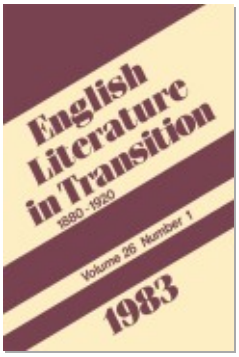
"In a mirror that mirrors the soul": Masks and Mirrors in *Dorian Gray*



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English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 26, Number 1, 1983, pp. 5-15 (Article)

Published by ELT Press

"In a mirror that mirrors the soul":
MASKS AND MIRRORS IN DORIAN GRAY

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In recent decades scholars have generally agreed that The Picture of Dorian Gray retains its position in the literary canon because of the "pre-modern" critical and aesthetic theories upon which the novel is based.[1] The failure of Dorian, it has been noted, to achieve the aesthetic ideals of Wilde's generation clearly sounds the death knell of the Aesthetic Movement even as it heralds the ennui of the fin de siècle. As a carefully constructed novel, Dorian Gray has attracted only moderate interest, perhaps because the rather mechanical plot bears such an intriguing relationship to Wilde's own life. In fact, Wilde's damnation of his young aesthete is now usually adduced as evidence of an intense self-consciousness of Wilde's own fall, a quality that Arthur Symons, in his bellwether essay "The Decadent Movement in Literature," identifies as the most striking characteristic of the Yellow Nineties.[2] No one can deny that the novel dramatizes the central aesthetic problem of its time, a problem that Wilde also struggles with in his essays. The tragedy of the artist depicted in Dorian Gray, however, is more artfully contrived than many critics seem willing to grant. Plot is not the only formal resource of the novel that Wilde uses to fashion his work. By placing what seems to be the most significant structural device--the notion of mirror images that reflect the masks of the characters--in the foreground, we can begin to appreciate that the novel's aesthetic design is far more subtle than having the plot damn the beautiful but fated protagonist.[3]

Wilde himself tried to direct criticism away from the novel's outrageous innuendous and towards its aesthetic design. Attacked on all quarters, Wilde parried with the moralistic reviewers of the Lippincott's Monthly Magazine version by countering that the plot itself produced a rather plain moral--though this, he conceded, was "the only error in the book."[4] Most of the public furor over the perversity of Dorian Gray should no doubt be judged in light of the prevailing Victorian standard of moral earnestness as a mark of "sincerity," as Karl Beckson urges.[5] In the eyes of his contemporaries, Wilde's carefully cultivated role as public sinner spoke louder than any protestations he made on behalf of his novel. Thus, despite his own best efforts in his defense, even a sympathetic critic like Walter Pater responded to topical interests rather than to the novel's serious concerns:

> Clever always, this book, however, seems to set forth anything but a homely philosophy of life for the middle-class--a kind of dainty Epicurean theory rather--yet fails, to some degree, in this; and one can see why. A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as Mr. Wilde's heroes are bent on doing so speedily, as completely as they can, is to lose, or lower, organization, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development.[6]

Not even Pater seemed to recognize that Wilde's intention is to show the failure of the aesthetic ideal, not its triumph. One of the few who responded to the subtleties of Dorian Gray was Arthur Conan Doyle, to whom Wilde wrote in reply: "The newspapers seem to me to be written by the prurient for the Philistine. I cannot understand how they can treat Dorian Gray as immoral. My difficulty was to keep the inherent moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect, and it still seems to me that the moral is too obvious" (Letters, p. 292). The "too obvious" moral refers of course to the main narrative sequence and the fate of Dorian. As concerned as Wilde was with the "artistic and dramatic effect," we ought to consider how other elements contribute to the form of the novel.

One consequence of neglecting the aesthetic form of Dorian Gray has been to undervalue the emblematic episode involving Sibyl Vane that creates basic expectations about life destroying art, expectations which the novel ultimately satisfies. Before he meets Sibyl, Dorian, who will become perhaps the greatest egotist of nineteenth-century literature, has an unrealized potential for good or evil. He has done some work with Lady Agatha's East End philanthropy (p. 39); and yet his petulance causes Basil a good deal of pain long before Lord Henry whispers his poisonous theories about sensation and pleasure (pp. 11-12). Complications arising from their relationship, however, force him to decide to escape the suffering of life by becoming a spectator to her tragedy.[7] Not only do the events involving Sibyl precipitate the crisis that results eventually in Dorian's failure as an artist, they also bring into sharp focus and give point to the most consistent pattern of imagery in the novel, the mirrored image. The metaphor of the mirror is used carefully in Wilde's critical essays to express the superiority of art to life, a point modern critics should remember when tempted to read Dorian Gray simply as autobiography. Good art is not a crude mirrored reflection; for the critical observer, art should be a veiled reflection in which the critic's moods and mask can be discerned. As Wilde writes in "The Critic as Artist," by looking within, the artist creates "a mirror that mirrors the soul,"[8] by which he means a subtle vehicle through which the critic can discover the chronicle of his own myriad impressions. In the novel the mirror imagery highlights the confusion between the imagined and the real, between mask and mirror, and as such it is a key to understanding why artists fail to achieve their ideals.

Dorian is attracted to Sibyl because of her extraordinary powers as an artist. In fact, she seems to be the perfect representative of the artist-hero Wilde celebrates in the essays he wrote in the early nineties. Like the artist described in "The Decay of Lying," Sibyl multiplies her personality through the medium of the stage. "'She is all the great heroines of the world in one,'" Dorian explains, and she is never Sibyl Vane. Her character is strongly reminiscent of Pater's often-quoted assessment of the vicarious experiences reflected in that quintessence of aestheticism La Gioconda: "All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there."[9]

Sibyl, moreover, has a personality as magnetic as Dorian's and as capable of moving her age. Much as Dorian's personality had suggested to Basil "'an entirely new manner in Art, an entirely new mode of style . . . a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek'" (p. 10), Sibyl also has the power to deeply affect her audience:

> "When she acts you will forget everything. These common, rough people, with their coarse faces and brutal gestures, become quite different when she is on the stage. They sit silently and watch her. They weep and laugh as she wills them to do. She makes them as responsive as a violin. She spiritualizes them, and one feels that they are of the same flesh and blood as one's self." (p. 81)

The appearance of such personalities as Sibyl and Dorian is regarded as essential to inaugurate new eras in art. Basil explains this belief to Lord Henry in chapter 1 (pp. 1-10). The elaborate tale that Wilde concocts about Willie Hughes in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." is also intended to demonstrate "that Shakespeare had been stirred by a spirit that so stirred his age" (Artist, p. 186). Thus Sibyl's fate ought not to be overlooked.

Sibyl's importance as a character in the novel is further heightened by the fact that her life seems to imitate art, a jeu de mot Wilde takes delight in in his essay "The Decay of Lying." To explain his typically inverted epigram--"Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life"--Wilde argues that perception, which the artist helps to shape, is the key to knowledge:

> Consider the matter from a scientific or a metaphysical point of view, and you will find that I am right. For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. (Artist, p. 312)

If Wilde fashions Sibyl's character with this epigram in mind, already we can detect a certain fatalism, for away from the stage her life reads like a bad Victorian play. When her mother tries to warn her of the dangers of an assignation with a gentleman, Sibyl drowns out these objections by feasting on impressions of her "Prince Charming." She contrives an absurdly melodramatic scenario for her brother's adventures on the high seas, even imagining the waves as "humpbacked" (p. 65), just as they would appear on a canvas stage flat. She is very nearly as histrionic as her mother, who herself feasts on the dramatic intensity of the scene with her son as she relates her sordid past (pp. 71-72). The very tawdriness of Sibyl's life, though, can only be seen as Wilde's first indication that this artist--who clearly stands in symbolic relation to the age--can never achieve her ideals.

The relationship between life and art, which Sibyl's life dramatizes, is an issue that occupied many in the nineteenth century. The reigning poet laureate gives imaginative treatment to it in a poem that became a favorite subject for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the precursors of the aesthetes of the eighties. "The Lady of Shalott" is generally read as a symbolic statement about life and art, and it has important parallels in Dorian Gray. Isolated from the world, the Lady only sees the world's reflections in the mirror of her imagination; she weaves the reflections into art on her magic loom. When she turns to see Lancelot directly, however, her mirror cracks and her art is destroyed. Likewise, Sibyl lives in the isolated tower of the stage. Using her remarkable gifts as an artist, she "spiritualizes" her audience and transforms the stage at the shabby theater into

the Forest of Arden or an orchard in Verona. When she kisses Dorian, though, she too loses her magical abilities.

Wilde invites an explicit comparison between Sibyl and the Lady of Shalott in the scenes at the theater following Sibyl's disastrous performance. As soon as she makes her appearance on stage, she steps back a few paces and her lips begin to tremble (p. 82). Formerly, she believed in the reality of this theatrical world--"'I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real'" (p. 85). But now she is repulsed by the hollowness of the empty pageant. Later, in her dressing room, Sibyl echoes the famous lines from Tennyson's poem:

> "You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is. My love! my love! Prince Charming! Prince of Life! I have grown sick of shadows. You are more to me than all art can ever be. What have I to do with the puppets of a play?" (p. 86, italics added)

Just as with the Lady of Shalott, this glimpse of reality destroys Sibyl's ability to maintain the illusion--however superior that illusion may sometimes be--that constitutes art: "'I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire'" (p. 86).

As an artist who turns from the mirror to touch reality, Sibyl has run counter to Wilde's dictum about the superiority of art to nature. In "The Decay of Lying" Wilde uses this same metaphor in formulating his critical position: "Life imitates Art . . . Life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality" (Artist, p. 307). In point of fact, the metaphor of the mirror is used quite consistently in Wilde's critical essays, as we shall see, to describe the relationship between art, life, and the critic's perceptions. The prominence of the mirrored reflection in Dorian Gray serves, I believe, to link the novel very closely with Wilde's critical work. The allusion to "The Lady of Shalott" here is so obvious--and so melodramatic, especially with Dorian her "Prince Charming" as Lancelot--that mirrors and their reflections are brought into the foreground of the novel. What is more, Sibyl's failure to maintain the superiority of art to nature foreshadows the failure of the other characters to achieve their ideals.

The episode with Sibyl--especially during the twenty-four hours following her performance--is the turning point in the emergence of Dorian's decadent egotism. In the early stage of their courtship, Dorian is as naive about life mirroring art as she is. He can only conceive of their love in terms of a stage romance. He begs Lord Henry to "'tell me how to charm Sibyl Vane to love me! I want to make Romeo jealous. I want the dead lovers of the world to hear our laughter, and grow sad'" (p. 54). Sibyl's bad acting and subsequent death teach him a painful lesson about the illusion of momentary aesthetic experience. His instinctive reaction to the wooden Juliet he watches on stage is an aesthetic one: he expects great art but only gets "'a third-rate actress with a pretty face'" (p. 87), and so he is bored. Inside, though, his heart is breaking because he is losing something he feels he has been looking for all his life (p. 75). A single kiss has marred the idyllic experience they had both created so imaginatively.

Dorian's grief is more telling than he realizes. In forsaking her he is committed to a life of discontinuous sensations. Opposed to Sibyl's spiritualizing power is Lord Henry, who wants Dorian to be the type of the new Hedonism by always searching for new sensations (p. 22). This dream of aesthetic intensity, Charles Altieri argues, "is the longing for absolutely self-sufficient present moments."[10] If every moment is self-sufficient, self-contained, then each moment is separate from another. Such discontinuity leads, as readers of the novel know, to the fragmentation and eventual disintegration of Dorian's personality. Sibyl offers an alternative to the headlong rush for new sensations. Perhaps it is the cathartic power of her art--for the narrator of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." explains that "by finding perfect expression for a passion, I had exhausted the passion itself" (Artist, p. 212). Dorian, at any rate, recognizes that he is being tugged in different directions, as he tells Lord Henry:

> "When I am with her, I regret all that you have taught me. I become different from what you have known me to be. I am changed, and the mere touch of Sibyl Vane's hand makes me forget you and all your wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories." (p. 77)

Just as Sibyl seems about to redeem Dorian, Wilde allows Lord Henry to arrive first at Dorian's townhouse to shape his perceptions of "'one of the great romantic tragedies of the age'" (p. 109).

Wilde arranges the plot of Dorian Gray to demonstrate one of his frequently overlooked theories from Intentions: "we are never less free than when we try to act" (Artist, p. 383). Though his notion of heredity is a gallimaufry of genetic determinism and Nietzschean will, which Philip K. Cohen labels "confusion bordering on chaos,"[11] it is helpful in explaining aspects of the novel. Gilbert, the aesthetes' spokesman in "The Critic as Artist," argues that genetics is the basis of all action:

> By revealing to us the absolute mechanism of all action, and so freeing us from the self-imposed and trammelling burden of moral responsibility, the scientific principle of Heredity has become, as it were, the warrant for the contemplative life. It has shown us that we are never less free than when we try to act. (Artist, pp. 382-83)

Heredity, he further argues, "has robbed energy of its freedom and activity of its choice" in the sphere of everyday life, thereby negating the importance of action. At the same time, heredity enriches the life of contemplation by endowing the soul with the imagination, which "is simply concentrated race-experience" (Artist, pp. 383-84). This quasi-scientific reasoning seems to be the foundation of Wilde's belief in the superiority of contemplation to action. As Lord Henry propounds in the opening chapters, the great challenge of life is to know thyself: "'The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly--that is what each of us is here for'" (p. 17). Dorian himself discovers that "man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead" (p. 143). One's heritage is thus crucial in Wilde's estimation. To discover these "strange legacies," one can only look within--"in a mirror that mirrors the soul" (Artist, p. 383). Such a remarkable mechanism is precisely what Basil has created for Dorian.

Dorian is fascinated by his genetic and his literary ancestors. We learn of his tragic heritage soon after he meets Lord Henry, who goes immediately to an uncle for a clue to Dorian's character. Not surprisingly he finds that Dorian is the offspring of a romantic match between a beautiful, willful heiress and a subaltern later killed in a duel. Having learned the importance of heredity, Dorian spends hours strolling through the gallery at Selby Royal to "look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins" (p. 143). Each of his ancestors, he feels, has bequeathed some complex sensation he himself must enact. Dorian discovers his progenitors in literature, where the imaginative record of civilization is transmitted, as well. Especially with the Roman emperor Domitian, Dorian feels sympathy; and in fact Domitian's fate exactly presages Dorian's: "as Domitian, [he] had wandered through a corridor lined with marble mirrors, looking round with haggard eyes for the reflection of the dagger that was to end his days, and sick with that ennui, that terrible taedium vitae, that comes on those to whom life denies nothing" (p. 145). Dorian is not the only character whose past seems to determine his future. Sibyl has nearly the same stormy parentage as Dorian,[12] and she seems doomed to repeat the tragedy of her mother and grandmother.

The absence of free will is especially apparent in Wilde's manipulation of the plot. A character's resolve is frequently stymied by uncontrollable circumstances. In the opening chapter, for example, even as Basil--who has thus far managed to shelter Dorian from Lord Henry's influences--decides that he will not allow the two to meet, his butler enters to announce that "'Mr. Dorian Gray is in the studio'" (p. 14). More importantly, though, Wilde contrives Lord Henry's arrival at Dorian's townhouse, instead of Basil's, after the performance when Dorian is trying to resist temptation and is vowing to return to Sibyl. The news of her suicide unnerves Dorian because he realizes his peril: "'My God! my God! Harry, what shall I do? You don't know the danger I am in, and there is nothing to keep me straight. She would have done that for me'" (p. 99). Knowing that the turning point is at hand for Dorian, Lord Henry allows Dorian's "unconscious egotism" (p. 100) to go unchecked in order to shape his perception of the event. He finds it easy to convince Dorian that Sibyl had never been other than a succession of romantic heroines for him; consequently, he must think of her death "'simply as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy. . . . The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died'" (p. 103). He thus becomes the spectator of his own life to escape its suffering. Dorian finally realizes that not only has Lord Henry explained him to himself, but has in fact made his decision for him:

> He felt that 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. (p. 105)

Dorian's course set, he turns to the portrait--"the most magical of mirrors" (p. 106)--in which he can view the mirror that mirrors his soul.

The "most magical of mirrors" seems obviously to be the key to the failure of the artist, particularly Basil's. The first clue that Basil has betrayed Wilde's version of the aesthetic ideal can be found on the opening page of the novel where

we read that "the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skillfully mirrored in his art." Though the narrator only casually introduces the notion of the mirrored reflection here, the language used clearly foreshadows what Basil, Dorian, and Sibyl will discover about art and illusion, using precisely the same metaphor that Wilde employs in Intentions to signal the confusion of art and life. Unlike Sibyl Vane or the Lady of Shalott, both of whom had lived in the shadowy world reflected by the imagination, Basil directly mirrors the comely form of Dorian in the life-size portrait. Making his creation a mirror violates a principal credo of Wilde's aesthetics. The best art is for Wilde not the gross realism mirrored in the fiction of Zola; art should be "a veil, rather than a mirror" (Artist, p. 306). Basil accordingly is troubled with this latest portrait of Dorian, and already he has resolved never to show it publicly.

When Dorian's extraordinary personality first suggests to Basil a new manner in art and a new style, Basil's work embodies the artistic ideals of his generation. Dorian is to him "'"A dream of form in days of thought"'" (p. 10). His early pictures of Dorian as Paris, Adonis, or Antinoüs--veiled, that is, in ancient myth--"'had all been what art should be, unconscious, ideal, and remote'" (p. 114). But, as Basil later confesses, in the life-size portrait he relinquishes control over form by painting Dorian as he really is, and as he really sees him, "'without mist or veil'" (p. 114). Wilde makes the nature of Basil's failure clear in an essay when he states that "The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything" (Artist, p. 319). Like Sibyl Vane, Basil prefers life to art, believing that "'Love is a more wonderful thing than Art'" (p. 84). Ironically, while Basil can see mirrored in the portrait his own love for Dorian, his "'curious artistic idolatry'" (p. 11), Dorian can only see his monstrous vanity (pp. 24-25). For as Wilde opines in the Preface, "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (p. xxxiv).

The portrait is thus flawed from the beginning. Paradoxically, it represents Basil's failure to multiply personalities through his art, while at the same time it mirrors the multiple personalities of Dorian. Perhaps we are meant to regard the ethical dimension Basil's idolatry adds to the portrait as a contributing factor to Dorian's decline since it fosters his vanity. Whatever else we make of the magical portrait, we must acknowledge its appropriateness to the critical theories set forth in the novel. Dorian is attempting to realize the ideal of self-development advocated by the aesthetes of the eighties by giving expression to every cultural and hereditary legacy he can detect within himself. As part of the novel's Gothic donnée, the portrait becomes the "mirror that mirrors the soul," in which he can observe the spectacle of his life without suffering. As an art work, it reflects the gross decay of his life. Dorian, who sought to elaborate a new scheme of life by "the spiritualizing of the senses" (p.130), sadly discovers some eighteen years later that

> Ugliness was the one reality. The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense actuality of impression, than all the gracious shapes of Art, the dreamy shadows of Song. (p. 186)

Thus end the high hopes of the Aesthetic Movement as the novel draws to a close.

Dorian fails to achieve these ideals because he neglects the development of his soul. Though he always recalls Lord Henry's epigram--"'Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul'" (p. 20) --he in fact devotes himself entirely to the senses, hoping to mask the sickness of his soul in the oblivion of opium. He is guilty of what Wilde accuses Bosie Douglas of in De Profundis: "The fact is that you were and are I suppose still, a typical sentimentalist. For a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it" (Letters, p. 501). Dorian's development, to use Pater's analysis, is incomplete because he neglects the "moral sense." As Wilde himself recognizes, even an experience like Reading Gaol can be turned to advantage:

> The important thing, the thing that lies before me, the thing that I have to do, or be for the brief remainder of my days one maimed, marred, and incomplete, is to absorb into my nature all that has been done to me, to make it part of me, to accept it without complaint, fear, or reluctance. The supreme vice is shallowness. Whatever is realised is right. (Letters, p. 469)

The real failure of Dorian Gray, as Wilde acknowledges about his own life, is the failure of the will to assert itself in the formation of one's character.[13] Though Lord Henry still urges Dorian to believe at the end of the novel that "'Life is not governed by will or intention'" (pp. 216-17), this claim is as ironic as his envy of the "'exquisite life'" Dorian has led. Evidently Wilde's notion of heredity and genetic determinism from his essays has been qualified in the novel. Though Wilde, as the creator of his characters, orchestrates the failure of will --for example, when a repentant Dorian is visited by Lord Henry instead of Basil-- his acutely self-conscious characters are painfully aware of their failures: like so many others at the fin de siècle, Dorian knows that his path is leading to perdition, yet he is powerless to resist.

Where Dorian fails as an artist whose life is his great work, he succeeds in some measure as a critic. For Wilde criticism "is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself" (Artist, p. 365). The critic is ever the observer who reconstructs a work according to his own impressions: "[He] will prefer to look into the silver mirror or through the woven veil, and will turn his eyes away from the chaos and clamour of actual existence, though the mirror be tarnished and the veil be torn. His sole aim is to chronicle his own impressions" (Artist, pp. 365-66). In this Dorian surely succeeds, as does Lord Henry who studies every nuance of Dorian's emerging consciousness quite scientifically. Lord Henry appropriately gives Dorian a silver mirror, adorned with Cupids--perhaps to suggest the mirror of Venus, a symbol of sensual preoccupation in traditional iconography. Dorian uses this gift to compare the changes mirrored in the picture with his features reflected in the glass. Apparently he always keeps the two mirrors together; and in the mind's eye the reader can perceive a montage of reflections within reflections as Dorian studies the chronicle of his life. Dorian's fate, however, undermines his "success" as a critic. Eventually he is called to account for his transgressions. His mentor does survive but only to the extent that any of the sufferers at Lady Narborough's dinner party--so much afflicted by the new French esprit--can be said to survive. Theirs is a weary generation, one longing for the relief that a new century might bring.

Thus Dorian observes, "in a mirror that mirrors the soul," the fragmentation of his personality, which finally becomes too great a "burden" for him to bear (p. 205). He has worn many masks--"he would often adopt certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature, abandon himself to their subtle influences" (p. 132)--and many "curious disguises" (p. 160). He has seen his image "dulled and distorted in the fly-blown mirrors" of the opium den (p. 187). All these extraordinary sensations, though, are but ashes upon his tongue. When he at last tries to adopt a different ideal by sparing Hetty Merton, he discovers that he cannot change. Observing himself in Lord Henry's silver mirror, he flings it to the floor, sadly recognizing that even "His beauty had been to him but a mask" (p. 220). Approaching what he desperately wants to believe is "an unjust mirror, this mirror of his soul," he realizes that he spared Hetty while hypocritically wearing "the mask of goodness" (p. 222). Only by destroying the portrait can he strip away the masks and discover that the monstrosity hanging in the shadows of the old schoolroom is actually what he is. The restoration of the portrait to its original splendor--mimetic though it may be--seems to represent the only triumph of art over life in the novel. But this bit of Wildean legerdemain to achieve an artistic triumph should fool no one. In his typically self-reflexive way, Wilde has already had Lord Henry tell us that "'the only things that one can use in fiction are the things that one has ceased to use in fact'" (p. 78).

The metaphor of the mirror establishes, therefore, a key to the structure of the novel. As Masao Miyoshi writes, "for the writers of the nineties--as for the Romantics--introspection, mirror-gazing, is a sanctioned activity. For the world, wear your mask; for a true glimpse of yourself, consult your mirror."[14] In Dorian Gray the mirror is not only the means whereby the characters--especially Dorian--discover themselves, but the mirror imagery creates the verbal pattern by which the artists are to be judged. Focusing on the mirror as a structural device also helps us to see that Dorian Gray is not simply the story of one man's attempt at self-discovery. Sibyl, Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry together seem to represent the failure of an entire generation to achieve its ideals. The theories Wilde proffers in Intentions, as seductive as they may be, finally seem too sublime for his characters, for himself, and for many of his contemporaries. Basil's fatalism in the opening scene undoubtedly expresses Wilde's own: "'There is a fatality about all physical and intellectual distinction. . . . Your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are--my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray's good looks--we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly'" (p. 3). The ideal of the Aesthetic Movement remains an impossible dream in the novel. Wilde's self-consciousness told him that it was so; his decadent vision would not allow him to express it otherwise.

NOTES

[1]The most important studies that address this question are Ted R. Spivey, "Damnation and Salvation in The Picture of Dorian Gray," Boston University Studies in English, 4 (1960), 162-70; Jan B. Gordon, "'Parody as Initiation': The Sad Education of 'Dorian Gray,'" Criticism, 9 (1967), 355-71; Christopher S. Nassaar, Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974); and Rodney Shewan, Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism (London: Macmillan,

1977). All quotations from The Picture of Dorian Gray, ed. Isobell Murray (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), will be cited internally.

[2]Arthur Symons, Dramatis Personae (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1923), pp. 96-117.

[3]Other critics have dealt with the idea of the mirror in Dorian Gray, especially in connection with the motif of the Doppelgänger. See, e.g., Jacob Korg, "The Rage of Caliban," University of Toronto Quarterly, 37 (1967), 75-89. Critics have also noted the allusion to "The Lady of Shalott": William E. Portnoy, "Wilde's Debt to Tennyson in Dorian Gray," ELT, 17 (1974), 259-61; and Shewan, p. 126. No one to my knowledge has explored the way the notion of the mirror controls so much of the language and characterizations of the novel.

[4]The Letters of Oscar Wilde, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 259. Other references to the letters will be cited internally, using the abbreviation Letters.

[5]Karl Beckson, ed., Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), p. 1.

[6]Beckson, p. 84.

[7]Many scholars read the novel in terms of the Faust-myth (thus emphasizing Lord Henry as a Mephistopheles) or the myth of Narcissus (thus emphasizing Basil's role in fostering Dorian's vanity). Donald H. Erickson, Oscar Wilde, Twayne's English Authors Series, no. 211 (Boston: Hall, 1977), pp. 100-3, summarizes these approaches. The major exception is Philip K. Cohen, The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde (Cranbury, NJ: Associated Univ. Presses, 1978), with whom I am in substantial agreement, though Cohen views the murder of Basil as the crisis of the novel (see pp. 123-27).

[8]Richard Ellmann, ed., The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 383. Other references to Wilde's critical essays will be cited internally, using the abbreviation Artist.

[9]Walter Pater, The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry. The 1893 Text, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1980), p. 98.

[10]Charles Altieri, "Organic and Humanist Models in Some English Bildungsroman," Journal of General Education, 23 (1971), 223-24.

[11]Cohen, p. 122.

[12]On p. 71 Sibyl's mother reveals to her son that her own experiences will enable her to protect Sibyl from the dangers of this assignation--an advantage she herself never had since she grew up without a mother. The implication seems to be that grandmother, mother, and daughter all repeat the same mistake.

[13]In De Profundis Wilde confesses to Douglas that "most of all I blame myself for the entire ethical degradation I allowed you to bring on me. The basis of

character is will-power, and my will-power became absolutely subject to yours. . . . I had always thought that my giving up to you in small things meant nothing: that when a great moment arrived I could reassert my will-power in its natural superiority. It was not so. At the great moment my will-power completely failed me" (Letters, pp. 429-30).

[14]Masao Miyoshi, The Divided Self: A Perspective on the Literature of the Victorians (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1969,), p. 311.