

Devils, Souls, and the Spectre of Matthew Arnold in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Studies of the influence of Matthew Arnold (1822–88) on Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) tend to begin (if not end) with the latter's "The Critic as Artist."¹ Lawrence Danson (*Wilde's Intentions* 129) astutely shows that both Wilde's mouthpiece Gilbert and foil Ernest voice ideas drawn from Arnold and Walter Pater so that Wilde can mimic, refute and combine their doctrines to clarify his own aesthetic theory. As the essay's original title "The True Function and Value of Criticism" alludes to Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," it is unsurprising that the focus of critics has been the differences between Arnold's and Wilde's positions on the purpose and significance of literary criticism (Danson, *Wilde's Intentions* 128–29). In his essay, Arnold argues that literary criticism is a means by which many can achieve part of the creative power shared by writers of genius, and that the ideas of literary critics can inspire future works of art ("Criticism" 422–33). Wilde's Ernest entertains this same idea and is rebuked by Gilbert, who maintains that "criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word. Criticism is, in fact, both creative and independent" (Wilde, "Critic" 982). Gilbert's explanation reveals that for Wilde, criticism is not—or should not be—constrained by academic standards, but is rather an art form that takes another artwork as the material necessary to produce an unfettered and highly subjective response. "[T]he highest criticism," Gilbert says, is "the record of one's own soul" (983).

Gilbert's statement might be taken as a hyperbolic way of expressing the notion that criticism reveals more about the critic than the object of criticism, if not for the myriad of references to the soul in Wilde's critical and creative writings that points to a greater schism between Arnold and Wilde than the function of criticism. This article proposes that Wilde's only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*² is responding to Arnold's claim that "most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry" ("Poetry" 502). Arnold's understanding of religion as "morality touched with emotion" meant that he regarded the increasing disillusionment towards Christianity amongst the British middle class as a call for poetry, and other forms of literature, to guide appropriate moral conduct through its similar effect on reason and the imagination. As this idea was the driving force behind the growth of English or Literary Studies in the late nineteenth century, which Terry Eagleton contends was designed to cultivate a disciplined and docile middle class, little change to accepted moral norms was foreseen—only the means by which they were reinforced (20–24). Indeed, William Robbins explains that although the moral lessons gleaned from poetry are subjective, Arnold believed that the insights of art would be supported "by an appeal to what man's higher nature has always found and still finds to be reasonable, by an appeal, in other words, to history and experience" (168).

Wilde's claim he was "a born antinomian" ("De Profundis" 1073) and expressed distaste for "that sordid necessity of living for others" ("Socialism" 1041) position him in direct opposition to Arnold's idealistic hope for a society guided by poetry and overseen by experience and history. In fact, in "The Critic as Artist" Gilbert proclaims that "[t]he one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" (979). However, *Dorian Gray*, in its exploration of this issue of art's suitability as a moral guide, reveals Wilde's misgivings to be far more complex than a simple rejection of any expectation of conformity to social norms. In the text, Wilde utilises the Faust myth—or trope of the deal with the devil—to propose the idea that art, and especially literature, is in some way "diabolical" and therefore unfit as a replacement for

religion and guide to moral conduct. Wilde's suppression of the religious resonance of the Faust myth in favour of the moral critique built into the trope is not unlike Arnold's focus on the social role of religion rather than its claim to divine truth. Both writers engage with a secular reinterrogation of values and norms established and reinforced by religious traditions that was undertaken by writers of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³

When the ostensibly supernatural elements of the novel are read in the light of Wilde's individualism, the latter being widely discussed with regard to his critical works but absent from most criticism of his fiction, it becomes clear that *Dorian Gray* puts forward the view that individuals should only respond to the desires of their souls and not accept cultural conventions or imitate others' value systems—even those depicted in works of art. Benjamin Smith, in his article "The Ethics of Man under Aestheticism," credits Wilde with a consistent aesthetic and ethical theory that has been overlooked by other scholars. He contends that Wilde privileges imagination in order to promote individualism: imagination is needed because art with an "aesthetically structured ethic" should "present figures characterized by indeterminacy" (Smith 321). The emphasis on imagination displaces didacticism and the need for moralising in art. Wilde's aesthetic theory promotes the cultivation of a personal morality, rather than a mimicking of accepted norms: the essence of individualism. However, Smith's analysis of Wilde's thought discusses the way in which it shapes his non-fiction works without exploring its effect on his fiction. This article builds on Smith's claim of an individualist aesthetic theory perceptible throughout Wilde's oeuvre by elucidating how the Faustian narrative of *Dorian Gray* refutes the opposing aesthetic and ethical theory of Arnold.

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Dorian Gray does not feature a devil character, and yet it is continuously cited as an example of the Faust myth by critics including Walter A. Kaufmann, Houston A. Baker and Christopher Craft. Observing the freshly-completed painting of himself, Dorian wishes that it "were I who was always to be young, and the picture that was to grow old," confessing, "I would give my soul for that!" (26). Without any formal ritual or event, Dorian's wish is granted, leaving him free to sin and remain physically flawless. Despite never explaining how this supernatural event occurs, the novel ends as one would expect of a Faustian narrative—Dorian recognises his error, but his attempts to make amends are not enough to save him from destruction. If there is a devil to be found in the novel it has to be read through the metaphor that the devil typically represents: the temptation to transgress societal norms and values to fulfil desires ultimately exposed as unsatisfactory. Lord Henry Wotton is a somewhat diabolical figure, but it is his suggestive words that have a supernatural influence. His words are actually described as an artistic form: "[t]hey seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute" (20). In *Dorian Gray*, then, the devil must be art. In addition to Henry's words, the devil is manifest in two other forms of art, the painting that inspires the wish and the "poisonous book" (111) that opens up Dorian's mind to possible transgressive acts. Their supernatural power seems to derive from the desires of their producers to act upon or inspire their audience.

Those who are familiar with the art and philosophies of Oscar Wilde might find it unlikely that he would propose that the consumption of literature could be a danger to the reader. After all, in "The Decay of Lying" he stated that "the proper aim of art" is "the telling of beautiful untrue things" (943). Can we learn anything about Wilde's aesthetic or ethical theories from his novel, or are we restricted to Wilde's purportedly non-fiction works?

Another acknowledged distinction between the philosophies of Wilde and Arnold is relevant here. Phyllis Weliver notes that both aspired to a state of “disinterestedness” in criticism (323); although Arnold believed this state should be apolitical but not amoral, and Wilde, as is well known, was an adherent of aestheticism and did not believe art needed to be moral. Are the implications of Wilde’s use of the Faust myth simply another error, an unfortunate consequence of the artist’s “perfect use of an imperfect medium” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 3), as he said of the novel’s Hellenic moral?

Actually, the insinuation that literature *may be* diabolical is perfectly in line with the aesthetic theory outlined in the Preface to *Dorian Gray*, which purports to warn the reader not to mistake the work of art that follows for didactic writing. The Preface was composed after the original version of the novel had appeared in *Lippincott’s Magazine* and met with criticisms and controversy. With the Preface’s history raising the possibility that Wilde only wrote it to quell the critics, it is not surprising that modern critics have frequently argued that in *Dorian Gray* Wilde undermines the aesthetic theory outlined in the Preface.⁴ However, I argue that this is not the case, and contend that foregrounding the Faust myth in *Dorian Gray* shows how the novel and the Preface actually do agree, validating the novel’s insights into Wilde’s thought.

The novel is not a flawless example of Wilde’s theory of art’s amorality in part because of the way in which narrative conventions such as closure, and tropes such as the Faust myth, have historically suggested a moral schema. In a letter “To the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle*” he explained that he knew that, when writing a Faustian narrative, “it would be difficult to keep the moral in its proper secondary place... subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect” (245). Moreover, Wilde’s aesthetic ethics continually force him into the paradoxical position of moralising against moralising in literature. Nevertheless, for Wilde the uncomfortable presence of a moral in *Dorian Gray* did not negate his belief that works of art should be judged on aesthetic merits, rather than on moral grounds.

This belief was not respected by his readers. In 1895 *Dorian Gray* was used as evidence against Wilde when he sought to prove that the Marquess of Queensberry’s assertion that Wilde was a “posing sodomite [*sic*]” was libel (qtd. in Holland xix). Edward Carson, the Marquess’ counsel, questioned Wilde about whether the depiction of the relationship between Dorian and Basil “might lead an ordinary individual to believe it had a sodomitical tendency” (qtd. in Holland 81) under the assumption that a text depicting homoerotic desire is encouraging it. The use of *Dorian Gray* in Wilde’s trials demonstrated that the Arnold’s view that literature is a commentary on how one should live was more in touch with Victorian popular opinion than Wilde’s own aesthetic theories.

While Wilde and Arnold do have some commonalities with regard to their view of criticism’s autonomy from the object of critique, and their championing of “disinterestedness” as the state from which criticism should begin, the significant difference in how they thought of the function of literature in modern society and the artist’s responsibility reflects a major debate in which many critics and writers were engaged. The question of where moral guidance would come from in modernity was pressing at the end of the Victorian era. This period not only saw an increasing loss of faith in Christianity amongst the middle class in Britain, the source for Arnold’s hope that the moral lessons of poetry would fulfil the void left by religion, but increased attention to individuality and inwardness as opposed to the collective (Taylor 94–107). Romantic understandings of the uniqueness of the artist, which remained influential throughout the Victorian period, enjoyed a resurgence in the *fin de siècle*

“propensity towards individualistic preoccupations” and distaste for moral considerations in art (Johnson 4).

Significantly, Alessandro Ferrara contends that personal and aesthetic autonomy came to be taken for granted in the twentieth century, with greater emphasis placed on authenticity: “While the Enlightenment is the age of autonomy *par excellence*, [the late twentieth century] is the age of authenticity” (5). The increased attention to individuals’ subjective experience of the world in modernity produced an “ethics of authenticity [which] start[s] from the assumption that in order to be a worthy moral being, we must not deny or try to suppress, but rather acknowledge the urges which deflect us from our principles” (Ferrara 7). The aesthetes and decadents pre-empted these ideas that would prove influential in the century succeeding their own, expanding on the Romantics’ rebellious critique of society by asserting that public morals are concerned with the collective at the expense of the individual, who is best served by art. Art is not the supreme value for the aesthetes and decadents because it is autonomous, but because its autonomy from obligations to societal norms enables it to fulfil human desires in a unique way.

The individualistic tendency amongst these nineteenth century artists was at odds with Arnold’s belief that poetry could improve his society by instilling a commitment to a shared culture and morality. Wilde consistently referred to his individualism in the guise of speaking of “the soul” or “one’s nature;” it is this privileging of individualism, rather than differences about the status of literary criticism, that represents his greatest break with Arnold.

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Throughout his *oeuvre*, Wilde reiterated the importance of individuals determining their own values and living according to them, rather than conforming to the expectations of society. In *Dorian Gray* Henry voices this view in the most explicit terms: “The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for” (19). However, Wilde’s metaphorical treatment of individualism and consequent failure to admit its centrality to his aesthetic theory has led to accusations of contradiction by critics such as Joyce Carol Oates (427) and Jerome Hamilton Buckley (234–35). In “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” however, it is clearly a dominant idea in his philosophy. Although Wilde’s conflation of individualism and Socialism in his declaration that “[t]he chief advantage that would result from the establishment of Socialism is, undoubtedly, the fact that Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others” (Wilde, “Socialism” 1041) might seem anomalous, given Socialism’s emphasis on the collective, Josephine M. Guy explains that nineteenth-century political Individualism was similarly founded on a negative definition of liberty (70). In this sense, there are significant similarities between political Individualism and the modern aesthetic sphere, with its desire for art to be emancipated from cultural norms and morality implicit in the idea of the autonomy of art.

Although Wilde engages with a political movement in the aforementioned essay, his politics were like his aesthetic theory: unique. His individualism, Regenia Gagnier contends, “was a dandiacal strategy of self-differentiation” (91). Wilde’s proclamations of his own genius and disregard for moral norms or academic standards of originality has led critics to understate his commitment to individualism and interpret his work as self-referential. However, his “strategy of self-differentiation” can also be understood as a challenge to the restrictive moral demands of late Victorian Britain.

That Wilde reworked the words of others and even “self-plagiarised” to produce his plays, poems, essays and novels is well-established by critics such as Florina Tufescu in *Oscar Wilde’s Plagiarism: The Triumph of Art over Ego* and Guy in “Self-Plagiarism, Creativity and Craftsmanship in Oscar Wilde.” What may be superficially understood as narcissism and the need to resort to plagiarism because of a lack of talent is both comprehensible within the decadent movement and consistent with Wilde’s aesthetic ethics as outlined by Smith. Notably, the protagonist of Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” claims that “to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem” (219). In his recent work on the sense of community binding the decadent movement, Matthew Potolsky describes a practice of “internal self-reference in decadent writing” that he calls “mimetic canonization” (72). For Potolsky, the decadents’ foregrounding of their indebtedness to their predecessors is central. Yet, his observation that “Wilde makes mimetic canonization the subject of [*Dorian Gray*]” (97) through Dorian’s perilous engagement with the decadent book shows that there is distinct difference between behaviour appropriate in the artistic sphere and in life. While Wilde unashamedly flaunted his aesthetic borrowing, he also depicted the repercussions of Dorian constructing his identity “largely out of the objects he gathers... or copies from models” (Potolsky 97). Wilde’s public identity continues to distract from the real concerns of his work, so that critics—whether they are writing from favourable or critical perspectives—have not noticed how his allegiance to individualism actually manifests in *Dorian Gray*. His stylised public persona and witticisms based on reversals of Victorian standards means that his work has often been read as a contrarian rejection of moral values for aesthetic values, simply intended to shock and provoke.

However, *Dorian Gray* provides evidence that Wilde did, in fact, consider the moral implications of the effect of literature on readers. The Preface indicates that Wilde’s aesthetic theory is actually a theory of the relationship between the artist and the reader, rather than the concept of beauty. The opening lines state that “[t]he artist is the creator of beautiful things” but in fact, “[t]o reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” (3). Literature is primarily about the reader, not the writer; “it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (4). However, as I argue, this does not mean that art is to be mimicked by every reader, but that its beauty should inspire other autonomous individuals.

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That *Dorian Gray* is about the reader, not the writer, is not a commonly accepted interpretation. The well-known facts of Wilde’s life and the association made between the novel and his biography by the trial means that some critics feel that they can authoritatively state that “*Dorian Gray* dramatizes Wilde’s own conflicts” (Ragland-Sullivan 473). However, other critics have emphasised the authorial role, rather than Wilde’s biography. To refer to an influential proponent of this focus, Oates makes the argument that the novel is “a highly serious mediation upon the moral role of the artist” (420). She suggests that in *Dorian Gray* “[t]he consequences of a Faustian pact with the devil are dramatized, but the devil himself is absent, which suggests that the novel is an elaborate fantasy locating the Fall within the human psyche alone. Basil, Henry, and Dorian are all artists, aspects of their creator” (Oates 424). The basis for this reading, it seems, is Wilde’s famous comment that “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry Wotton what the world think me: Dorian what I would like to be in other ages perhaps” (qtd. in Gomel 91). However, although Oates is right to say that the novel depicts a conflict within the psyche, her reading of the three main characters as alternate projections of Wilde’s consciousness is one that necessarily ignores a central theme of the novel. The novel is an account of the Fall instigated by social interaction,

locating the potential for corruption outside the individual human psyche. *Dorian Gray*, therefore, is not as far from the traditional Faust myth as Oates implies. In addition to the theme of artistic responsibility which Oates discusses, *Dorian Gray* and many of Wilde's other works explore its corollary: the responsibility of the reader to be amused by a book, but not influenced.

Wilde warns his reader of this quite explicitly in the Preface to the novel. He asserts, "all art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril" (4). Thus Oates is correct in asserting that "the artist, even the presumably 'good' Basil Hallward, is the diabolical agent"—with qualification (420). This is how the artist is *for Dorian*, and Wilde is arguing that Dorian's susceptibility to the influence of the artist is his failing. Dorian is ignorant of Wilde's own precept that "[n]o artist has ethical sympathies" and takes on lessons from Henry and the poisonous book as sincere guidance, rather than recognising them as art to be appreciated for their beauty and uselessness (3). The artist and even artwork can play the role of the devil, but only if the reader or audience frame them in that way. As such, for Wilde, art is to be revered if it is a work of beauty. It is only when it is taken to be commenting on reality, and interpreted in terms of moral lessons or guidance, that it becomes dangerous and diabolical. The concept of a poisonous book, therefore, does not have to "negate the aesthete's defiant boast in the Preface," as Nicholas Ruddick claims (196).

At the beginning of *Dorian Gray*, Dorian is a naive youth who "had kept himself unspotted from the world" (17), but by the end "[t]hey say he has sold himself to the devil for a pretty face" (167). Though he is not initially an exemplary human being—Dorian's innocence and purity sits alongside petulance and narcissism (Liebman 446)—Dorian's moral degradation only begins when he is exposed to the influence of Henry's hedonistic philosophy, Basil's painting, and the poisonous book. This can be deduced through the mechanism of the supernatural painting, as his externalised image only begins to show signs of decay after he mistreats Sybil.

Before Henry introduces him to decadent ideals, Henry makes a statement that should be taken as a warning: "All influence is immoral" (18). Dorian, however, is not astute enough to recognise this statement as a warning, nor recognise that Henry's philosophy is a subjective truth, not an objective one. As such, he is only "dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him," under the misguided impression that "they seemed to him to have come really from himself" (20). Henry's philosophy is based on fulfilling his natural impulses and desires, rather than repressing or sublimating them: "to live... life fully and completely... to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream" because "[e]very impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us" (19). However, before this conversation, Dorian only has childish whims, not transgressive desires. Henry insists that he must "have had passions that have made you afraid" but Dorian's thought in response is that "there had been things in his boyhood that he had not understood" (20). It is unclear whether he really did have frightful passions, or just awareness of having witnessed other people's passions. Consequently, when he tries to live out Henry's proposition that "[t]he only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" the temptations he responds to are not internal, but the ones suggested to him by the poisonous book Henry gives him (19). Thus, "Lord Henry's language creates a new reality for Dorian" (Cohen 806) that superimposes false interpretations of Dorian's needs over his prelapsarian understanding of his relation to his desires and the world.

The titular picture also influences Dorian as it shows the signs of his sins and age as he continues to look beautiful and innocent. The painting therefore firstly, inspires him to identify with his beauty and encourage others to objectify him and secondly, functions as an excuse to act without regard for the consequences. Oates makes the claim that Dorian “would not have exchanged his soul for eternal youth and beauty had not an artist, Basil, presented him with an utterly new, unrequested, and irresistible image of himself” (421). Indeed, Dorian appends his claim that Basil’s compliments “had not influenced his nature” with his observation that his “sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation” as he looked at the painting for the first time, indicating that the painting is another diabolical influence (25). Dorian begins to weep upon realising that the painting will keep the beauty he will lose, which prompts Henry to observe that “[i]t is the real Dorian Gray” (27). Ostensibly referring to Dorian’s childishness, the ambiguous pronoun may also refer to the painting, conflating Dorian’s identity with his image.

From the time of his wish, Elana Gomel asserts, “Dorian becomes an image pretending to be a man” (80). This image, moreover, embodies Basil’s desire, rather than showing anything of the true nature of Dorian. Ed Cohen explains that as an image, he is “a space for the constitution of male desire,” “the surface on which the characters project their self-representations” (806). As such, though Dorian feels that the painting “is part of myself” (27), he misrecognises it, as Basil has already confessed that he has “put too much of myself in it... every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion” (8).

This moment of misrecognition points to a potential problem with an influential reading of the novel: if the painting truly represents Basil’s desire, not the real Dorian, then how can the painting represent the externalisation of Dorian’s conscience or soul and its corruption by his evil acts, as critics such as Daniel M. Haybron and Colin McGinn have assumed? The problem with this interpretation is its misguided conflation of “soul” and “conscience” in the context of Wilde’s thought that leads them to assume that the soul is the source of virtue. McGinn’s argument that Dorian is destroyed because he only cared about the beauty of his body, and not the “beauty of his soul” (McGinn 139), is a key example of this line of thinking. Dorian does indeed say that the painting “had been like conscience to him” (194), but this cannot be taken as an authoritative statement given Dorian’s detachment from his own values and desires. What the painting represents is Dorian’s soul and its corruption by external influence, but it is not simply the corruption of his moral guide.

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After asserting that “[a]ll influence is immoral,” Henry goes on to explain that “to influence a person is to give him one’s soul” (18). The concept of the soul is one that clearly fascinated Wilde, as it is a major theme in *Dorian Gray* and several of his other works. When the editor of *Lippincott’s Magazine* requested a publication from Wilde for his magazine, Wilde first suggested “The Fisherman and his Soul” before writing *Dorian Gray* for this purpose (Gillespie xii). This fairy tale is therefore something of a precursor to Wilde’s only novel, and both suggest that the soul needs to be one with the heart’s desires lest it be corrupted by society.

“The Fisherman and his Soul” depicts the corruption of a besotted fisherman’s soul when it is separated from the fisherman’s heart as the condition for being united with his love, a mermaid. Wilde’s fairy tale suggests that he does not correlate the soul with conscience. The fisherman remains moral and loving without his soul because he retains his heart, while the

heartless soul becomes corrupt even as it becomes experienced and wise. Although his corrupted soul encourages the fisherman to prosper through evil, the fisherman chooses death with his beloved because he nobly listens to his heart above all else. His commitment to the mermaid shows the fallacy of the priest's warning to avoid the seafolk because they lack souls, and suggests instead that the heart alone is incorruptible. The purity of the heart is also shown in *Dorian Gray* when Dorian's love for Hetty enables him to critically reflect on his behaviour.

The soul, then, can only thrive when it is connected to the heart's desires and can be corrupted by society otherwise. Wilde's concept of the soul is a poetic representation of the ideal of authenticity, while the "heart" holds the desires of an authentic individual. The authentic individual can lose sight of neither.

In "The Soul of the Man under Socialism" Wilde claims that "[a]ll imitation in morals and in life is wrong" (1049). Elsewhere, he encourages the revaluation of values and suggests that:

What is termed sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics. (Wilde, "Critic" 979)

Wilde proposes that if everyone were true to their soul, rather than adhering to the arbitrary values of society, the notion of sin would become obsolete and society would thrive. As Baker notes, Wilde believed that the individual must progress before society could (351). Wilde can therefore be opposed to Sigmund Freud; while the psychoanalyst "believed mental health consisted of accepting reality and the constraints of civilization," the aesthete thought that "sanity meant 'being true to oneself' and acting consistently with one's beliefs" (Foldy 100). Being "true to one's soul" is synonymous with Ferrara's definition of authentic conduct: "the quality of being somehow connected with, and expressive of, the core of the actor's personality" (5).

When Dorian claims that Henry "poisoned [him] with a book once" and makes him promise to "never lend that book to any one. It does harm," he is admitting that he allowed Henry to influence him and in doing so betrayed the demands of his soul (190). He warns Henry that "[t]he soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, or made perfect" (187). Henry remains a pitiful, passive figure whose artistic philosophy and witty approach to society does not equip him for life as depicted in the novel. His wife leaves him, and he wildly misreads Dorian towards the end of the novel, claiming: "It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder" (185). Unsurprisingly, he has not achieved Dorian's mature understanding of the soul, telling him: "Don't be so serious. What have you or I to do with the superstitions of our age? No: we have given up our belief in the soul" (187). Henry negligently insists that he had been speaking of the soul in metaphorical terms when he said he enjoyed the activity of "project[ing] one's soul into some gracious form, and let[ting] it tarry there for a moment" (35), but the novel—and many of Wilde's other works—make a case for its existence as an individual's internal guidance. The soul and conscience are not conflated, because the conscience is a moral construct that does not take into account the needs, desires and ideals associated with the soul. Resistant to other people's standards of morality and understandings of sin, Wilde championed the idea of the soul, which could be corrupted by society's influence, or provide a valuable contribution to society by facilitating experiment and growth, but only if wedded to the heart. As such, the painting, as an

externalisation of Dorian's soul, only becomes corrupted when Dorian commits other people's sins instead of the sins that, to Wilde, were permissible because they were the heart's desires.

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The frequent references to the transmigration of souls and the impact of sin on the soul are clear allusions to the Faust myth. Perplexingly, though, the novel represents the *effects* of a deal with the devil without the representation of a devil character, or a gap in which we can read an unmentioned deal with the devil—Dorian Gray is as surprised as the reader by what occurs. There is, in fact, enough evidence to read the novel as an example of the Faust myth despite the lack of the traditional central figure. Even though the function of the devil is taken by art, the novel incessantly reminds the reader of the Faust myth: the woman at the opium den, for example, comments that “[t]hey say he has sold himself to the devil for a pretty face” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 167).

The absence of a devil character is logically consistent with Wilde's intentions, as indicated by the Preface. In his discussion of Wilde's aesthetic ethics, Smith argues that if artworks are to “foster the creation of truly autonomous [or authentic] subjects,” art must “eschew didacticism and present figures characterised by indeterminacy” (321). As a Christian symbol of evil, the mere presence of the devil signposts a moral framework underpinning the narrative. It is a symbol that Wilde must avoid, then, if he is to maintain his claim in the Preface that “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” (3), for the devil's presence would imply the existence of a moral schema in a work of art. The paradoxical nature of his critique of moralising in art, however, means that he needs to allude to a long-standing method of “demonising” something undesirable to show the practice's undesirability. For Wilde to depict a man selling his soul without betraying his philosophy, the devil must be metaphorical, rather than literal.

Nevertheless, my analysis has already demonstrated that *Dorian Gray* conveys a warning about conforming to others' morality that—alongside the “erroneous” Hellenic comment on moderation—seems to be the moral of the story. But Wilde did not think that readers should simply accept the moral schema put forward in a text, for literature is not meant to be didactic. He did not think that this was the only way literature could contribute to readers' moral education, however. To restate Wilde's views on morals and their mobilisation in literature, Wilde thought that Victorian morality, which was derived from custom, was wrong because it did not allow progress or a reconsideration of values (such as homoerotic desire). Because Wilde disparaged his society's morals and refused to moralise in his art, he was accused of being completely immoral as well—implied in his conviction for “gross indecency.” In reality, Wilde seems to have had a strong albeit unconventional belief in the need for morality, and thought literature could inspire the cultivation of a personal morality in which “good” meant “true to one's heart and soul.”

As such, in *Dorian Gray* Wilde makes a case for the arbitrariness of the values that are commonly internalised. Henry tells Dorian, “[t]o be good is to be in harmony with oneself... Individualism has really the higher aim. Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age” (70). There are no characters to be admired amongst the hedonists in the text, but nor are there amongst the traditionally moral characters, because everyone upholds a morality that does not speak to his or her desires. The only exception is Henry, who professes an aesthetic philosophy similar to Wilde's own, but does not live out the ideals nor believe in the soul. Henry is consequently no hero for Wilde. The mockery of “modern morality” and

inversion of clichés set the scene for Wilde’s argument that the soul should be the only guide for action. His fixation on the soul as something that needs to be cultivated suggests that he saw it as in opposition to the pressure to conform to societal norms.

Because every soul is unique, Wilde only shows how life should not be lived, not how it should be. The novel does put forward a model for living—Henry’s hedonistic philosophy—but it remains at a critical distance from this philosophy. Though it depicts negative consequences arising from Dorian’s attempts to live out the philosophy, and Henry’s inability to fulfil his own ideas, it does not condemn the philosophy outright. The lack of an identifiable devil figure indicates that the reader is free to make his or her own judgement of the events and ideas of the novel. After all, when speaking of achieving the perfection of the soul, Wilde maintained that “[t]here is no one type for man. There are as many perfections as there are perfect men” (“Socialism” 1049). For Wilde, the only legitimate moral guidance came from the soul and the heart.

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Arnold’s dream that poetry or other forms of literature would take the place of religion in modernity is antithetical to both Wilde’s aesthetic theory, which states that art should be valued for its beauty alone, and to his individualistic ideas about the supremacy of the soul over Victorian morality. Significantly, however, in “An Unnoted Allusion to Matthew Arnold in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” Apryl L. D. Heath emphasises the significance of the passage in which it is said that Dorian “never fell 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, *Dorian Gray* 117). Heath argues that the allegory of the inn is a pointed inversion of Arnold’s Epictetus-inspired allegory from “Wordsworth” of the writer who prioritises morals in literature, and the aesthete writer who does not (32). For Arnold, who wrote that “[a] poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against *life*; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards *life*” (“Wordsworth” 12–13), a writer whose poetry is amoral is akin to a man who stays forever at an inn on his journey home because he enjoys its pleasures, instead of returning to his responsibilities at home.

Heath’s interpretation of the significance of Wilde’s revision of Arnold’s allegory is that for Wilde, morality is the distraction and aesthetics that true responsibility, or “home,” of the writer. The similarity between this possible reading of the allegory and *Dorian Gray*’s Preface makes it an understandable conclusion. However, there is a level of irony in this line, as Dorian is blind to the fact that he has mistaken an inn for a house, mimicking art instead of listening to his soul. Thus, while he is mocking Arnold’s view of art, Wilde is also interrogating Dorian’s opposing view that “the senses, no less than the soul, have their spiritual mysteries to reveal” (*Dorian Gray* 117).

In disagreeing with Arnold’s view that poetry or other forms of art will replace religion in guiding moral conduct, Wilde paradoxically writes a narrative that is didactically anti-didactic. Wilde demonstrated that literature is a sphere in which language, values and norms can be subverted in order to produce new, authentic world-views. Art therefore has the potential to be as divine as it can be diabolical; as Danson explains, for Wilde “when everyone is realised as an individual, everyone will be an artist” (“Critic” 54). He envisioned a better world in which the exercise of the imagination led to greater self-knowledge and the cultivation of an individual morality that suited the individual, not their outdated culture (Quintus 571).

Accordingly, Wilde did not think that anyone should replicate a world-view put forward in art, but should imitate the *process* of suggesting world-views that enable individuals to be true to their souls. Art was not a guide to life, but a celebration of beauty meant to engage with the imagination rather than the conscience. While not innately diabolical, then, literature has diabolic potential when it is used inappropriately by the reader. As such, the moral of *Dorian Gray* is that one should not go looking for morals in books.⁵

Notes

¹ For discussion of the influence of Matthew Arnold on “The Critic as Artist,” see Danson and Ellmann, “The Critic as Artist as Wilde.”

² *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will hereafter be referred to as *Dorian Gray*.

³ This project of reinterrogating the assumptions of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries is inextricably tied to the modernist self-conscious questioning of the role of literature in society. The way in which key modernist authors followed Wilde by suggesting that literature might be “diabolical,” or worryingly ambivalent, is the focus of my unpublished doctoral dissertation.

⁴ For interpretations contending that the novel contradicts the Preface, see Oates (427), Clark (236), Joyce (413), and Buckley (234–35).

⁵ I would like to thank Meg Tasker and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments which have greatly improved this article.

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