

JOSEPH CARROLL

AESTHETICISM, HOMOEROTICISM, AND
CHRISTIAN GUILT IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

SINCE THE ADVENT OF THE poststructuralist revolution some thirty years ago, interpretive literary criticism has suppressed two concepts that had informed virtually all previous literary thinking: (1) the idea of the author as an individual person and an originating source for literary meaning, and (2) the idea of “human nature” as the represented subject and common frame of reference for literary depictions. Under the tutelage of Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault, literary critics learned to speak of authors, characters, settings, and plots not as individuals situated in a natural world but as discursive formations constituted by the circulation of linguistic, cultural, and ideological energies. In the three decades during which poststructuralism has dominated academic literary study, a different kind of revolution—evolutionary, Darwinian, and naturalistic—has been transforming the social sciences. Sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, Darwinian anthropology, behavioral ecology, cognitive archaeology, and behavioral genetics do not all agree with one another in every respect, but they are all nonetheless aspects or phases of a common research program. The central working hypothesis in this program is that the human species, like all other species, has evolved in an adaptive relation to its environment and that as a consequence it has a distinct, genetically transmitted, species-typical set of characteristics—anatomical, physiological, hormonal, neurological, and behavioral. That set of characteristics is what in common language is meant by “human nature.” Literature has always given us subjectively evocative depictions of human nature, and Darwinian social science is now giving us a more comprehensive and scientifically precise account of it. The sense of

individual agency is one crucial aspect of human nature, and that aspect is now being explored in complementary ways by personality psychology and by cognitive neuroscience.¹

Over the past decade or so, a scattered handful of literary scholars has broken away from the dominant poststructuralist paradigm and has sought to make use of the new scientific information on human nature.² The simplest and most obvious way to use this information is to examine the behavior depicted in literary texts and to correlate that behavior with "human universals," that is, with forms of behavior that appear in every known culture and that thus appear to be embedded in the nature of the species. Seeking depictions of universals has produced valuable results for literary study, but this first move in Darwinian criticism does not exhaust the range of possibility in the analysis of literary meaning. Human nature is complex and sometimes divided against itself; individuals vary, and some variations depart from species-typical patterns, even in the most adaptively crucial aspects of survival and reproduction. Moreover, literary meaning involves more than the represented subject matter. Authors imbue texts with meanings and affects peculiar to themselves; authors engage in communicative transactions with audiences; and texts have formal and aesthetic properties that are not reducible to represented subject matter. All of these aspects of the total literary situation are part of literary meaning, and all of them can and should fall within the range of analysis available to Darwinian literary study.³

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers two special challenges to Darwinian criticism. First, the novel is saturated with homoerotic sexual feeling, and it thus defies any simple reading in terms of behavior oriented to reproductive success. Second, the central conflicts in the novel involve two competing visions of human nature, and in their conceptual structure neither of those visions corresponds very closely to the quasi-Darwinian conceptual structure implicit in most realist and naturalist fiction. One vision derives from the aestheticist doctrines of Walter Pater, and the other from a traditional Christian conception of the soul. Pater's ideas about human motives and the human moral character are at variance both with Christianity and with Darwinism. Christianity and Darwinism share certain concepts of the human moral and social character, but they couch those concepts in different idioms, and they would invoke wholly different causal explanations for how human nature came to be the way it is. Wilde does not develop his themes in Darwinian terms, but the novel can still be read

and understood from a Darwinian perspective. If Darwinian psychology gives a true account of human nature, including its homoerotic variations and the affective and ethical dimensions of religious beliefs, it can explain the meaning structure of *Dorian Gray*.

In weighing the effects of Wilde's homosexuality on the meaning of the novel, I shall use the incisive Darwinian analysis of homosexual behavior provided by Donald Symons in *The Evolution of Human Sexuality*. I shall not concern myself with the still controverted—and for my purposes irrelevant—question as to whether homosexuality is or is not an adaptive form of behavior. I shall instead compare the psychological character of homosexual and heterosexual relationships. In analysing the conflict between homoeroticism and the Christian ethos, as Wilde conceives it, I shall invoke a Darwinian conception of species-typical evolved sex differences, and I shall correlate homoeroticism with male sexual psychology and the Christian ethos with the maternal female character. I shall argue that Wilde associates aestheticism with homoeroticism and that he sets both in opposition to the idea of lasting affectional bonds and self-sacrificing love. As an aesthete devoted solely to sensual pleasures, Wilde's protagonist repudiates the idea of affectional bonds, and it is that repudiation which produces the mood of guilt and horror in which the novel culminates. Wilde partially identifies with his own protagonist, and he is himself riven by the conflict between homoerotic aestheticism and Christian pathos. The unresolved conflicts in the plot of the novel reflect deep divisions in his own personal identity.

In recent years a number of studies have discussed the specifically homosexual character of *Dorian Gray*, and by making this issue into an explicit theme these studies have taken a crucial new step toward a true understanding of the deep symbolic structure in Wilde's novel. But most of these studies have been written from a liberationist standpoint; most have been written from within a Foucauldian framework of sexual theory, treating of homosexuality as a discursive construct or a literary trope; and none has made use of evolutionary psychology.⁴ Both liberationist commitments and poststructuralist ideas lead critics away from the central artistic purposes and the basic structures of meaning in Wilde's novel. A commitment to a liberationist standpoint typically involves a determination to envision all homosexual experience in a positive light. As a result, most of the recent gender criticism of Wilde's novel has avoided registering the elements of guilt and self-loathing in Wilde's self-image, and those elements are central to the meaning of

the story—to its characterization, plot, theme, style, and tone. (Three studies of *Dorian Gray* have acknowledged negative elements in Wilde's depiction of homosexual experience.)⁵ Poststructuralism repudiates, in Jonathan Dollimore's phrase, "the model of deep human subjectivity."⁶ If the fundamental artistic motive in the novel is to articulate the conflicts in the depths of Wilde's own identity, the poststructuralist affiliations of current gender theory would necessarily join with its liberationist commitments in casting a veil over the meaning of his novel. In order to gain a true understanding of the deep symbolic structure of Wilde's novel, we must combine a recognition of deep human subjectivity with a recognition of Wilde's own conflicted feelings about his homosexuality. If we deploy this combination, we are in a position, for the first time, fully to grasp Wilde's meaning.

A Darwinian critique of *Dorian Gray* would acknowledge the way in which all its symbolic figurations—sexual, religious, and philosophical—are culturally and historically conditioned, but it would also identify the way in which those culturally conditioned figurations organize the elemental, biologically grounded dispositions of human nature. The symbolic figurations in Wilde's story cannot be limited to the socially encoded values and conventional literary meanings available within a specific cultural context. Wilde, like all artists, assimilates the cultural configurations available to him, but he penetrates to their elemental sources in human nature, and he uses these configurations as a medium through which to articulate his own individual identity—his own sexual, social, moral, and intellectual character.

Dorian Gray is a wealthy young man of exceptional beauty. His friend Basil Hallward paints a portrait of him that captures that beauty. While he is posing for the painting, Basil's friend Lord Henry Wotton tells Dorian that youth and beauty are the only things worth having in life and admonishes him to live fully, since his own youth must soon fade. Dorian exclaims that he wishes he could change places with the painting so that the painting would grow old but that he would remain young. His wish is granted, though he does not realize it until some time later. He becomes engaged to a young actress, Sybil Vane, whose talent as an actress he admires. When she falls in love with him, her acting deteriorates, he rejects her, and she kills herself in despair. Under Lord Henry's tutelage, Dorian finds that he can regard her death coldly, as an aesthetic event, and he then notices that the painting has changed; it has acquired a look of cruelty about the mouth. Dorian hides the painting in his old school room, and as he

ages, pursuing a life divided between aesthetic cultivation and debauchery, he never changes in appearance. He remains young and beautiful, while the portrait grows steadily older and more hideously ugly, manifesting in its deformity the moral corruption of Dorian's "soul." Years later, Basil hears rumors that Dorian is secretly leading a depraved life and asks Dorian to tell him the truth about his behavior. In response, Dorian shows him the painting. Basil is horrified and calls on Dorian to repent and reform. Instead, Dorian stabs Basil and kills him, and the hand in the painting becomes stained with blood. Some time after, in a thematically irrelevant episode that bulks out a slender narrative, Sybil Vane's brother discovers Dorian's identity. He blames Dorian for Sybil's death and plans to murder him but is himself killed in a hunting accident. Having escaped destruction, Dorian makes an effort to behave generously to a girl by not seducing her. He hopes his generosity will be reflected in the painting, but the face in the painting only takes on a new expression of cunning hypocrisy. In loathing and revulsion, Dorian stabs the painting in the heart. The knife stroke kills Dorian himself, and he and the painting once again change places. The image in the painting becomes young and beautiful; and Dorian Gray, as a corpse, is old and loathsome.

The three chief male figures in the novel all embody aspects of Wilde's own identity, and that identity is fundamentally divided against itself. The novel is thus a "psychodrama." Writing in a period before poststructuralism had cordoned off "deep human subjectivity," Barbara Charlesworth gives a succinct formulation to this view of the novel. "Wilde, even more consciously than most writers, split himself into various characters and saw in all of them some portion of his actual or potential self . . . his was a nature of contradictions from which he could find no escape . . . With the intelligence to understand all the conflicts of his age, yet without the ability or the will to resolve them, Wilde was finally broken by them."⁷ In a letter to a friend, Wilde himself suggests an autobiographical dimension for the characters in the novel, but his own commentary tacitly smoothes over both the sinister aspects of the three characters and the conflicts among them. He says that *Dorian Gray* "contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry, what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages perhaps."⁸ What he does not say in his letter is that Dorian is beautiful but selfish, sensual, and cruel; Lord Henry is a worldly cynic incapable of registering the moral horror that leads Dorian to murder and suicide; and that Basil is enthralled by Dorian's beauty but appalled

at the moral quality of his life. The conflicts emerging out of these values and dispositions constitute the central structures of meaning in the story. The idea that the characters embody aspects of Wilde's own conflicted identity stands in sharp contrast with the poststructuralist idea that the characters embody various aporias, gaps, and paradoxes inherent in "textuality."⁹

For Wilde, identity consists of two main elements, sensual pleasure and moral pathos, and in his moral universe these two elements are usually set in opposition to one another. Sensual pleasure associates itself with egoism, worldly vanity, and cruelty. Moral pathos is sometimes associated with devoted love, but it manifests itself primarily as pity for the poor and as tenderness toward children. Erotic passion allies itself with sensual pleasure. The morally negative side of Wilde's identity is distinctly male and predatory, and the positive side distinctly female and maternal. In Wilde, the moral sense couches itself explicitly and imaginatively in Christian terms—in terms of self-sacrificing love, sin, remorse, redemption, and the soul.

The most overt and explicit manifestations of Wilde's polar thematic structure appear in his fairy tales—stories that have medieval characters and settings and that are saturated with the spirit and mood of medieval religious experience. In the fairy tales, Christian pathos usually triumphs over egoistic cruelty and sensual pleasure. The Happy Prince and the swallow that serve as his messenger sacrifice themselves for love and pity, and God sanctifies their sacrifice. The Selfish Giant repents of his selfishness, embraces the Christ Child, and is taken to heaven. The Young King renounces wealth and pomp that feeds off the suffering of the poor, and when his subjects revolt, God himself intervenes and crowns him with glory. The Star Child is arrogant and cruel, but he is sore afflicted, repents, humbles himself in self-sacrificing penance, and as a reward is crowned king. The Nightingale impales her heart on a thorn, sacrificing her life for love. The young man and woman for whom she makes the sacrifice are not worthy of it, but Wilde's own sublime lyricism implicitly affirms its intrinsic beauty: "So the nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart, and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb."¹⁰ When Basil invokes the spectre of guilt at living solely for selfish pleasure, Lord Henry tells him that "mediaeval art is charming, but mediaeval emotions are out of date."¹¹ Clearly Lord Henry has not been reading

Wilde's fairy stories, and his flippant dismissal of guilt underscores his inadequacy as an interpreter of Dorian's experience. It is nonetheless the case that in *Dorian Gray* the Christian ethos manifests itself only negatively, as guilt and anguish. There is no moment of transfiguring redemption at the end. It is not a fairy tale but a horror story, and in that respect, it is perhaps more true to Wilde's own life than the stories that depict redemptive transfigurations.

Dorian is not all of Wilde, but he is part of him, and the qualities exemplified in Dorian's career have two main sources in Wilde's own experience, one an intellectual source, and the other a personal, sexual source. The chief intellectual source is the philosophy of aestheticism propounded by Walter Pater. The personal, sexual source is the homoerotic sensibility that places a maximal value on youth, beauty, and transient sensual pleasure. Pater was himself homosexual, though possibly celibate, and in Wilde's own mind aestheticism and homoeroticism converge into a distinct complex of feeling and value. Dorian's life turns out to be something like an experimental test case for the validity of Pater's aestheticist philosophy, and the experiment falsifies the philosophy. Dorian lives badly and ends badly, but the retribitional structure does not simply eliminate the Paterian component from Wilde's sensibility. That component is inextricably linked with Wilde's temperament and his sexual identity. (Several of the scholars who have commented on Wilde's use of Pater in *Dorian Gray* have recognized Wilde's ambivalence toward Pater but have emphasized the negative, satiric aspects of Wilde's treatment.)¹²

The key tenets of Pater's philosophy are divulged in one highly condensed and vastly influential passage in the "Conclusion" to *Studies in the Renaissance*. Pater treats of humans as egoistic isolates for whom reality consists only of transient sensory impressions:

Every one of those impressions is the impression of an individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. . . . To such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down. It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves.¹³

Throughout *Dorian Gray*, Wilde echoes the explicit ethical doctrines of this brief essay. Pater declares that “not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end” (*Renaissance*, p. 188). And Lord Henry inducts Dorian into the philosophy of a “new Hedonism” the aim of which “was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be. . . . It was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment” (*DG*, p. 101). In answer to Pater’s evocation of the amorphous and unstable character of the individual ego, Dorian “used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex, multiform creature” (*DG*, p. 111). Pater suggests that, “our failure is to form habits” (*Renaissance*, p. 189). And Lord Henry proclaims, “The people who love only once in their lives are really the shallow people. What they call their loyalty, and their fidelity, I call either the lethargy of custom or their lack of imagination. Faithfulness is to the emotional life what consistency is to the life of the intellect—imply a confession of failure” (*DG*, p. 43).

By emphasizing the single moment of sensation and the isolated but amorphous ego, Pater eliminates the two central components of moral life—the bonds we have with other lives, and the continuity of identity through time. Following Pater, Lord Henry tells Dorian that “the aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here to do” (*DG*, p. 19). What Pater and Lord Henry fail to understand, is that the “self” cannot be cultivated or “developed” in isolation from its relations with others. Nor can it be developed with an emphasis on isolated moments of sensation; it bears within it the burden of all its past acts. As Darwin understood, those two forms of extension—of the self in relation to others, and of the self extending over time—are the very basis and substance of moral life:

A moral being is one who is capable of comparing his past and future actions or motives, and of approving or disapproving of them . . . Man, from the activity of his mental faculties, cannot avoid reflection: past impressions and images are incessantly passing through his mind with distinctness. Now with those animals which live permanently in a body, the social instincts are ever present and persistent . . . They feel at all times, without the stimulus of any special passion or desire, some degree of love and sympathy . . . A man who possessed no trace of such feeling

would be an unnatural monster . . . Conscience looks backwards and judges past actions, inducing that kind of dissatisfaction, which if weak we call regret, and if severe remorse.¹⁴

Darwin's analysis refers to "man" in general, that is, to human nature. Generalizing from his own temperament as an isolated, introverted aesthete, Pater developed a philosophy of the goals and purposes of life that are not congruent with human nature and that are thus not functional and adequate for most people. Wilde partially accepted Pater's vision; Dorian Gray embodies Wilde's own disposition to live in absorbed and egoistic delight at pure aesthetic sensation. But in Wilde's personality that disposition is set in active and even violent tension with the sense of social bonding and the continuity of the individual identity.

In Wilde's own imagination, the egoistic sensualism of Pater's decadent aestheticism correlates with the emphasis on promiscuous and impersonal sex that is a distinguishing feature of a homoerotic sensibility, and Wilde's intuition in this regard gains confirmation in the research of Donald Symons. In *The Evolution of Human Sexuality*, Symons collates and analyzes multiple studies of homosexual behavior. On the basis of these studies, he concludes that male homosexual behavior is characterized by promiscuous, impersonal sex. He explains this pattern of behavior by invoking the Darwinian logic of differences in the reproductive interests of males and females, and the corresponding differences in male and female sexual psychology. Males and females have co-evolved, but their sexual character is partially complementary and partially conflicting. Males can benefit reproductively by promiscuous sexual encounters, and male sexual psychology is more prone to casual sex. Females benefit most by enlisting the sustained support of a male who possesses material resources and is willing to invest them in the woman and in her offspring. Men tend toward promiscuous desire; women seek lasting relationships. Men are on average adapted preferentially to value youth and beauty in a mate, and women are on average adapted preferentially to value status and resources in a mate. Because men and women have co-evolved in adaptive interdependency, men are adapted to seek the status and resources women value, and women are adapted to be attentive to those aspects of beauty that motivate men. In strongly hierarchical, polygynous societies, men of high rank and wealth have multiple wives or concubines (and the lowest ranking males are consequently excluded from sexual relations altogether). In monogamous societies, males partially suppress their desire for mul-

multiple sexual partners, though pornography, prostitution, adultery, and “serial monogamy” still cater to evolved male proclivities for diffuse sexual experience. In homosexual communities, Symons explains, the male desire for promiscuous sexual encounters is not constrained to compromise with female dispositions toward long-term pair bonding. The result is that male homosexual communities produce a culture of promiscuous sexual encounters. (Lesbians, in contrast, maximize female proclivities for stable, long-term pair bonds.)¹⁵

Dorian Gray has an overt heterosexual plot, and there is no explicit homosexuality in the story—it could hardly have been published had there been—but the putatively heterosexual liaison with Sybil is of a purely aesthetic character, and the atmosphere of the story is saturated with homoerotic feeling and style. That feeling and style make themselves felt from the opening lines of the novel, and the first several scenes establish its sexual orientation by interweaving four chief elements: images of luxuriant sensuality, an overriding preoccupation with male beauty, the depiction of effeminate mannerisms among the characters, and a perpetual patter of snide remarks that are hostile to women, to marriage, and to sexual fidelity. None of these four elements would by itself decisively signal a homoerotic orientation, but in the combination Wilde produces, the effect is unmistakable and strongly evocative. Luxuriant sensuality is not exclusively homoerotic, but when it is closely associated with a fixation on male beauty, it invests that fixation with an erotic charge. Antagonism to heterosexual bonding is not in itself an unequivocal marker of homoeroticism. Heterosexual males can also express dislike for being tied down, but when coupled with homoerotic sensuality and with effeminacy of manners, antagonism to female desires for “fidelity” assumes a specifically homoerotic character. Recent historians of gender roles have argued that until Wilde’s trials for homosexual practices, in 1895, effeminacy of manners was not unequivocally associated in the public mind with a specifically homosexual persona; they argue also that Wilde’s own persona and the public response to his trials were pivotal in fixing the modern public image of the homosexual.¹⁶ But even before Wilde’s trials, effeminacy would by definition already have signalled a disruption or crossing of gender boundaries, and that disruption, since it is associated with an erotically charged fixation on male beauty, gives a sufficiently distinct signal of the sexual orientation that animates Wilde’s characters. Among heterosexuals, feminine characteristics act as a stimulus or trigger for male sexual desire. One chief reason effeminacy can be so

easily integrated with a homoerotic persona is that effeminacy indirectly suggests that the effeminate male could himself be an object of male sexual desire. (The original serialized version of *Dorian Gray* contains a few more overtly homoerotic gestures and expressions than the book version.)

Evoking a homoerotic atmosphere is central to Wilde's artistic purposes. From the very first lines of the novel, he uses all the resources of his style to orient the reader to his own distinctively homoerotic sensibility, and he makes a point of locating that sensibility in relation to the themes of Pater's aesthetic philosophy:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of the laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect . . . (*DG*, p. 7)

Pater had proclaimed that "this, at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways," and he had characterized the ultimate constituent of experience, the impression, as "a tremulous wisp" (*Renaissance*, pp. 187, 188). By importing Pater's distinctive idiom ("flame-like," "tremulous") into Basil's studio, Wilde gives Pater's abstract doctrines not just a concrete habitation and a name but also a sexual orientation. In its delicate and luxurious sensuality and its emphasis on art-like effects, the evocation of this scene strikes a new note in English fiction. It registers a distinct sensibility, and one defining aspect of that sensibility is an overwhelming preoccupation with male beauty. Dorian is first introduced, through his portrait, as "a young man of extraordinary personal beauty" (*DG*, p. 7). Lord Henry expands expressively on this flat denotation—"this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves. Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus" (*DG*, p. 9). When he meets Dorian in person, Lord Henry reflects, "Yes, he was certainly handsome, with his finely-curved

scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair” (*DG*, p. 18). Basil does not merely register Dorian’s youthful beauty; he identifies it as the central value in his own ethos: “You have the most marvellous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having” (*DG*, p. 22). After Lord Henry has told Dorian that youth and beauty are the only things worth having, Dorian cries out that he is jealous of the portrait whose beauty will not die, while he will only get older and uglier. “Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now! Why did you paint it? It will mock me some day—mock me horribly!’ The hot tears welled into his eyes; he tore his hand away, and, flinging himself on the divan, he buried his face in the cushions” (*DG*, p. 26). Scenes of women lying prone and weeping are common enough in Victorian fiction; scenes depicting males in that posture are vanishingly rare. By flinging himself on a divan, weeping over the prospect of his own lost beauty, Dorian crosses a gender boundary in two distinct ways: he displays a passionate preoccupation with his own personal appearance, and he indulges in histrionic emotional expressiveness.

In these opening scenes, delicate and luxurious sensualism, a preoccupation with male beauty, and effeminate manners combine to produce a distinctly homoerotic atmosphere. As a polemical accompaniment to this atmosphere, Lord Henry keeps up a drumbeat of denigrating comments against heterosexual bonding. “You seem to forget that I am married,” he tells Basil, “and the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties” (*DG*, p. 10). In response to Basil’s confession that for so long as he lives “the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me,” Lord Henry responds, “Those who are faithful know only the trivial side of love; it is the faithless who know love’s tragedies” (*DG*, p. 16). Faithfulness is, as Lord Henry says in a passage already quoted, “simply a confession of failure.” Commitment or bonded attachment is a “trivial” form of personal interaction; promiscuous and opportunistic liaisons animated by transient appetites are the “serious” and substantial forms of interpersonal relation. These contentions are not abstract, universal, and gender neutral. Lord Henry is quite clear about the sexual orientations implicit in the conflict of values he propounds. “Always! That is a dreadful word. It makes me shudder when I hear it. Women are so fond of using it. They spoil every romance by trying to make it last forever” (*DG*, p. 24). (Elaine Showalter comments on the misogyny in the novel but does not register the antagonism to long-term bonding as the focal point of Lord Henry’s polemic.)¹⁷ The folly

of fidelity is one of Lord Henry's favorite themes—a complement to his themes of sensual indulgence and self-cultivation as the ultimate aims in life. "What a fuss people make about fidelity!" exclaimed Lord Henry. "Why, even in love it is purely a question for physiology. It has nothing to do with our own will. Young men want to be faithful, and are not; old men want to be faithless, and cannot" (*DG*, p. 28). These are universalizing claims about the nature of human intimacy, but what they universalize is not human nature in its heterosexual form; it is a specifically homosexual ethos produced by isolating and totalising male dispositions toward promiscuity.

Lord Henry's assault on normative heterosexuality is subversive and revolutionary on a grand scale. "The longer I live, Dorian, the more keenly I feel that whatever was good enough for our fathers is not good enough for us. In art, as in politics, *les grands-pères ont toujours tort*" (*DG*, pp. 43–44). This claim could not be more boldly sweeping. In art and politics, *the grandfathers are always wrong*. Not wrong on this or that principle or point of taste or value—wrong generally, wrong fundamentally, wrong simply by virtue of being who and what they are, wrong precisely because, as heterosexuals, they became grandfathers.

Wilde invests part of his identity in each of the three characters, and the relations among them reveal the divisions within that identity. Lord Henry is what the world thinks Wilde is because in his own essayistic writings Wilde actually says many of the same things that Lord Henry says. Lord Henry often sounds like Wilde, but unlike Wilde, Lord Henry is not himself an artist. His creativity limits itself to the formulation of epigrams. Basil is a moralist, not a wit, but he is also a true artist. For Wilde, the central enigma of personal identity is that the creative spirit, as it is embodied in Basil, is fundamentally divided against itself. Basil is devoted to Dorian as the embodiment of purely sensual beauty, but he also believes in the "soul"; he believes, that is, in the continuity of moral identity—in the bonds we have with others that form part of our own inner selves. He argues that one would have to pay "a terrible price" for "living merely for one's self," a price in "remorse, in suffering, in . . . well, in the consciousness of degradation" (*DG*, p. 64). The plot tacitly affirms these suppositions, and Dorian himself thinks of the painting in the same terms Basil uses to explain the logic of moral consequences. The painting becomes "the visible symbol of the degradation of sin," an "ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls." As such, it would "be a guide to him through life, would be what

holiness is to some and conscience to others, and the fear of God to us all" (*DG*, p. 77).

Basil acknowledges the reality of conscience, but as an artist he is also hopelessly dependent on Dorian. Basil works most successfully as an artist when he is most fully under the sway of Dorian's "personality," and when Dorian distances himself from Basil, Basil's art goes into decline (*DG*, p. 163). In his early days, Basil's conscience is blind and his art successful. In his final encounter with Dorian, his conscience awakes to the moral horror of a purely aestheticist orientation, and he calls on Dorian to repent and reform. As Dorian unveils the portrait and Basil sees it for the first time in two decades, "An exclamation of horror broke from the painter's lips as he saw in the dim light the hideous face on the canvas grinning at him. There was something in its expression that filled him with disgust and loathing . . . It was some foul parody, some infamous, ignoble satire. He had never done that. Still, it was his own picture. He knew it, and he felt as if his blood had changed in a moment from fire to sluggish ice. His own picture! What did it mean?"

"Can't you see your ideal in it?" Said Dorian, bitterly . . ."

"There was nothing evil in it, nothing shameful . . ."

"It is the face of my soul."

"Christ! What a thing I must have worshipped! It has the eyes of a devil." (*DG*, pp. 121–22)

Lord Henry's discourse dominates the earlier portions of the story. For the final portions, Lord Henry reveals himself as wholly inadequate to interpret the meaning of the events in which he has participated. As Marlow says of Kurtz's fiancée in *Heart of Darkness*, Lord Henry is "'out of it.'"¹⁸ He does not know that Dorian has murdered Basil, and he does not know that Dorian's portrait—his inner self—bears the marks of corruption and degradation. Despite the appearance of his rhetorical dominance in the exchanges with Basil and Dorian, Lord Henry is less capable of registering the full meaning of the story than either of them. Dorian most fully lives out the doctrine of egoistic hedonism, but he also feels the countervailing force of conscience. Basil feels the horror of moral corruption, but he also feels the haunting pull of beauty. Both of these characters are divided against themselves, but they do at least have depths of personal identity. Lord Henry is simple and whole, but he is also flat, two-dimensional. He professes a philosophy of surfaces,

and his observations on the course of Dorian's career remain wholly on the surface. He mockingly quotes a street preacher's question—what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul? In response, Dorian assures him, with unwonted fervor and sincerity, that “the soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned or made perfect” (*DG*, p. 164). Lord Henry disclaims the very existence of the soul, and Dorian's soul thus remains a closed book to him.

The plot of *Dorian Gray* is retributational, but the meaning of the novel is not exhausted by any simple moral message. Defending himself against critics who accused the novel of promoting immoral behavior, Wilde asserts that “the real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its laws as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself” (*Letters*, p. 263). This is a rather trite and bland account of the didactic message conveyed by Dorian's disastrous career. Dorian's problem is not merely that he indulges in “excess.” His problem is that he fails to create or sustain affectional bonds. He betrays all the people who are closest to him; he destroys them or leads them to ruin. But a more important point, in qualification of this appeal to didactic structure, is that didacticism is a form of resolution; it is an affirmation of an assured set of normative values, and the novel affirms no such set of normative values. There is no resolution of conflict in the story itself, and Wilde as narrator occupies no position above and apart from the story. There is at no point in the novel a single dominant perspective, standing apart from all three characters and encompassing them, that provides a normative, authoritative vision of the whole. The vision of the whole is nothing more, or less, than the enactment of the conflicted, unresolved relations among the three chief characters.

The most likely candidate for the role of internal moral guide would be Basil, but Basil is fundamentally compromised by his subjection to Dorian's “personality.” He is himself guilty of an unconscious complicity with the values that animate Dorian's behavior. That complicity is revealed in the crucial episode during which the supernatural transformation in the painting takes place. While Basil is finishing the painting, Dorian is listening to Lord Henry propound the doctrine of hedonistic aestheticism. Lord Henry's talk is enchanting to Dorian, and it is the

immediate prelude to the supernatural interchange that takes place between himself and the painting. At the end of the sitting, Basil apologizes for fatiguing Dorian. “When I am painting, I can’t think of anything else. But you never sat better. You were perfectly still. And I have caught the effect I wanted—the half-parted lips, and the bright look in the eyes. I don’t know what Harry has been saying to you, but he has certainly made you have the most wonderful expression” (*DG*, p. 21). Basil has explicitly warned Dorian not to listen to Lord Henry and has told him that Lord Henry “has a very bad influence over all his friends” (*DG*, p. 19). He would not himself like what Lord Henry says to Dorian, but he very much likes the effect Lord Henry’s words have on Dorian, and capturing that effect brings him to the highest point of his own artistic achievement.

In his devotion to Dorian, Basil tacitly associates himself with the aestheticist ethos, but aestheticism is not the whole of art for either Basil or Wilde. In speaking of Sybil’s artistic purpose as an actress, Basil articulates a moral conception of art like that which informs Wilde’s fairy tales. “To spiritualize one’s age—that is something worth doing. If this girl can give a soul to those who have lived without one, if she can create the sense of beauty in people whose lives have been sordid and ugly, if she can strip them of their selfishness and lend them tears for sorrows that are not their own, she is worthy of all your adoration, worthy of all the adoration in the world” (*DG*, p. 66). In this conception, the chief function of the artist is not that of celebrating sensuous beauty but that of creating empathy—of suppressing selfishness and making people feel for the sorrows of others. It is this conception of art that dominates the fairy tales, but within *Dorian Gray* it can neither achieve dominance nor be wholly suppressed.

In his conversation with Dorian about Sybil’s suicide, Basil attempts to assert his own moral perspective but fails to sway Dorian and ultimately yields to him, thus tacitly acknowledging his own dependence on Dorian’s identity. In speaking of Sybil’s death, Dorian’s speech has been more coldly and heartlessly selfish than at any previous time; it has all of Lord Henry’s cynicism with none of his whimsical humor. He describes her death as “one of the great romantic tragedies of the age” and contrasts it with the “tedious” “middle-class virtues” of “commonplace lives” (*DG*, p. 86). He dispenses with sorrow and seeks to see the whole episode only “from a proper artistic point of view” (*DG*, p. 86). Given Basil’s temperament and values, one would anticipate that he would be profoundly shocked and alienated by this

speech, but Dorian appeals to his friendship, and “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 a mood that would pass away. There was so much in him that was good, so much that was noble” (*DG*, p. 87). Basil’s fascination with Dorian compromises his moral judgment. He cannot distinguish between the charm of Dorian’s “personality” and his own sense of the “good” and “noble.” His language, recorded in free indirect discourse, is that of someone rationalizing the bad behavior of a friend or lover, and there is no evidence from the text, no verbal clues, that at this point the narrator has any ironic detachment from Basil’s perspective. His confusion about Dorian’s value as a person seems to reflect Wilde’s own perplexity, and that perplexity is at the very heart of the story.

Darwin tells us that humans have an evolved moral sense that consists in empathic human bonds extending over time and generating a sense of personal responsibility. When that sense of human connection is violated, he explains, we feel guilt and remorse. Basil confirms these contentions, and the plot of the story gives them symbolic form. Wilde does not invoke Darwin’s psychological theory. He speaks instead of “the soul” and the “sense of degradation,” but the moral and psychological content of Wilde’s Christian imagery is interchangeable with Darwin’s naturalistic analysis. Wilde is intoxicated by Pater’s aestheticism, but his own intuitions tell him that Pater’s concept of human nature is profoundly false. It is adequate to sustain a two-dimensional character like Lord Henry, who scarcely seems to exist outside the medium of his epigrams. It is not adequate to sustain either Basil or Dorian. Like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Dorian has a glimpse, before his death, of the horror of his own soul. Unlike Conrad’s Marlow, though, Wilde does not try to invest that moment of vision with redemptive power. Dorian loathes himself, but, except by killing himself, he never stops being himself. Suicide is not a form of resolution. It is a capitulation to ultimate failure.

Wilde’s conception of an unresolvable conflict between the aesthetic and moral sides of his own identity is not a criterion of artistic success or artistic failure. It is merely the subject and animating spirit of his novel. One central measure of the novel’s success as a work of art is the degree to which its figurative structure, its stylistic devices, and its tonal qualities are adequate to articulate that subject. The sustained psychodramatic interactions of the characters and the virtuoso interplay of

cynical wit, voluptuous aestheticism, and morbid horror fulfill Wilde's artistic purposes. The novel is in many ways painful and unpleasant, but it is nonetheless a small masterpiece. In order to appreciate Wilde's artistic achievement in this novel, we have to recognize that despite all its sensuous luxuriance and provocative wittiness, its culminating dramatic moment depicts a loathsome self-image stabbed to the heart. The central artistic purpose in *Dorian Gray* is to articulate the anguish in the depths of Wilde's own identity.

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