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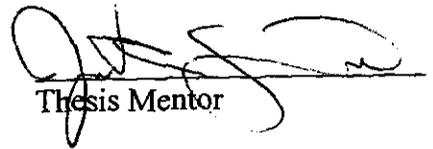
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**“Poisoned by a Book”: Aesthetic Decadence and Plagiarism in
*The Picture of Dorian Gray***

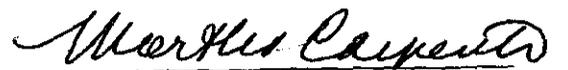
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts
Department of English,
Seton Hall University

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A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Thesis Mentor

A handwritten signature in black ink, written in a cursive style, appearing to read 'Markus Carpenter'.

Second Reader

The eleventh chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* renders the final stages of Gray's transformation from an impressionable and passionate youth to a man crippled by a hedonistic desire to flee reality, and the inspiration for Dorian's transformation is a "yellow book that Lord Henry has lent him" (Wilde 128). This yellow book, "simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own," strongly resembles the symbolist movement in nineteenth-century French literature (Wilde 128). Although there is much speculation about what exact text Wilde is referencing, for the purpose of this study, I will explore Wilde's aestheticism as paralleling Joris-Karl's Huysmans' *À rebours*, a nineteenth-century novel whose main character, Duc Jean des Esseintes, also migrates between the different realities he creates through assuming personalities based on the senses. In taking on Huysmans' text, in addition to those of Walter Pater and Charles Baudelaire, amongst others, Wilde battles accusations of plagiarism and unoriginality to showcase a unique view of his contemporaries. Each of the major characters in the novel mimics a different artist in the nineteenth century and each of their stylistic interpretations of aestheticism. Through their failure to recognize what Dorian becomes, Wilde displays the restrictions of their theories and the collapse of a one-sided reading of any text.

The narrator depicts Dorian Gray as someone for whom "life itself was the first, the greatest, of the arts, and for it all the other arts seemed to be but a preparation" (Wilde 132).

Gray worships the senses in a manner that he feels no one else truly understands. He employs sensualist forms, including Roman Catholicism, musical instruments, Dandyism, and jewels, as vehicles for creating a new spirituality “of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant characteristic” (Wilde 133). Gray transforms his apartment into an aesthetic laboratory, where the aim is to focus on the experience itself instead of solely on the result. Through various experiments Dorian Gray builds on decadent traditions at the close of the nineteenth century to inspire a new theoretical interpretation of what we call aestheticism.

Chapter eleven of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* employs the metaphor of dawn to reveal the death of the first forms of aestheticism and the birth of a new, modern theory of aesthetic impression. Gray describes a sleepless night, one in which man is plagued with “horror and misshapen joy, when through the chambers of the brain sweep phantoms more terrible than reality itself” (Wilde 134). Night, in which “all grotesques” lurk, symbolizes the decadent movement in poetry, art and literature (Wilde 134). Gray associates the idea of being “enamored with death” with darkness because at the *fin de siècle* literature and art were obsessed with the decay of society. By defining the men who succumb to these dark visions as those “whose minds have been troubled with the malady of reverie,” Gray indicates men who hide from their own societies and instead spend their days longing for those past as (Wilde 134). He employs romantic modes to illustrate this idea, as Wilde feels that the age of Romanticism is still alive but in need of reformation.

Wilde’s metaphor begins with a chamber whose darkness is pierced by the light of day. As dawn first enters the bedroom, nature is personified as “white fingers creep[ing] through the curtains,” and the “dumb shadows” are forced to “crawl into corners of the room, and crouch there” (Wilde 134). Wilde expresses that with the dawn there is a potential for change; however

at this time in the late-nineteenth century the light does not fall on anything new but instead remakes “the world in its antique pattern” (Wilde 134). The narrator feels that men are creatures of habit who find comfort when their ordinary objects are once again visible and the terrifying visions of night disappear. It is this moment of comfort, however, that Dorian Gray finds so disturbing, and he ends this passage between the new and old forms of aestheticism by illustrating his interest in those moments of fear:

There steals over us a terrible sense of the necessity for the continuance of energy in the same wearisome round of stereotyped habits, or a wild longing, it may be, that our eyelids might open some morning upon a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure, a world in which things would have fresh shapes and colors, and be changed, or have other secrets, a world in which the past would have little or no place, or survive, at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation or regret, the remembrance even of joy having its bitterness, and the memories of pleasure their pain. (Wilde 135)

The point is not that the everyday objects of the bedchamber have been altered, but that the viewer’s perspective has changed. Instead of fearing the unknown, Dorian Gray finds an excitement that pushes him towards a new definition of life. To see the world in a different light one must unleash the past; however, Gray does not imply that there should be a complete severance from history, but only that society needs to place it where it belongs. The novel proves that in order for society to move into the twentieth century one must simultaneously embrace the past and present; thus, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* anticipates a modern aesthetic through a reaction to romantic individuality, *bricolage* and decadence. By openly using his contemporaries’ works in his novel, Wilde sets himself apart from those who felt that only

individuality was true art. By recognizing his contemporaries' theories Wilde successfully builds on the past to navigate through to the twentieth century.

When Oscar Wilde was convicted of gross indecency in 1895, the *National Observer* claimed that decadence was at its end. This wrongful observation illustrates not only a common misunderstanding of ancient traditions of decadence, as its beginning can be traced back to Roman architecture, but also the wishful thinking of those members of nineteenth-century society whose concerns and fears of immorality at the *fin de siècle* led them to place blame on Oscar Wilde and his decadent contemporaries. It is no coincidence that decadent writings consistently appear at the end of centuries, for themes of decline and decay that many critics ascribe to this style correlate with a universal unease about the implications that a new century holds. The metaphor of darkness versus light that appears in the above passage is Wilde's acknowledgement of this anxiety and his own diagnosis of the situation as something that is not so easily defined.

In "Beyond Decadence: Huysmans, Wilde, Baudrillard and Postmodern Culture," Nicholas Zurbrugg defines the modern idea of decadence in terms of Renato Poggioli's theories of imitation and aesthetics:

An old, tired and sophisticated society may at least in part turn the very object of its fear into objects of hope. The last heirs of a dying tradition may be willing to prepare the ground for the builders of another cultural order, who will be at once their successors and destroyers; the representatives of the series already closing may even delude themselves that they may become the first representatives of the series not yet begun. (qtd. in Zurbrugg 210)

Beginning with Mario Praz in the 1970s and developing through the 1990s with scholars such as

David Weir and Michèle Mendelssohn, disputes over the symptoms of decadence and its implications in *Dorian Gray* have resulted in multiple publications about a topic that does not have a concrete definition. In *Perennial Decay*, editors Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky diagnose this difficulty by placing the criticisms of decadence as much at blame as its primary sources. Because decadence has been seen mainly as a negative criticism of writing, scholars have felt a need to distance themselves from their subjects by categorizing decadence as a movement in itself or limiting its life-span to the end of the nineteenth century. Due to its traditional association with sexual nonconformity, artificiality and morbidity, decadent criticism was looked upon as an insignificant method of discussing a text (Constable, Denisoff and Potolsky 2). Also due to the fact that “the writings of decadent authors are so voluminous, and the associations of the word *decadent* so far-reaching, that the critic can understandably become enmeshed in simply making sense of his or her subject matter (Constable, Denisoff and Potolsky 2).

Instead of defining and then evaluating decadence, critics had a tendency to diagnose texts in the nineteenth century as decadent instead of understanding the intentions of those that adopt the generic features of decadent writing. The inability to understand decadence is proven through the extent of critics’ tendencies to avoid a further analysis of the generic function of decadence. A critic only summarizing texts implies that decadence is not in itself a genre but is used as a method for segueing into new literary forms, like the modernist movement in the early twentieth century¹. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is frequently named the epitome of decadence because Wilde embraces as hallmark features of his work many of the features that critics diagnose as immoral symptoms of decadence; Wilde appropriates these “symptoms” to deride

¹ For a more detailed discussion of decadence as a literary genre, see Teresa Mangum’s “Style Wars of the 1890s: The New Woman and the Decadent” in *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction of the 1890s*. Eds Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson. New York: St. Martins Press, 1994. 47-66.

criticism that derogate his writing as decadent, and “it is for this reason that one so often finds critics struggling to dissociate themselves from the works they study” (Constable, Denisoff and Potolsky 4). I want to show that through Wilde’s novel the symptomatic figures of decadence can be read as literary innovation instead of decline, and this understanding leads to a deeper look at both decadence and *Dorian Gray’s* intentions.

To trace Wilde’s methods of identifying a new aesthetic at the end of the nineteenth century, one must start with his influences. The inspiration for the previous passage about waking up to a new world can be seen when J.K. Huysmans claims that “when the period in which a man of talent is condemned to live is dull and stupid, the artist is haunted, perhaps unknown to himself, by a nostalgic yearning for another age” (181). The many scenes that center on artwork connect the themes of influence, imitation and artificiality. Basil Hallward’s portrait, which frames much of Dorian’s personality mirrors the eleventh chapter when he regards his family’s portrait gallery. The inspiration for this passage can be seen in the very first lines of J.K. Huysmans’ *À rebours*:

These were ancestral portraits... There was a gap in the series, a gap which one face alone served to fill and so connect the past and present-- a mysterious, world-weary countenance. The features were heavy and drawn, the prominent cheekbones touched with a spot of rouge, the hair plastered to the head and entwined with a string of pearls, the slender neck rising from amid the pleatings of a stiff ruff. (1)

Although the portrait intends to fill this “gap,” Huysmans shows with the description of his portrait that Duc Jean des Esseintes’ personality adheres too strongly the decadent traits of his family. The way the “stiff ruff” of the clothing overcomes des Esseintes’ “slender neck” proves

his inability to surmount the degenerative family ancestry (Huysmans 1). His “heavy and drawn” features show a weakness that will destroy his life unless he is able to escape it (Huysmans 1). When Esseintes recognizes this fate, it forces him to leave his familial and social obligations behind in an attempt to avoid what will inevitably be a long life of dullness and reverie, “without any real stirring of blood or stimulation of nerves” (Huysmans 1).

The “gap” that des Esseintes’ portrait fills can be seen as the bridge between his ancestors, who are represented through their portraits, and the main character’s current representation of the changing times. Wolfgang Iser’s *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* claims that a literary work can be understood through a meaning which slides between two poles: the artistic and the aesthetic: “the artistic pole is the author’s text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization but must be situated somewhere between the two,” which results in a virtual definition of a text (21). A virtual reading of the text, therefore, cannot be completely subjective or totally absolute; it must fill the gap between the aesthetic and artistic poles by simultaneously acknowledging both but not adhering to either one (Iser 22). An aesthetic reading of a novel like *A Rebours* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is problematic, because as Iser notes, “one automatically seeks to relate it to contexts that are familiar. The moment one does so, however, the effect is extinguished, because the effect is in the nature of an experience and not an exercise in explanation” (22). To this end, the potential meanings of a text can never be fulfilled. Due of the inherent subjectivity of the aesthetic pole, only an “ideal reader” can realize all of a text’s meanings.

My suggestion here is that Oscar Wilde prefigures Iser’s idea of the ideal reader with Dorian Gray’s character. Iser concludes that “the ideal reader, unlike the contemporary reader, is

a purely fictional being; he has no basis in reality, and it is this very fact that makes him so useful: as a fictional being, he can close the gaps that constantly appear in any analysis of literary effects and responses” (Iser 29). Wilde creates Gray as Huysmans’s ideal reader: someone who can interpret a novel in a purely aesthetic manner because he is fictional and therefore does not have any personal stake within his own novel. Wilde does not give the reader an unbiased view of Dorian’s character; we have no intimate references to Gray’s personal life, only his personality as Basil Hallward and Lord Henry see it.

Wilde can show his readers the negative effects of a one-sided or purely aesthetic lifestyle through Dorian Gray’s response to Huysmans’ novel. Wilde rewrites the scene that Huysmans published in 1884 in his novel as Gray’s failure to view his family in a purely aesthetic manner. Then narrator illustrates Dorian’s tendency to “stroll through the gaunt, cold picture--gallery of his country--house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins,” during which he wonders, “had some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own?” (Wilde 146). The reproduction of this passage imitates not only the plot but also the decadence that Huysmans employs, which Wilde indicates through the idea of a poisonous germ. The realization that his family line has degenerated causes Gray to respond in much the same manner as *des Esseintes*; Huysmans’ character physically leaves the city, and Gray employs “means of forgetfulness” by escaping “from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne” (Wilde 145). *Des Esseintes* and Gray’s immersions in aesthetic interpretations of life are attempts evade from their fates; however, whereas *des Esseintes* becomes totally engrossed in an artificial life, Gray recognizes that a purely aesthetic view can only be temporary: “he never falls into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system, or of mistaking, for a

house in which to live, an inn that is but suitable for the sojourn of a night” (Wilde 136). Through his escape, Dorian vacillates between both the artistic and the aesthetic poles of interpretation but is careful to never adhere to either one. In a careful reworking of his inspiration, Dorian is cautious not to make the same mistake as his predecessor; proving that, although he becomes engrossed in many facets of his imagination, he does not allow any of them to completely take him over.

Stylistic structures throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are near-imitations of those by J.K. Huysmans, Charles Baudelaire and Walter Pater, the latter two lying outside the scope of this essay. Wilde, however, marks his novel with deliberate inconsistencies that various critics have seen as a veil concealing plagiarism. For example, in a chapter entitled “The Gentle Art of Making Enemies” in *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture*, Michèle Mendelssohn cites two different theories about the intentions behind Wilde’s plagiarism, the first being Harold Bloom and Patricia Clement’s idea that “Wilde ‘lacked strength to overcome his anxiety of influence,’ but was anxious to be original and therefore suppressed his sources” (Mendelssohn 92). This claim not only affirms the widespread prejudice against Wilde’s sexual “immorality,” but rearticulates it into a stylistic immorality. The second and slightly more recent proposal noted by critics such as Richard Allen Cave, claims that Wilde creates “an originality founded on the already made, a newness that flaunts belatedness... what he borrowed he intended to make wholly his own” (qtd. in Mendelssohn 93). The main issue with Cave and also Mendelssohn, who takes a middle road between these two theories, is that there is never any conclusion about *why* Wilde makes these his own. What Mendelssohn does accomplish, however, is making the connection between plagiarism and the artificiality inherent to aestheticism through Wilde’s work, which, although she does not elaborate on it in her book, connects his past to his present

which is essential to his ideas for the twentieth century.

The relationship between Oscar Wilde and James McNeill Whistler mirrors the concept of a new aestheticism that reimagines the common decadent modes of artificiality through the aesthetic difference between a painter and a critic. In equating plagiarism with artificiality, Mendelssohn proves that “Wilde’s Aestheticism brazenly transgresses (and therefore displaces) conventions about literary appropriation and creation, by resisting the commonplaces of intellectual honesty and artistic attribution” (95). Similarly, in “Constructing Artist and Critic between J.M. Whistler and Oscar Wilde” Anne Bruder classifies Whistler as someone “firmly ensconced in the Aesthetic Movement, hailing Gautier’s *l’art pour l’art* as his mantra” and that “a painting for Whistler became the manifestation of the artist’s mind, the perfect articulation of the painter’s self, not a mere record of sight” (164). After meeting in 1879 and becoming a follower of Whistler’s aesthetic theories and practices, Wilde briefly abandoned his first mentor, John Ruskin, who “elevate[d] that which represents nature most clearly to the highest position of excellence” (Bruder 162). In opposition to Ruskin’s fear of modernism and its affect on the artist’s appreciation for nature, Whistler envisioned a new aesthetic that, as Bruder notes, “shifts the creation paradigm from the artist as the transcriber of nature’s truth to the artist as fabricator of his—and the world’s—own truths” (164). Whistler claimed that nature only served as his raw material with which he painted, rather than the inspiration of his artwork.

In 1966 Claude Lévi-Strauss classified present the idea of *bricolage* as a term used to describe an engineer who can make do with what is at hand (17). As Lévi-Strauss notes, “The ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project” (17). From this definition we can see that Wilde does

not steal another man's work as a theft, but is rather using his tools, or influences, as a method of writing his own novel. Unlike Whistler, who sees his raw materials as nothing more than a medium of art, Wilde forms his own ideas by using the ideas and techniques of others. Lévi-Strauss notes that a bricoleur's "set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous," because "what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions" (17).

Wilde's ideology surpassed Whistler with the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* because "he gives humans the ability to "discern beauty" as a method of transcending worldly ethics, and as a way to create new forms" (Bruder 168). Here Wilde credits the readers as those who are the "bearers of morality," instead of the immoral beings that Whistler believes his audience to be. A rift grew between the two as Whistler saw Wilde as unappreciative of his new mentor, and publically mocked Wilde's profession and his lecture tour in America. Whistler felt that imitation should not be part of aestheticism, because to Whistler, Wilde did not adhere to the idea that life should be an imitation of art; he saw Wilde's work as a one-dimensional definition of plagiarism. In refusing to see the ways in which Wilde manipulated his work, Whistler gave a lecture that denounced their relationship, in which the "main objectives... were to attack moralism in art, representationality (the depiction of objects as they appear to the eye), art critics and writers (especially those whose process made use of the visual arts), and the principle of the sisterhood of the arts" (Mendelssohn 97). The very stereotypes of aestheticism that Wilde seeks to modernize in his fiction are the elements that Whistler accuses his follower of committing.

Whistler and Wilde's potential to create a new aesthetic through the combination of their painting and writing almost ended in failure when Whistler declared that "the war... is really

one between the brush and the pen” (qtd. in Mendelsohn 97). In his attempt to be original, Whistler actually succumbs to a decadent mentality that ends in his defeat. Wilde’s retaliation and triumph over Whistler can be seen in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where Basil Hallward’s character parodies. In terms of a modern definition of decadent aestheticism, Whistler is the predecessor who refuses to believe that his ideas of individuality epitomize common decadent methods. He represents the dying tradition and in refusing to accept Wilde and his mimicking, fails to enter the new “cultural order.”

Florina Tufescu’s *Oscar Wilde’s Plagiarism* explains the various reactions to Wilde’s pattern of borrowing through the different definitions of plagiarism in the late nineteenth century. Whistler represents the romantic bias of the definition “in its focus on authorial intentions and on individual authors as plagiarists and plagiarized rather than on texts and in its understanding of plagiarism as covering the theft of ideas, motifs, themes or potentially any element of previous work” (Tufescu 4). In accordance with romantic ideology in the nineteenth century, individuality is the ideal. In this view, any unacknowledged copying is considered deliberate appropriation and is morally and ethically wrong. The problem with a romantic view, which can be seen in Whistler’s issues with Wilde, is that a work can almost always be traced back to another source. Both artists and writers are constantly influenced by other works, therefore it would be nearly impossible to give every source proper credit.

In 1966 Claude Lévi-Strauss classified the idea of *bricolage* as a term used to describe an engineer who can make do with what is at hand (17).

Tilar Mazzeo’s “Coleridge, Plagiarism, and the Psychology of the Romantic Habit,” outlines three possible conditions as to how an artist could defend himself against accusations of plagiarism: “when the author has improved upon the original work; when the author has

borrowed from a work so well known that a reader may be expected to credit the original source; and when the borrowing has been unconscious” (336). Although his argument leans strongly on the circumstances of Coleridge’s unconscious borrowing, Wilde’s multiple references to *À rebours* negate this possibility. The two other circumstances, however, can only be acknowledged by *Dorian Gray*’s readers. Wilde may have felt that he was improving upon Huysmans’ novel, but who else can decide upon this but the critics, who are first and foremost readers? Surely Huysmans would not have agreed with that assertion. Mazzeo also notes the importance of the reader in the third observation concerning the familiarity of a text. Although Huysmans and Baudelaire were popular French writers in the nineteenth century, contemporary readers are less likely to recognize their work. Judging from these conditions, Wilde’s plagiarism cannot be defended by romantic standards, and must fit into a more modern pattern.

In an effort to redefine plagiarism, the end of the nineteenth century saw a return to a more classic view: in opposition to the romantically-biased criticism, “classical criticism condemns artistically unsuccessful appropriation...what is criticized by classical readers is not the insufficient acknowledgment of sources, but rather the insufficient concealment of sources” (Tufescu 5). In opposition to the romantic perspective, the classical view is the more unethical and immoral position on plagiarism. In stating that one should be more skilled at covering up his or her influences, this definition implies that only the final product should be shown, instead of the process by which a writer gets to that point. As Tufescu notes, “what is criticized by classical readers is not the insufficient acknowledgement of sources, but the insufficient concealment of sources” (5). The problem with this “primarily aesthetic definition”, however, is that a story would only consist of an ending (Tufescu 5). What I mean by this is that a reader of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would only be able to see that Dorian kills Basil Hallward and takes his own life,

but without knowing how he got to this point – which is shown through his many influences and desires-- there would be no meaning in this ending. Dorian's demise at the end of the novel depends on the ways in which his character imitates the aesthetic characterization of Huysmans' *des Esseintes*. Without knowing first, the plot of *A rebours* and second, the way that Dorian reads and reconstructs the text, one cannot understand why the change in Dorian's personality is so significant. The eleventh chapter in which Wilde employs Huysmans' novel and Dorian's imitation of *des Esseintes* is where one sees plagiarism at its best. The readers' consciousness is just as aesthetically based as Dorian, and now that both have the same aesthetic mindset, the reader is free to interpret Dorian's change by taking the imitation into account. To this end, post-modern thinkers like Nicholas Zurbrugg dissect the term "plagiarism" in an attempt to erase the concept completely. In this view, neither "Wilde nor anyone else can be regarded as a plagiarist, yet his critical writing intriguingly anticipates contemporary thinking on authorship and creativity" (Tufescu 8).

Much like Tufescu's views on plagiarism, Zurbrugg's essay details the modern and postmodern fear of the technology definitive of the Industrial Revolution and how the decadent mentality "is perhaps most interesting as a symptom of moments of crucial transition between cultural orders; moments of anguished aesthetic adolescence...between intolerable past orthodoxies and a sense of 'no future,' or at least of no clear future" (212). The tension Whistler creates between himself and Wilde publicly illustrates that plagiarism was a symptom of the transition, but *The Picture of Dorian Gray* marks the true culmination of these symptoms. The ability to bring a work into a new historical period by reproducing it has the same implications as plagiarism: they are both imitations that can degrade but also inspire a new reading. Once Dorian Gray becomes obsessed with Huysmans' novel, "he procure[s] from Paris no less than

nine large-paper copies of the first edition, and had them bound in different colors, so that they might suit his various moods, and the changing fancies of a nature over which he seemed, at times, to have almost entirely lost control” (Wilde 130). Although the nineteenth century most commonly saw only *l’art pour l’art*, Walter Benjamin notes that “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (272)². By placing a portrait at the center of his novel, Wilde brings art, or at least writing about art, and writing together to create a new aesthetic that potentially resolves the disparity between the two.

From Poggioli’s hypotheses about decadence, Zurbrugg creates his own theory about the concept of a modern form that combines both past and present theories, that “in many respects does not so much build ‘another’ culture ‘on’ the ruins of the present (thereby adding to the present), as build an aesthetically bricollaged alternative to present cultural ruin *from* the ruins and the energies of the present, and *from* the ruins and the energies of the past” (211). In a truly unique incarnation of painting and literature, Dorian Gray’s soul is split between Basil Hallward’s portrait and his physical self. Hallward’s character symbolizes Whistler’s old ideas about aestheticism within the painter’s fears about exploring new worlds and his reaction to his brilliant portrait of Dorian:

A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself...I had always been my own master; had at least always been so, till I met Dorian Gray. (Wilde 8)

² For a further discussion of the modernization of mass mechanical reproduction, see Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Glasgow: Collins, 1979.

Hallward's anxious energy is the same as the intention that dawn carries with it; it has the power to cripple one with fear or motivate one to pattern the future. From his first glance at Dorian, Hallward realizes the possibilities that come with befriending the eccentric youth. If he allows himself to become enchanted by Gray, he loses power over his own life and succumbs to his idol's aesthetic personalities. Wilde is indeed playing on the idea that Whistler represents a romantic definition of plagiarism, which can be seen through Hallward's inspiration for his painting of Dorian.

If Hallward represents Whistler, then he should feel that his work has too much of Dorian in it. In his Preface, Wilde describes a romantic view of art when he notes that "to reveal art and conceal the artist is art's claim" (1). When he finishes his portrait of Dorian, Basil refuses to let the public see it because he is afraid he committed a cardinal sin of his profession: that he "should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them" (Wilde 13). With a shout of, "there is too much of myself in the thing, Harry-- too much of myself!" he admits to his closest friend, Lord Henry, that Dorian's personality has already manifested itself, and his complete infatuation with the young man is pushing him in a modern direction that terrifies him (Wilde 13). In an ironic twist of romantic plagiarism, Basil feels that his own work tells his audience too much about himself. His idea that his own work represents Dorian exemplifies a classical aesthete who wants to keep art and life separate entities, as when he scoffs at poets for their idea that "we live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty" (Wilde 13). If one's work cannot be a reflection on itself but also cannot plagiarize other's ideas, where does that leave us? This passage presents Hallward as an artist, much like those Mendelssohn criticizes, who fail to come to terms with the idea of plagiarism, and gives us a prime example of why Wilde feels that

the definition of plagiarism is in need of changing.

Dorian Gray begins with Basil Hallward's description of his relationship to Dorian before the reader is formally introduced to the character himself. Much like the decadent aesthetic mentality that over-determines and predetermines so much twentieth-century literary criticism of *Dorian Gray*, his reputation precedes him, and the audience forms an opinion of him through someone else before they personally experience Dorian Gray's character. Through these bricolage passages that combine Wilde's new theories with Whistler's earlier illustrations of decadence, Wilde places his novel in the ideal setting to move forward with a new concept. The decadent influences on Gray by Lord Henry are immediately manifested when he sees Hallward's final product. Lord Henry anticipates what will happen to Dorian, but can only see in terms of the relationship between Hallward and Gray, when he lectures that a man influenced by another "does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him" (Wilde 20). Although Lord Henry has the same amount of influence on Dorian that he sees in Basil, he is too self-absorbed to anticipate the evil of his teachings. After their first discussion in the garden at Basil's studio, the portrait and subject are both condemned as Dorian immediately falls under Henry's aesthetic spell in believing youth and beauty are the only assets worth having:

How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young...If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that-- for that -- I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that! (Wilde 28)

Lord Henry's lecture on treasuring one's youth in addition to Hallward's portrait inspires a new way of looking at life. If youth and beauty are the only things in life of any importance, Lord Henry places Dorian in an impossible position. In the same afternoon that he discovers the vast potential of a hedonistic life, he also realizes that his time on earth is drastically shortened because when his youth fades, the pleasures of life will also. With this wish, Dorian condemns his soul to the painting, and spends the rest of the novel reaping the consequences.

The differences between Wilde's work and that of his predecessors also proves that an interpretation of writers such as Huysmans and Baudelaire constantly change according to the time period in which they are read. As implied by Iser, the meaning of a text is relative to the style in which it is written. An artist like Whistler can claim that his work has one singular meaning, but someone reading that work in a different context, time period, mood or profession will understand that work in a different way. Iser, as well as many critics who take the observer's perspective into consideration, feel that "the same subject...will take on a different form when viewed under different conditions or at different times" (193). The fact that so many different artists can be seen in Wilde's novel shows reader the multitude of ways in which people at the end of the nineteenth century view aestheticism and its decadent tendencies. In taking on Whistler, Pater, and Huysmans' texts and rewriting them in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde inherits their styles to display that no one definition of decadence is correct and no definitive reading of a text exists. As Iser notes, "the multiplication of perspectives will blur the outline, but through it the object will begin to grow, and this growth be stunted if one were to try and define, since definition involves restriction to a chosen viewpoint which, in turn, involves a stylization of the reality perceived (186).

In the passages about the family portraits both des Esseintes and Dorian Gray employ a traditional understanding of decadence, then each writer subverts it as the motivation for their characters' transitions. Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky note that there is nothing in portraits themselves that evidence the family's degeneracy:

The narrator's reading of the portraits is mimetic; it assumes that art imitates nature, that a picture can tell us something about the person it depicts...For Des Esseintes, the once-clear distinctions between nature and artifice have ceded to a more mottled aesthetics drawing upon the interdependence of their meanings.

(19)

Much like Huysmans' transformation of decadence, Wilde also illustrates the difficulty of interpretation through Dorian's portrait. When Dorian's painting assumes the character's sins and starts to degenerate, Wilde's main character mirrors the des Esseintes' family. The Gray family line, however, collapses within a single generation; Wilde literally speeds the process to make the transformative powers of decadence more apparent, and the resulting mimesis is more real than the original.

Wilde's characters react to the painting in various ways, and through Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian the author's reverence for bricolage combines with aesthetics and decadence to culminate in a new theory. Just as Basil Hallward embodies Whistler's use of decadence, Lord Henry serves as a mouthpiece for another of Wilde's mentors: Walter Pater. In *The Renaissance: Studies in Poetry and Art*, Pater questions "what is the whole physical life in that moment but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names? But these elements, phosphorus and lime and delicate fibres, are present not in the human body alone: we detect

them in places most remote from it” (246). Here he defines a new, hedonistic method for living that Wilde demonstrates through the multitude of Lord Henry and Dorian’s experiences. Pater manages to connect biology and aestheticism through the late romantic styles in the nineteenth century. As Lord Henry describes it, “the things one feels absolutely certain about are never true. That is the fatality of Faith, and the lesson of Romance... Life is a question of nerves, and fibers, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams” (221-222). Lord Henry has given up on the idea of a soul, and feels that the only way to live is to act as though it never existed. Although the body has an instinctual aversion to sin, Henry believes that “it is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place” (Wilde 21). It is through devious thoughts, and not actions, that one dissents from society and forms his own life, free from the thoughts of other people. Lord Henry is a man of many words and very few actions, and succeeds in directing Gray mostly through his speeches, without setting much of an example.

From the proposal which Lord Henry represents Pater and his view of a decadent aesthetic, his last conversation with Dorian illustrates Wilde’s notion that Pater could not see outside of his own ideologies. To fully understand the ideology, one must look at Michael Gillespie’s work on *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*. Due to the barrage of negative criticism of this text³, even mentioning it seems taboo; in seeing where Gillespie fails, however, one can better grasp his original idea and how it can be a useful tool in deciphering Wilde’s characters and their significance. In his final conversation with Dorian Gray, Lord Henry holds strongly to his initial impressions of his youthful friend and refuses to see what he has become:

Ah, Dorian, how happy you are! What an exquisite life you have had! You have drunk deeply of everything. You have crushed the grades against your palate.

³ See Melissa Knox’s chapter on “Reader Response Criticism” in *Oscar Wilde in the 1990s: The Critic as Creator*.

Nothing has been hidden from you. And it has all been to you no more than the sound of music. It has not marred you. You are still the same. (222)

Regardless of Dorian's noticeable change in personality, Lord Henry cannot see past his own one-sided viewpoint. He sees the myriad experiences in the eleventh chapter as Dorian's victory over life instead of the overwhelmingly negative consequences of a hedonistic existence.

Although Gillespie notes "the problem facing anyone who tries to read the novel from a single, exclusionary point of view," he refuses to see that this refusal to restrict himself to any single point of view is the very reason Lord Henry survives the novel. When Henry remains within the boundaries that Wilde and, as an extension, Pater sets for him, he does not realize the limitations of his one-sided impressions and therefore is safe within those boundaries.

The limitation of Gillespie's interpretation of Lord Henry is that it groups Basil Hallward as having the same stubborn reaction to Dorian that his friend does, which attenuates the significance of the mimetic style of the novel. Gillespie notes Basil's initial reaction to the painting as his only reaction, as the painter cries "no, the thing is impossible. The room is damp. Mildew has got into the canvas. The paints I used had some wretched mineral poison in them. I tell you the thing is impossible" (Wilde 161). In this statement we can see that Hallward realizes the horridness of Dorian's true self. Gillespie, however, feels that "because Basil cannot perceive the condition of duality, he cannot revise his perception of Dorian, even when confronted with the horrors of the painting" (65). Basil makes a final attempt to believe that Dorian is as innocent as he was when he sat for the portrait, but even with these words Basil clearly knows that the portrait reflects his old friend's wrongdoings. In fact he goes to Dorian's apartment in a last effort to believe that Dorian isn't as evil as the rest of town think he is. Wilde even incorporates his thoughts so the reader recognizes that Basil comes to a full realization of Dorian's character:

He held the light up again to the canvas, and examined it. The surface seemed to be quite undisturbed and as he had left it. It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come. Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosy of sin were slowly eating the thing away. (Wilde 161)

His reaction to Dorian's confession is nothing like Lord Henry's, whose limited and one-sided view is now apparent. Gillespie is right in saying that "an insistent nostalgia continually informs the images of Dorian created in the minds of both Basil and Lord Henry"; unfortunately for Basil, his inability to adhere to his first images of Dorian leads to his untimely death. He acknowledges the narrowness of his view when stating "I worshipped you too much. I am punished for it. You worshipped yourself too much. We are both punished" (Wilde 162). Here Wilde foreshadows both Basil's death and also Dorian's demise.

When both Basil and Lord Henry look at Dorian's portrait, they feel that the real Dorian is portrayed, but do not give any evidence of why they feel that way. The portrait is never actually described by the narrator; we only see it through the reactions of the characters. Much like Dorian's personality, only through bricolage of all of these reactions can the reader form an opinion of the painting. After all, every observation by the human eye leaves an impression on the brain, and through these impressions one's personality is built. Both Walter Pater and Lord Henry claim that the importance of one's life is not the culmination of experience, but rather the individual experiences themselves. Pater claims that "the theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have no identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us" (251). Dorian Gray is presented as a blank slate at the beginning of the novel, as the reader knows nothing of him but that which he experiences

throughout Wilde's text. Although Lord Henry would like to pride himself that he shaped much of Dorian's experiences and therefore his personality, Pater argues,

every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of the world. Analysis goes a step farther still, and assures us that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight. (248)

When Dorian claims that "there were times when it appeared to [him] that the whole of history was merely the record of his own life," Wilde illustrates his failure to understand that his personality is being shaped by himself alone, and not Huysmans' book or the lectures from Lord Henry (148). Also, with his soul trapped in the portrait Dorian is unable to grasp the gravity of his actions, and only realizes the consequences of his solipsism he made when it is too late.

The aesthetic spell cast over Dorian heightens his confidence and his peers wonder "how one so charming and graceful as he was could have escaped the stain of an age that was at one sordid and sensual" (Wilde 131). Dorian is very much like these other members of society who feel the need to escape their present circumstances; however, unlike them, he is able to temporarily leave the outside world behind. Without a soul, Gray can at first move through different experiences without remorse. As Renato Poggioli explains in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*,

This means that the classical aesthetic, contrary to the modern, was in no position to admit into the category of the ugly those forms that might be said to have a not-

new beauty, a familiar or well-known beauty, a beauty grown old, an overrated or common beauty: all synonyms that could serve to define kitsch or stereotype. (81)

Dorian begins by strictly adhering to this principle of the classical aesthetic, and literally surrounds himself with decadent beauty. He is at once in love with a beautiful youth named Sybil Vane, but when he sees an ugly side to her (her change in acting ability), he dismisses her as quickly as he falls in love. In the novel's span of eighteen years, Dorian spends an entire year "accumulat[ing] the most exquisite specimens that he could find of textile and embroidered work," and "on one occasion he took up the study of jewels," as their literal beauty cannot be argued (Wilde 142 and 138).

Dorian's search for beauty seems to be an escape from reality, but in actuality he wants to prove that he can live in both his own worlds and also be a functioning member of society. Almost in defiance of des Esseintes' inability to socialize with the people he once knew, Dorian tries to incorporate his new ideology with his past life as a member of London's elite:

He was not really reckless, at any rate, in his relations to society. Once or twice every month during the winter, and on each Wednesday even while the season lasted, he would throw open to the world his beautiful house....His little dinners...were noted as much for the careful selection and placing of those invited as for the exquisite taste shown in the decoration of the table. 132

The further he progresses into own imaginary worlds, however, the harder it becomes for him to be around others. Whereas des Esseintes' main objective is to escape from others, Dorian begins to realize that he is really trying to hide from himself. When the narrator describes "the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne," he refers to Dorian's fear of his

extreme individuality. All of Dorian's adult life has been lived through his impression of other people and characters. The portrait, which places Dorian in a truly unique situation, is first a source of intense pleasure and egotism, but becomes a cause for deep anxiety and self-hatred.

Because Dorian's situation is so unique, he cannot go to Basil or Lord Henry for comfort: the men that led and trapped him into a hedonistic life are unable to understand or give him advice, and Dorian's mentors abandon him. Once Dorian is left alone with the painting, one can see that "central to every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient" (Iser 20). Not only can we finally figure out who Dorian is without his influences, we also realize that Dorian himself represents a reader of texts; the way he perceives both Huysmans' novel and Basil's portrait show his nature as deeply confused. Dorian himself does not know how he feels about the painting. His addiction to opium at once seems to be a method of completely avoiding the painting and its implications, but then "on his return he would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin, and smiling...at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own" (Wilde 144). Although Dorian can see the horrifying effects of his behavior, it only appears in the painting and therefore he believes he is immune from the effects. Dorian's own confusion and the constant changes in his attitude and behavior make it virtually impossible for the reader to come to any conclusion about his character.

Lord Henry feels that "modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age. I consider for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality" (82). When Dorian realizes that he cannot truly be separated from his soul, he stabs the portrait with the same knife that he used to kill the painter. He feels it will "kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill his monstrous soul-life, and without its

hideous warnings he would be at peace” (Wilde 229). He refuses to recognize the past and its importance, and as a result fails to survive the end of the nineteenth century. Much of British society condemned *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when it was published in 1890 because they associated the decadent styles with an immorality. With his death they believed that Gray escaped persecution for the murder he committed, instead of seeing that society would have been unable to persecute a man who is so disconnected from reality.

Pater feels that “in a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike (250). Although Dorian was careful to allocate only a certain amount of time to any obsession before moving on, that in itself was his habit and failure. Without any regard for the consequences of his actions, Gray fails to reconcile his past with his contemporary self, and his demise marks the violent death of the old view of aestheticism that cites only artificiality, immorality and decadence as its credo. At the end of the novel, Lord Henry’s wisdom is evident in his last comments, when Dorian once again blames Huysmans’ novel for his demise: “as for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame” (Wilde 224). Much as authors and critics try to distance themselves from decadence and its implications, Wilde recognizes that only by embracing it can one move forward. Through the use and explicit critique of his predecessors’ overtly decadent and aesthetic themes, Wilde transports them to the modern period at the end of the nineteenth century, and prepares British literature for the twentieth century.

Iser's theory about one's difficulty in interpreting the aesthetics of a text directly corresponds to the reader's problems with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He claims that our "constant need for definitions induced by the text seems to jeopardize our attempts to grasp the nature of literature...[and] is in no way different from the definition they accept as apposite for the study of literature" (26). In this manner, the various stylistic changes in Wilde's novel inspire many different definitions so that we can never come to one single definition of Dorian. At first the reader sees Dorian as Basil Hallward's inspiration, a youth whose very beauty and innocence inspires Hallward's best work. He is favorite of London society as soon as he comes of age; women fall in love at first sight and men want nothing more than to be his friend. Once Lord Henry enters Dorian's life, however, we see nothing but a mirror of his new friend's ideology. When Basil visits Dorian after Sybil Vane's untimely death, he notices the change in his friend's personality:

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. 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. (Wilde 112)

Not only is Basil too caught up in his own definition of Dorian to realize that his portrait is not a true representation, he adheres to his own beliefs until it is too late. Lord Henry, as I have noted above, cannot see beyond his own definition of Dorian therefore survives the novel with his own visions of beauty intact.

Wilde designs the narrative of *Dorian Gray* so that the reader cannot come to a concrete definition of his character. Through reader-response critics' work, we are now aware that both

the author and the reader take part in creating textual meaning, and in cases such as Wilde's novel the reader is ultimately confused about the finite meaning of the ending:

this confusion can only come about because the literary text at least potentially prestructures these 'results' to the extent that the recipient can actualize them in accordance with his own principles of selection. In this respect, we can say that literary texts initiate 'performances' of meaning rather than actually formulating meaning themselves. Their aesthetic quality lies in this 'performing' structure, which clearly cannot be identical to the final product, because without the participation of the individual reader there can be no performance. (Iser 26)

Dorian Gray performs his various interpretations of Huysmans' text by providing a model of the implied reader. In the end of the novel, neither Dorian nor the reader can come to any concrete definition of his character. Dorian does not know whether the portrait symbolizes his triumph over sin or a terrible misfortune, and he dies before Dorian or the reader can come to any conclusion about his true nature. In this light, one can see how the Oscar Wilde prefigures the relationship between the writer and his readers. Our ability to realize the limitations of both Basil Hallward and Lord Henry's characters make the confusion surround Dorian's character apparent to reader. When the majority of the public misinterpreted *The Picture of Oscar Wilde*, they did so by trying to discover what Wilde wanted to say through Dorian's fate. Only with an understanding of reader-response, however, can the current critic realize that Dorian is purposefully allusive and confusing. In trying to define Huysmans' novel as promoting a one-sided view of beauty and the senses, his one-sided interpretation of *des Esseintes* proves to be Gray's demise. If the reader is to learn anything from Dorian's character, is it that we should not try to discover a single interpretation of any reading.

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