from the stereotypical sensualist and suggest a range of ambivalences within his nature.

In the final pages of the work, the callousness that had shielded Dorian, like the picture itself, seems to give way in favor of an obsessive sense of guilt:

Was it really true that one could never change? He felt a wild longing for the unstained purity of his boyhood—his rose-white boyhood, as Lord Henry had once called it. He knew that he had tarnished himself,

filled his mind with corruption and given horror to his fancy; that he had been an evil influence to others, and had experienced a terrible joy in being so; and that of the lives that had crossed his own it had been the fairest and the most full of promise that he had brought to shame. But was it all irretrievable? Was there no hope for him? (219–20)

The narrative threatens a decline into melodrama at this point, but arguably one needs to project that sort of ethos to prepare the reader for the enormity of the self-loathing that has become part of Dorian's nature and evinces itself in his last look at the painting:

He went in quietly . . . and dragged the purple hanging from the portrait. A cry of pain and indignation broke from him. . . . The thing was still loathsome—more loathsome, if possible, than before. (221)

Each of these perspectives—Basil Hallward's, Lord Henry's, Dorian Gray's, and the picture's itself—offers a very poignant and powerful view of the nature of Dorian Gray, and each arguably articulates a valid estimation of Dorian's character. Of course, for the reader attempting to formulate his or her own picture of Dorian Gray, this very validity of a number of points of view raises a range of potential problems. It clearly enforces the insufficiency of an approach to interpretation that relies upon any single attitude to describe a full picture of Dorian. Thus, the question arises not so much as to whether the reader constructs his or her own picture of Dorian Gray independently, or adopts the perspective of one of the central characters, but rather what alternatives exist to the exclusionary, either/or, approaches followed by Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian himself.

To some degree, the picture itself offers a useful model for viewing Dorian. Its protean features remind us of the kinetic qualities both of Dorian's character and of the interpretive process. At the same time, a linearity circumscribes the picture's alternatives, for the image of Dorian goes through progressive stages of degeneration with little or no allowance for variation. Its inadequacy, like those of the other renderings of Dorian, points toward the need to adopt a hermeneutic beyond the deterministic certitude of nineteenth-century realism or early twentieth-century modernism.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, from the ironic definitiveness of its title to the artificial closure of its final lines, parodies the conventions of these literary movements and invites the broader, freer response of postmodern reading. As I have noted at the beginning of this essay, the novel's title seems to declare its intention of offer-

ing an authoritative rendering of the central character, yet, by making no single view of Dorian sufficient, it clearly returns the task of that rendering to its readers and invites them each to form an amalgamated image from the different alternatives offered in the narrative.

This is not to suggest that one dilutes or synthesizes these different versions of Dorian into yet another perspective, for such a gesture implies the possibility of imposing a form of certitude that the novel itself does not sustain. Rather *The Picture of Dorian Gray* operates along lines of pluralism that preclude easy resolution. Despite the Cartesian finality of the title, the narrative of the novel frustrates efforts to suppress multiplicity, even through amalgamation. Thus the force of the title focuses not so much on the identification of a single representation of Dorian Gray. Rather it directs our attention to the fact that while the picture continually changes it retains within it a variety of images of Dorian—existing simultaneously though given varying emphases—that form one's total impression.

While these diverse pictures of Dorian Gray do not necessarily offer mutually exclusive versions, they do resist the impulse toward integration. Accepting any one does not preclude seeing the logic of any other, but neither does it lay down the means to reconcile the diversities into a single dominant feature. Just as the concept of primacy stands as antithetical to the postmodern impulse, within Wilde's novel one can maintain a number of different pictures simultaneously without stratifying or synthesizing them.

Dorian's inability to sustain this range of different pictures of himself, his ultimately irresistible need for closure and certitude, stands as a failure of the imagination. It is the one thing that Lord Henry's code of New Hedonism cannot tolerate, and the melodramatic conclusion to the novel—one that Dorian himself would surely abhor—stands as his punishment for failing to sustain his own innovative power. In this fashion he becomes an example for the reader who must work to avoid the reductiveness that proves so costly to Dorian.

Notes

1. For a clear and direct summary of the assumptions informing deconstructive readers, see Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

2. Although Wilde did not flaunt his nationalist sentiments, as Richard Ellmann's biog-

raphy makes clear, all his life he remained very sensitive to his ethnic heritage. *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 120–21 and 195–97.

3. Yeats's dramatic efforts to reinvent Irish mythology—creating alternative institutions when those represented by society offer little satisfaction—stands as one example of this impulse. Joyce's solution—as articulated by his character Stephen Dedalus—“to fly by those nets” of nationality, language, and religion presents the antithetical reaction. Both, nonetheless, reflect that postmodern sense of revulsion toward the alien social institutions dominating Irish society.

4. Dominic Manganiello, from an admittedly more traditional perspective, takes up similar issues in his “Ethics and Aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 9 (December 1983): 25–33.

5. Most critical responses to Wilde's novel, while covering a wide range of approaches, maintain the primacy of a single dominant point of view. The following book-length studies give a fairly representative survey of modes of interpretations, and their titles underscore a range of possible perspectives: Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, trans. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986); Philip Cohen, *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978); J. E. Chamberlin, *Ripe Was the Drowsy Hour: The Age of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977); Donald H. Ericksen, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Twayne, 1977); Christopher S. Nassaar, *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

6. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 2–3; subsequent quotations of Wilde's novel are from this edition and page references will be cited in the text.

7. I have a very specific sense of the meaning of the term *reader*. I am applying it to the individual who makes an imaginative response to the words on the printed page to create a text. In this sense my reader follows the “writerly” approach advocated by Roland Barthes in his *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974).

8. Not every critic would agree with this approach. Good examples of interpretations that emphasize the homosexual aspects throughout *Dorian Gray* occur in the following essays: Ed Cohen's “Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation,” *PMLA* 102 (1987): 801–13, and Jonathan Dollimore's “Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide,” *Genders* 2 (Summer 1988): 24–41.

9. Some critics, of course, have argued that Dorian has changed for the worse because of the force of art. Cf., for example, Donald B. Dickson's “‘In a Mirror that mirrors the soul’: Masks and Mirrors in *Dorian Gray*,” *English Literature in Transition* 26 (1983): 5–15. That sort of linear interpretation, however, narrowly casts Dorian into the role of Narcissus, and stands diametrically opposed to the multiple forms of reading that I am suggesting.