



**Poetics of Fantasy  
and Personality Coherence  
in Oscar Wilde's**

**The Picture of Dorian Gray**

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ملخص

شعرية الخيال وثبات الشخصية

في رواية (صورة دوريان جراي) لأوسكار وايلد

هرروب، يتناول هذا البحث نقاد الخيال  
البارزين، مثل أريك رابكن وليو برسانيي  
وروزميري جاكسون ودبليو أر اروبين، إذ  
لفت هؤلاء عنايتنا إلى عمل الخيال الشكلي  
ومضامينه الجلية وان النفس الحرة ينقصها  
الهوية

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخيال، الجمال،  
الميلودراما، الابيقورية، اللذة، الهيدونية،  
القوطية، الشخصية، الهوية.

استعمل أوسكار وايلد فيل في روايته  
(صورة دوريان جراي) على ما اختلف من  
أشكال الخيال ليعزز مقومات لغته الفنية، فقد  
اكتشف معالم خيال متنوعة ليفاجيء القارئ .  
ولقد افضى استعمال طرائق الخيال هذه إلى  
كشف توقعات القارئ ومعارضتها، ولاسيما  
ما اتصل بها خفي من معلومات وأحداث في  
الكتابة الفنية. إذ أن نقد الخيال خلال الربع  
الأخير من القرن العشرين يتعارض مع  
المفهوم التقليدي للخيال بوصفه منفذ

**Abstract**

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde turned to the forms of fantasy in order to create what he considered an artistic language. In particular, he explored fantastic methods for surprising readers; these methods involved exposing as well as contradicting their expectations of unambiguous information in artistic writing. Because criticism of fantasy in the last quarter of the twentieth century often contradicts the conventional definition of fantasy as an escapist mode, the paper surveys a few significant critics of fantasy - like Eric Rabkin, Leo Bersani, Rosemary Jackson and W.R. Irwin - who have drawn our attention to fantasy's formal operations and to fantasy's implications that a self which is truly free lacks identity.

Keywords: fantasy, aesthetic, melodrama, epicureanism, hedonism, Gothic, personality, identity

**Introduction**

Fantasy has been described as creating a space where events are more orderly than those of the ordinary world (Irwin 11-17). But fantasy can have the opposite effect too: it can dismantle order. It contradicts common sense. It questions identity. It even contradicts other fantasies, since, as Eric Rabkin observes, it can occur entirely within the sphere of language (7).

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (henceforward *DG*) shows fantasy at work in these three ways. In reaction to what Walter Pater described as the "perpetual motion of life," Dorian creates an impossibly orderly and isolated world, an aesthetic paradise governed by different laws than those of the rest of the society (Long and Jones 248-9). Dorian can still grow old, however, and so in Chapter 7 a portrait painted of Dorian begins to age in his place, freeing him even further from social and physical constraints. Fantasy, a mode that originates in dissatisfaction, thus corrects one of its own creations.

Besides providing wish-fulfillment the magic portrait in *DG* has an inherently disruptive

function. It undermines laws of society as well as nature, since Dorian can behave as he wishes, protected by his innocent looking face from public disapproval. The portrait also seems to encourage self-destructiveness in Dorian. At first Dorian is happy to be free of the constraints of conventional morality. He hopes to become the "visible symbol" of a guiltless aestheticism, in which he may "give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream ...." (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 35).<sup>1</sup> His "new hedonism" is thus founded on a degree of self-knowledge that society ordinarily discourages. This self-knowledge is a mixed blessing, however. Because the portrait takes onto itself the tell-tale marks of his experience, it frees Dorian to express and experience desires and feelings that, owing to its increasing ugliness, it implicitly condemns. Moreover, though the portrait seems to be a conscience, it does not act like one in one important respect, since it makes it possible for Dorian to sin. The portrait simply gives Dorian the freedom to be himself, then suggests that he is

abominable. As a result, the portrait is partly responsible for Dorian's downfall. At first Dorian is fascinated by the increasingly evil-featured portrait, but in the end, when he realizes that he cannot influence what it shows him, he hates it. Finally, he tries to destroy the portrait, but he dies mysteriously himself. In trying to regain the control over his identity that the fantastic portrait obviates he virtually commits society.

#### The Aesthetic Paradise

Wilde's first use of fantasy in *DG* is to construct a world informed by imagination. It excludes a nature "understood as the inhuman chaotic force of matter, as the enemy of mind and of artistic contemplative thought" (Breuglemans 11). Rene' Breuglemans paraphrases here Vivian's remarks on Nature in "The Decay of Lying," in which Vivian contrasts Nature's crude monotony to the "infinite variety" that "resides in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who looks at her" (12). Infinite variety, a key concept of Wilde, accrues to the creative mind. Wilde links that mind to fantasy, which rejects or is "blind" to the

common sense notion of what is possible or desirable. Lord Henry Wotton dissociates even sin from nature: "it is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place" (35). Wotton suggests here that the fantastic paradise Dorian will soon inhabit is more than an escape world. It is the creative mind itself.

Wilde describes Dorian's paradise with a prose that implies a fusion of fantasy and art:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred

amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac,

or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn. (19)

The unreal world Wilde opens to us in his first paragraph is emblematic of fine arts. Its description is composed entirely of words signifying exquisite stimuli. Odours are composed like musical notes, contrasting in lightness and heaviness, scent pulsing into the room by the conductor wind. Intertwined alliteration and assonance

underscore Wilde's self-conscious artfulness. As always, because Wilde conceives of art as flourishing, like fantasy, at a remove from mundane experiences, Wilde associates the two.

In the second paragraph Lord Henry Wotton illustrates the method by which Dorian is to construct his own aesthetic paradise. Wotton lies on the sofa, looking out into the garden:

and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussor-silk

curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary

Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid, jade-faced painters of Tokyo who,

through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion. (19)

By having "impressions" that are more inventive than receptive, Wotton exploits that inevitable wall of personality Water Pater described in his "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* (157).

At first the passage appears to illustrate the flux of life, which produces an impression by chance. Like the birds, denizens of Heraclitus' river of life, which are gone as soon as they appear, Wotton's impression is itself also of short duration, "a momentary Japanese effect." Still, Wotton associates his impression with an art form that was a touchstone of late Nineteenth century taste. Japanese art seems "necessarily immobile," capturing and freezing "the sense of swiftness and motion." It transmutes mutable life into form. In the end Wotton and Japanese art as well as the birds are all displayed formally in the carefully arranged words of the page, fixing movement, pattern and impression symbolic of but also independent of the flux of life. Because the subjective personality filters and shapes perception, Wotton can use it not only to select the best experiences actually available to him but also to fantasize a world more formal and exquisite than Nature.

Dorian's initial paradise meets the criteria for fantasy of one group of fantasy critics, headed by W.R. Irwin, for

whom magic or "bizarre material" is less essential to fantasy than the construction of a separate sphere that in its very isolation provides an ongoing contradiction of "the established sense of possibility" (Irwin 155). In his book *The Game of the Impossible* Irwin describes the fantastic high society invented by the later fantasist, Ronald Firbank, whose ornate prose, witty dialogues and eccentric aesthetic characters resemble Wilde's. There is

a group of fantasies derived from showing societies that, because of prevailing values,

attitudes, and styles of living within a group of persons, are exotic beyond credibility. The fantasy is created not by external conditions, but by the existence and interaction of some small and concentrated community of persons who share strange values, whose total outlook and communication are determined by extreme snobbery, preciousness, affection [sic], ennui, or the like. So complete is their eccentricity that they rarely need discuss it .... So absorbed are these social groups in their own

orchidaceous ways that their idiosyncrasy is self-evident.

Comment, or even climactic scenes, in which sense triumphs over nonsense, would be otiose. (113-4)

Like Firbank's eccentrics, Henry Wotton, Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward, concentrate on what Walter Pater called the "highest quality" in their moments (Pater, "Conclusion") so that nothing mundane will intrude upon their awareness. Their very lives are shaped as aesthetic structures, as Dorian's rise and fall as an overreacher. Even Dorian's excursions into the slums are adventures with literary conventions and character types rather than with the "realistic" world of the Naturalist fiction Wilde disliked (Pater, "A Novel by Mr. Wilde" 36).

The absorption of these "exotic" characters into their "strange values" produces a metamorphosis of human into art object that is fantastic in both its impossibility and its ambiguity. Dorian transmutes himself into artistic form. Critics have remarked on the irony in Dorian's portrait's coming to "life" while Dorian's body is fixed in its most perfect

form, like a work of art (Erickson 110). However, long before the portrait changes and magic enters the novel Dorian begins to appear as an exquisitely crafted object. Troubled by a conversation with Wotton, Dorian retreats to the garden, where he buries his face pettily in some lilac blossoms. He is at once desirable as a young man and admirable as a piece of artwork:

He was bare-headed, and the leaves had tossed his rebellious curls and tangled all their gilded threads. There was a look of fear in his eyes, such as people have when they are suddenly awakened. His finely chiselled nostrils quivered, and some hidden nerve shook

the scarlet of his lips and left them trembling. (37)

In this significant passage life transmutes into form. Dorian's tangled curls, trembling scarlet lips and timid self-consciousness, stock images of sexual prey, are nevertheless inert. Dorian seems to metamorphose like an Ovidian character into some inanimate object. His lips are "chiseled," his hair "gilded." His bare tangled head could be the bust of a faun or a

Ganymede. Like the people on Keats' Grecian urn, Dorian is stilled into form at a moment when he displays what his friend perceives as his essential nature. Such images do not suggest the infinitesimal pause of attention, but permanency, which goes against the law of nature.

Dorian's function as a beautiful boy to be looked at happens only for a short while. Eventually he is ambitious to be the exemplar of "a new Hedonism that was to recreate life and to save it from ... harsh uncomely Puritanism" (143). As an active hedonist, however, he still shapes himself with an artist's selectivity. In *Beyond the Tragic Vision* Morse Peckham observes: "Dorian is the artist, the dandy, the stylist whose identity is presented as antithetical to his personality" (318). Personality is multifarious, unpredictable, and uncontrollable; the identity is coherent and crafted, like a work of art (Bersani). When Dorian eventually decides to become a dandy, it is a role which allows him, as Peckham says, to maintain an identity while investigating "London's erotic and economic sub-world"

(318). Dorian's ambition is thus to invent an ideal identity that will not be overwhelmed by the unconscious he intends to explore.

Dorian's identity eventually breaks down because his personality becomes more than his fantastic aesthetic paradise allows for. The most obvious example of the distance between the aesthetic paradise and Dorian is Lord Henry Wotton's inability to conceive that Dorian might commit a crime. Dorian finds that he cannot at once curb his personality to create an ideal identity and "live out his life fully and completely, ... give form to every feeling, expression to every thought ..." (35). He discovers that the personality cannot help but struggle against the restraints of an ideal identity. As Gilbert puts it in "The Critic as Artist,"

the true tragedy that dogs the steps of most artists is that they realize their ideal too

absolutely. For, when the ideal is realized, it is robbed of its wonder and its mystery, and

becomes simply a new starting-point for an ideal that is other than itself .... This ... is the

explanation of the value of limitations in art. (Wilde, "The Artist as Critic" 370)

Dorian's obsessive fears, his cruelties and remorse, his eventual longing to be virtuous, all create the "limitations" that expel him from an idealized fantasy world, which W.H. Auden calls Wilde's Eden. Eden is a happy place where "space is both safe and free. There are walled gardens, but no dungeons, open roads in all directions but no wandering in the wilderness." This orderly dream Eden is threatened, says Auden, by the Serpent, "any serious need or desire; acquaintance with him "results in immediate expulsion" (Auden 410-11).

Expulsion is not necessarily a sign that Dorian has gone astray; Wilde's admiring attitude to his erring hero suggests that there is something accomplished through his imperfections and his wanderings in his wilderness. The upsurge of Dorian's passion and desire bring about, not an end to fantasy, which shapes a perfect, isolated order, to another, which breaks order down.<sup>2</sup>

Fantastic Disorder: The Ideal Breaks Apart

Dorian first contemplates the demise of his paradise when he sees his finished portrait. "I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful," he declares enviously, "but this picture will remain always young .... If it were only the other way!" (42). Dorian's wish never to change is not vanity; he never, we are told, paid much attention to Basil's compliments (41). His envy rises from an impossible dilemma. Dorian can find fulfillment though taking unashamed pleasure in the physical world, but "the life that was to make his soul would mar his body" (42). Though the aim of Dorian's life should be "self-development," Wotton tells him, this will only be possible for a short while. When grows old, there will be "no triumphs left" (39). Wilde, himself fond of beautiful young men, has every sympathy with Wotton's and Hallward's inclination to consider Dorian as their own particular inspiration. Nevertheless, Wilde also appreciates the tragedy that is inevitable where everything, including the exercise of

imagination itself, depends on something as transient as youth.

Aging turns out not to be Dorian's greatest problem, however. In Chapter 7 Wilde introduces a new fantastic device, magic, to remove the problem of aging. Once Dorian ceases to grow old, the aesthetic world should be without defect. However, rather than make conditions better than they ordinarily might be, as is commonly assumed to be fantasy's function, the fantastic portrait brings into the open a self-loathing that precedes and survives Dorian's liberation from the aging process. One frequently noted component of Dorian's downfall is his conscience. Dorian seems to assume that moral law still obtains, that the portrait merely conceals from the world "the ruin he had brought upon his own soul." At first, Dorian thinks of that ruin with pleasure: "he grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul" (141). Then he becomes distressed and agitated by the vicious aspect of his portrait, until at last he assaults it, an act

which, leading to his death, expels him literally from Eden.

Dorian's self-loathing derives from the irreconcilability of his desires to inhabit an ideal aesthetic world and to explore and express his personality. Fantasy now serves Wilde as a means of confronting the limits of anything that immobilizes, including art. Thus, for a time fantasy becomes in *DG* inimical rather than supportive of art. In his aesthetic paradise, Dorian is expected to transcend what is coarse in human nature. As we have seen, his friend Wotton rejects the possibility that Dorian might discover in himself a violent impulse. Though he insists that Dorian has shameful thoughts and dreams, they occur "in the brain only." He imagines only "wonderful" consequences should Dorian forget his inhibitions: "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. With your personality there is nothing you could not do." Dorian's unrestrained personality is "young, fiery-

coloured" to an almost starry-eyed Wotton (39).

Wotton's idealized conception of Dorian's personality conforms to Walter Pater's theory of epicureanism. The epicurean, says Pater, is automatically virtuous as the result of "a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism" (Pater, "A Novel by Mr. Wilde" 37). This development is harmonious because the epicurean is aloof from action, and therefore avoids dwelling upon any particular desire. In contrast to the voluptuous Dorian Gray, Marius, Pater's own model epicurean, is preserved by "a genuine virility," a "hatred of what was theatrical," its austerity, thoughtfulness and passivity. Throughout *A Future for Astynax* and *Baudelaire and Freud*, Bersani says that the emergence of desire, or the awareness of a lack, lies behind of fantasy's often violent assaults upon the integrity of an identity. To the extent that the balanced epicurean identity prevents, rather than permits, the full experience and expression of desire, it invites these fantastic assaults upon itself.

Dorian Gray fails to measure up to the standard of contemplative distance that Marius embodies: he is active, as when he murders Basil Hallward, and he is obsessed by particular emotions, including his final desire to be good. He is subject to such unwelcome passions as disappointment, obsessive desire and fear. His career, from his first jealousy of the portrait to his final assault on it, is shaped by his explosive responses to restrictions on himself. In the end, to destroy himself is to finally eliminate his restrictive coherence. Fantastic disorder and violence becomes increasingly the expression of the collision of his irreconcilable identities as perfect art object and epicurean critic and imperfect, even revolting, human being. As the novel proceeds the kind of fantasy that comes to govern Dorian's story resembles what Rosemary Jackson believes is modern fantasy, which is "less and less to assume a transcendental role or to invent superworlds" (79). "Incoherent, fluid selves exist," she later adds, "in opposition to precious portraits of individuals as whole or essential" (87). Crimes and

perversions like Dorian's are common in fantasies which seek to uncover what is "behind, or between, separating forms and frames"; this shapeless material appears "demonic" because it threatens to overturn the order we would like to believe informs the world and our cultures (Jackson 57).

### The Fantastic Structure

Sympathetic critics of Oscar Wilde tend to look for the themes that unify the novel's structure. George Woodcock and Christopher Massar detect in the book's organization a meaning pattern of opposed impulses. Epifanio San Juan argues that the portrait, "an image objectifying the inner motivation of the major characters, ... integrates the formal elements of [Wilde's] narrative" (39). When reading *DG*, however, the reader does not experience a form characterized by integration and harmony. While the book certainly has important themes worked through, stylistically it is full of surprises. The reader is subject to frequent, radical changes in modes of writing and in their corresponding points of view. At various points one

finds Gothic and melodramatic writing, witty aphoristic dialogue, aesthetic debates, detailed description of luxurious interiors and imitations of the decadent manners. These various modes of writing replicate the fantastic mutations of point of view that Dorian suffers as he discovers more about himself than can fit into one version of a coherent self. Neither he nor the novel is "simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence," but rather a "complex, multiform creature" (155).

Wilde's handling of the novel's modes of writing maximizes a fantastic effect: surprise. The reader is not expected simply to compare two modes of perception in order to note a situation's irony. Instead Wilde underscores the extreme remoteness of one mode from the others by encouraging, as through the use of sonorous sound effect, the reader's absorption into each one. In addition, he makes the transition between two modes abrupt. This abrupt transition is, to use Roland Barthes' word, a "scandal," on which, Christine Brooke-Rose observes, the fantastic plays (39).

For examples, Chapters 4 and 5 collide jarringly. Chapter 4 closes with Lord Henry Wotton speculating dispassionately about the intricacies of Dorian's character and his own relation to it:

It was clear to him that the experimental method was the only method by which one could

arrive at any scientific analysis of the passions; and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject

made to his hand, and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results. His sudden mad love for Sybil Vane ... was not a simple, but rather a very complex passion ... transformed by the workings of imagination, ... remote from sense, and ... for that very reason all the more dangerous .... Our weakest motives were those of whose nature we were conscious. It often happened that when we thought we were experimenting on others we were really experimenting on ourselves (73-4).

Wotton is dreaming on these things, we are told, but his dreams are of ideas, not of concrete, wished-for experiences . As in dream his intellect

moves easily from thought to thought, juxtaposing unexpected motions elaborately and with pleasure. Thus, Dorian's "passion" for Sybil Vane is "remote from sense." Dorian unwittingly experiments on himself by falling in love with her, just as Wotton experiments on him. The complication pleases Wotton, and Wilde presumably intends it to intrigue the thoughtful reader.

Significantly, Wotton's day-dreaming is associated with a beautiful, strange image: "The sunset had smitten into scarlet gold the upper windows of the houses opposite. The panes glowed like plates of heated metal. The sky above was like a faded rose. He thought of his friend's young fiery-coloured life ..." (74). Victor Schlovsky's theory of "defamiliarization," which, incidentally, some consider an essential aspect of fantasy (Branham 329; Jackson 17), holds that the artist distorts reality in order to perceive freshly (Elrich 176-7). Wotton looks at a familiar object, a house, but sees an effect which, though natural, seems odd; window panes cease to be transparent, glowing instead like

molten metal. The glowing windows remind him of Dorian, but the image also associates Wotton himself with beauty that is shaped by “defamiliarizing” modes of creative thought.

In stunning contrast are the opening words of the next chapter: “‘Mother, Mother, I am so happy!’ whispered the girl, burying her face in the lap of the faded, tired-looking woman ...” (75).

The kind of operation by which fantasy achieves the transition from Chapter 4 to Chapter 5 is not the easy fluidity of creative daydreaming but a confrontational and disruptive assault on the reader’s point of view. The opening line and scene assert a sentimental text and manner of reading diametrically opposed to those we have gotten used to in Chapter 4. Wotton’s musings favor the unfamiliar, for example, while the sentimental text is familiar. The cluster of words, “mother,” “happy,” “lap,” and “tired” evoke predictable characters and plots. “Mother” pairs with all protective, omnipotent mother and the cruel, neglectful mother, a duo that occurs, not coincidentally, in fairy tales.

The stable, predictable structures of oral fairy tales, Vladimir Propp has shown, are essential to their function. Talking of happiness in her mother’s lap, Sybil elicits the paired conventional notions of good and evil mother, the sentiments attached to that pair, and the plot, that will inevitably unfold to justify those sentiments. Sybil is tragically alone and doomed to be crushed. Here there is none of Wotton’s complexity of thought. Instead, there is a ritual, almost ceremonial arranging of very common wishes and fears.

Chapter 5 also reverses other points of view established by Chapters 1 through 4. Those chapters focus on two men’s great admiration for the beauty (which they call personality) of a younger man, a situation that was not ordinarily explored in popular British literature. By the end of Chapter 4, however, the adaptive reader becomes used to the worship of Dorian Gray. To restore the reader’s astonishment Wilde turns to the popular melodramatic conventions that had been implicitly rejected by the book’s first worldly chapters. Dorian does not appear in chapter 5 at

all. We return to the familiar, a voyage, which under certain circumstances can create a fantastic jolt. As Rabkin observes, it is fantastic when Alice eats a cake and finds that she remains the same size: "this ordinary experience functions as a reversal of the ground rules then operating, and surprises both Alice and the reader" (21).

Such reversals can have no fantastic impact unless the reader participates fully in the point of view of each mode. Thus, the formulaic melodramatic mode of Chapter 5 is serious and through it Wilde invites us to sympathize with the genre of sentimental melodrama by emphasizing its positive features. Sybil Vane's beauty, spirit and insight (apparent when she mocks her brother for behaving like a character in a melodrama) cue the reader to sympathize, not so much with Sybil, who is scarcely developed as personality, but with the literary forms of sentimental idealism she embodies. Wilde does qualify his approval, but in ways that manage to redeem melodrama as a literary form. Mrs. Vane, veteran of a moribund theatrical melodrama

that has been replaced by the type of society play Wilde wrote, lacks genuine emotion. She is disappointed in her children, who despise her "false theatrical gestures" and refuse to participate in her exaggaratingly passionate scenes (7, 86). Still, those children are busy making melodramatic scenes of their own, as when Sybil falls on her knees before Dorian to plead for a love that may take place in the "real world." Melodrama is almost inevitable, it seems; it fills the human need for ideals, merely remodeling itself to suit changing times. Moreover, Mrs. Vane's vain and silly, but wholehearted, passion for old time melodrama is certainly more amusing than is her sullen, unimaginative son's scorn for it. Wilde seems to take pleasure in his characters' eager, if awkward, idealism, a passion which can be one aspect of the multifarious personality.

Like melodrama, the Gothic parts of the novel have the value of ritual. The book's plot structure recalls such Gothic romances as the Faust legends, Monk Lewis' *The Monk*, and Maturin's *Melmouth the Wanderer*. Dorian is an innocent young man who gives

up his soul in order to exert his will freely. Through magic or a miracle he develops inhuman powers, specially a perpetual youthful and innocent appearance. His looks avert the punishment due him, for no one believes a man looking like Dorian could do wrong. Eventually, like many Gothic hero-villains, Dorian suffers increasing self-doubt and fear, during which his actions grow more desperate, until he is finally punished in a typically grotesque and mysterious fashion. Such a plot is almost reassuringly familiar. Wilde also uses stock Gothic effects with no effort to make them his own: "a rising wind made some of the windows rattle" and "the light shot up for a moment in a flame of murky orange" set the scene of Basil's murder. These unoriginal moments do not suggest that Wilde is inattentive. He takes care to write a sonorous prose, as in the staccato "light shot up" and the assonances of "moment in a flame of murky orange." Furthermore, he develops the Gothic themes of the individual and his secret selves with subtlety and relevance to his own time. Only the formal

foundation of Dorian's Gothic story draws attention to its blatant unoriginality. These are forms, Wilde seems to say, that recur and are dependable.

Next, in Chapter 11, Wilde asks us to recognize the appeal of a very different, even contradictory mode, which might be called the decadent aesthetic. Though ultimately Dorian abandons the decadent aesthetic because it still does not satisfy his impossible desire to express everything about himself, for a time it seems to liberate him from repression. Dorian is an aristocratic "virtuoso," a collector. In place of human relations Dorian occupies himself with what G.K. Chesterton disgustedly called "dead things" (Chesterton 244-5): jewels, musical instruments, costumes. Wilde itemizes these collections exhaustively, transmuting objects into a new form, language, which does not erode as matter does. The inhibiting effects of transient, dying nature are rejected from this chapter. Dorian also collects "certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature," such as sadism and transvestism (145). By assuming modes of

thought alien to the identity he had developed as he grew up in his particular culture Dorian extends the boundaries of his imagination. Wilde invites us to enjoy this decadent mode of writing. He modulates the sound and rhythm of his prose and sprinkles it with the revealing adjective "fantastic," which intimate that the primary value of the excesses he describes is to explore the forbidden and impossible.

Thus, throughout the novel a central, repeated reversal is between modes of free, speculative thought and of ceremonial, formal conventions that almost preclude thought. The clumsy, awkward, blatantly unoriginal modes of melodrama and Gothic fiction function like Propp's folk tale structures or like popular genres that Northrop Frye points out in *The Secular Scripture* periodically revitalize art. These popular modes contain the visible structures of an aesthetic, as opposed to common sense and practical, point of view. They are, however, predictable and silly, foundations of art. Because we have outgrown them, and yet require them, we alternately pick them up and

abandon them, as Wilde does in the novel. The oscillating dynamic of a fantasy that never can be satisfied seems appropriate to the inclusiveness of the artistic enterprise.

The various modes of writing of *DG* do not therefore fit together. Attempts to see the book as shaped by, say, the conflict of good and evil that Nassar detects, merely disregard Wilde's larger concern with "multiple variety." As Rosemary Jackson observes, in our age of epistemological doubt such categories of good and evil are no longer clearly distinguished (56). this is not to say that there is no such thing as duality in the novel. It exists, but only as one mode of thought that Dorian Gray, or his author, temporarily, albeit enthusiastically, adopts. In the novel's structure fantasy asserts the co-existence of beliefs and passions that need not have harmonious relations to one another.

### Conclusion

Dorian Gray's story is dominated by different kinds of fantasy, all of which involve some form of contradiction. Wilde first uses fantasy to shape an ideal, impossibly isolated

world, in which a character may shape for himself an equally ideal identity. The ideal itself grows unsatisfactory, largely owing to its changelessness. Unable to achieve the impossible ambition, "to become everything without ever losing the self: a permanent metamorphosis without change" (Bersani 21), Dorian Gray suffers a conflict between infinite possibility and the stasis of perfection. Fantasy then creates a formal incoherence in the novel that expresses "tension" rising when an ideal is recognized as undesirable (Bersani 4). This tension is for Wilde in itself an artistic subject; he does not appear to be interested in resolving it by declaring, for example, that it is better to be human than ideal.

Early in the novel the kind of fantasy that dominates is what Rosemary Jackson calls fantasy of transcendence, which denies that an individual is shaped and constrained by social mores and his own morality. Dorian, himself barely out of adolescence, displays the optimism and ideal qualities that attract so many young people to such fantasies of transcendence as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*

trilogy. Confident that the individual may be better and more significant than his position in society would suggest, the fantasy of transcendence invents a new world or society that is actually a canvas onto which the wished-for self is projected. Thus, though fantasy critics typically talk of "other worlds," what appears to be a landscape in transcendent fantasies is more often than not a metaphor of a desired self. The function of transcendent fantasies, then, is to assert, against the evidence provided by the ordinary common sense world, that the human is at the centre of the universe, if only he has moved himself there. For Dorian at first and for Wilde, art can be such a fantasy. It asserts the significance of imagination and aesthetic sensibility, even when they are silent in the pragmatic world.

As many dystopic fantasies show, however, the "other world" can reveal unsavory aspects of the self. Fantasies have characters disillusioned by their trespass into the world of art. In *DG* aesthetic form itself becomes the source of the hero's

disorder. Entering the ideal world he finds he does not belong there. Not all passions are worthy artistic subjects, as Wotton tells Dorian. Among sensations inappropriate to Wotton's ideal art are regret and other manifestations of moral consciousness.

If a Dorian Gray is to represent an ideal aesthetic critic, he must select for use only certain aspects of himself as well as of life. "... It is the function of Literature to create, from rough material of actual experience, a new world that will be more marvelous, more enduring, and more true" (Wilde, "The Critic as Artist" 363),<sup>3</sup> says Wilde in "The Artist as Critic," suggesting an analogy between an aesthetic form and the "otherworlds" of transcendent fantasy. Wilde's appreciation of the multifarious self comes into conflict with his classical concept of art as selective, changeless and "true". Art aspire to capturing a moment of perfection. An urn, a sonnet, a Shakespearean character, is frozen at the moment its essence is most perfectly revealed. Dorian finds that he cannot transform himself into such an ideal entity. He

fails to select only those of his characteristics which are most ideal; worse, he has no "essence" to express, just an indeterminate self.

Two versions of liberty thus collide in *DG*. When Dorian forms his aesthetic paradise he hopes to free himself from the commonplace world in order to reveal a truer, because less inhibited, self than could ever be visible there. An inhibited self turns out to be contrary to an ideal self, however. Even more than the discovery of his inclination to be cruel and to commit diverse crimes, the discovery that his passions can be uncontrollably inartistic dismays him. For a time he conceives of his "evil" pursuits as another as another means to experiencing the beautiful, exploring a route through the world of Art mapped out by Baudelaire, Flaubert and others. Finally, though, his "conscience," his inexplicable sense that something is wrong with him, undermines the efficacy of the "decadent" means to an aesthetic identity. He is forced to confront the fact that all along he has been subject to feelings and sensations that may be

intrinsic to the complex human personality he wants to explore but are inimical to the ideal he had hoped to find at his being's core.

Much of *DG* is composed of structures implying a contradiction between these two incompatible desires. As Leo Bersani observes, many fantasies orient themselves around this tension rather than invent a solution for it:

Baudelaire's work gives us images of this psychic fragmentation at the same time that it documents a determined resistance to all such ontological floating. This tension accounts for much of the interest of Baudelaire. Like Freud, he can be located at that critical moment

in our culture's history when an idealistic view of the self and of the universe is being simultaneously held onto and discredited by a psychology ... of the fragmented and discontinuous. (*Baudelaire and Freud* 4)

Perhaps from living in a culture growing increasingly secular Wilde found something powerful in the tension between the idealistic view of self and the fragmentation of an

unrestricted, or "liberated" self. *Hid* novel suggests diverse interpretations of Dorian's dilemma, but finally none dominates. For example, it is obvious to most readers that the novel has a moral conclusion, in that Dorian dies, or commits suicide, in apparent atonement for his sins. Wilde admits to this conclusion by complaining that the novel's moral ending is the book's only flaw (Wilde, "To the Editor of 'St. James's Gazette,'" 240-1). Before assuming that Wilde means that he had chosen a reading of Dorian's life that he now regrets, we must remember the context of the remark, a debate, carried out in the newspapers, over whether or not the book was "wicked." Restive under the limitation of the discussion to moral terms, which he frequently said are irrelevant to the assessment of a work of art, Wilde speaks in a typically exaggerated and paradoxical fashion. In fact, he declares to his critics, the book *can* be seen as moral, and therefore is aesthetically flawed. Were he not obliged to resist the reduction of the novel to its moral components he might have been able to concede what

the novel itself illustrates, that morality itself is material which can be rendered into aesthetic form, like any other passion of the multifarious personality. The moral passion neither represents everything human being is or even harmonizes with his or her other passions, but is one passion a person like Dorian feels driven to explore if he is to feel alive.

Contradicting the conclusion that Dorian's life has been judged and condemned by his final punishment, the novel as a whole presents Dorian as a creature in constant metamorphosis. One cannot judge such a being, as the features that are to be judged do not persist. Thus, Dorian is an ingénue, a victim, a sadist and an epicurean. He loves, and is indifferent to everyone. He is guilty often, and often callous. He is foolish, and yet acts at times as Wilde's mouthpiece. He is influenced by his friends, and then passes beyond their ken. This fantastic device of metamorphosis assures that, as is Wilde's desire in all his work, the "truth" about Dorian is impossible to determine. He, not to mention the reader, is too complex, too elusive.

In positing the impossibility of explaining *DG*, Wilde uses fantasy as more modern writers have used it. Christine Brooke-Rose observes that "it is by now a philosophical commonplace that neither nature nor humanity has any innate significance" (8). Wilde makes a similar statement in "The Critic as Artist," where he says that we impose meanings wherever we can, like Wordsworth, who, according to Wilde, put under stones the meanings he found there ("The Critic as Artist" 301). Admitting cheerfully that, like Napoleon, we have crowned ourselves emperor, he exploits the contradictory, doubting mechanisms of fantasy to demonstrate that there is no innate human identity nor human significance in the universe.

Wilde does not demonstrate the almost exuberant pessimism Rosemary Jackson sees in modern fantasy, however. The absence of external validation sometimes bothers him: Dorian is, after all, sorry rather than triumphant. In compensation, however, the self is free to be more than would be possible where it to have, like

an art object, a fixed identity. Fantasy for Wilde is a way of keeping the personality in a state of fruitful "becoming" ("The Critic as Artist" 54). It permits the personality to compose a universe that holds, at least temporarily, some valuable meaning, and it permits it to destroy it when that meaning finally grows restrictive.

The uses of fantasy in *DG* then may seem, depending upon the reader's point of view, to imply an adolescent indeterminacy of being, an exuberant, immature preference to explore all options when none have yet become compelling, or, alternatively, a philosophical resistance to defining a self that is too complex to know. Both, in all likelihood, are Wilde's motives.

## Notes

- 1 All other references to this novel appear parenthetically in the text.
- 2 The terminology used by three critics of fantasy implies the instability of point of view. "Reversal" is Rabkin's term, "hesitation" Todorov's, "mobility" and "abrupt displacement" are Leo Bersani's.
- 3 The Russian formalists later were to hold that "the 'materials' represented the raw stuff of literature which acquires esthetic efficacy and thus becomes eligible for participation in the literary work of art only through the agency of ... a set of devices peculiar to imaginative literature" (Erlich 188).

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