

# Life as an Object of Art: Moral Corruption and Dehumanization in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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## 1 Introduction

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published for the first time in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1890 (Stern 756) immediately led to a scandal in Victorian England. Not only was the novel used as proof at the beginning of its author's trial prosecuting Wilde's alleged homosexuality (Stern 756), it also resisted sexual and Christian social norms in the eyes of the public and was not published anymore after its first publication (Stern 756). Critics in Wilde's Age merely read the novel as a corrupting tale of a young man seduced by the older Lord Henry Wotton to lead an immoral and sexually scandalous life deprived of any social norms. Interestingly, many modern critics have been tempted to focus on a queer reading of the novel and interpret it as a work of repressed homosexuality<sup>1</sup>. Clearly, this point of view implicates an understanding of Oscar Wilde as a modern homosexual, a standpoint which has been criticized by Alan Sinfield<sup>2</sup> since it contains a modern view of sexuality not given in the Victorian

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Esther Rashkin notes "that Wilde's creation of this work of art may be an effect of Victorian society's aggressive denigration of his own sexual identity as "vile" and "corrupt", and as a symptom of that society's painting of the author himself as *véreux*" (80).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Bristow writes about Alan Sinfield's academic work: "In the preface to his engaging study of Wilde's sexual styles, Alan Sinfield insists that we must be wary of assuming this defiantly effeminate man can be readily understood as homosexual or gay. [...]. The problem for modern critics, as Sinfield sees it, lies in the fact that 'Wilde and his writings look queer because our stereotypical notion of male homosexuality derives from Wilde, and our ideas about him'" (199-200).

Age. But also other positions on Wilde's oeuvre have come out since the 1980s. In his review of scholarship on Wilde, Bruce Bashford differentiates between four recent directions of interpretation of Wilde's work: the Gay Wilde, the Irish Wilde, the Materialist Wilde and the Idealist Wilde<sup>3</sup>. This paper will mainly take into account the perspective of aesthetic theory and Wilde's religious beliefs as indicated in his only novel and further draw on the implications of Gay Wilde studies for an interpretation of the novel.

Even though *The Picture of Dorian Gray* implicitly refers to "the love that dare not speak its name", as Wilde himself put it in his trial (Bristow 196), the novel does not simply deal with male-male-desire. As a contemporary work of art, it furthermore illustrates an aesthetic experiment by turning the protagonist into a living object of art. Thus, Wilde's novel focuses on the consequences and moral corruption which appear when life imitates art<sup>4</sup>. This paper will argue that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can only be fully understood in the framework of its contemporary context and thus needs to be related to the theory of aestheticism, especially to the influence of Walter Pater's academic work *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* on Wilde. As a character Dorian reflects Wilde's philosophy of aestheticism but also evokes a critique of this philosophy as the novel pushes Pater's aestheticism to its utmost form. Its setting is a test of Wilde's own theory of aestheticism in the Victorian society he lived in. This is a test which is set up to fail. On the one hand, the novel reflects aestheticism in a positive light by closely describing Victorian society and mocking its values, but on the other hand, Dorian's moral corruption leads to the decay of his human soul and his suicide so that the negative consequences of a life free from social and moral bonds are clearly portrayed and can be seen as a critique of an aestheticism that dominates an individual life<sup>5</sup>.

As a result, aestheticism and Christianity are both portrayed ambiguously in the novel, since the decay of Dorian's soul is reduced to a satirical experiment of life as an object of art under the influence of his corruptor Lord Henry. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that Dorian is not a human subject to Lord Henry and Basil Hallward right from the beginning of the novel. Whereas Basil uses Dorian as a muse, his sexualized object which improves Basil's art through his male desire towards Dorian, Lord Henry regards Dorian's life simply as a human experiment that helps him to escape his boredom with married life by turning the young man into the artificial figure of a dandy. Dorian thus addresses the two men's senses: Basil's

<sup>3</sup> Bashford sums up: "Here I will focus my discussion by borrowing what Small designates three "new paradigms" that emerged in the 1990s: the Gay Wilde, the Irish Wilde, Wilde and Consumerism – this last I will rename the Materialist Wilde. To these I will add a fourth category, [...]: Idealist Wilde" (613).

<sup>4</sup> As Wilde claimed in his essay *The Decay of Lying*, Danson comments: "in 'The Decay of Lying' Wilde reverses the course of wisdom: 'Nature imitates Art', and should be made to obey art's laws" ("Wilde as Critic and Theorist" 85).

<sup>5</sup> Colleen Cooper Harrison notes: "Therefore, it can be assumed that Wilde is satirizing the concept of material belongings as the new religion of the Victorian people, thus arguing that aestheticism is the result of a loss of faith in both man and God, both sacrificed for objects of beauty" (7).

sexuality and Lord Henry's decadent thirst for new experiences. Basil and Lord Henry serve as outstanding figures in Victorian society who do not fit into the constraints of Christian social norms: Basil struggles with his homosexuality and Lord Henry tries to lead a nihilistic life free from social pressure and responsibility. They are two individualists, each of them trying to shape Dorian according to their own ideals<sup>6</sup>.

Although Christian values are questioned in the novel, Christianity, as well as aestheticism, is viewed ambiguously. Dorian's portrait painted by Basil shows his moral corruption and the expression in it alters after every sin Dorian commits. The portrait functions as a moral marker of Christian values by capturing Dorian's flawed soul<sup>7</sup> which returns to his body after he stabbed the painting in a vain attempt to free himself from the status as a living object of art<sup>8</sup>. Thus, the failure of Dorian's life and Lord Henry's aesthetic experiment serves as a reassurance of Christian social norms and a Catholic understanding of the unity of soul and body. In order to lose his human soul, Dorian needs to lose his morality and his religion first. This is achieved by Lord Henry's speeches. However, even Lord Henry is unable to free himself entirely of the belief in the soul as a moral faculty (Salamensky 128). The conception of the soul as a moral consciousness – most prominently symbolized by the character of Basil Hallward (Hinojosa 89) – remains a decadent Catholic concept in the novel which mirrors Wilde's own attraction to Catholicism (Schuchard 392). Dorian Gray suffers beautifully in the novel but cannot achieve Christ's redemption because – as will be shown – he is unable to feel any remorse for his sins. The topic of homosexuality is thereby subtly portrayed in the novel as a love of higher virtue (Brinkley 65). This higher virtue is most prominently ascribed to the love of Basil for Dorian, a feeling that is closely linked to Christian terms such as empathy and care. Interestingly, Wilde's novel suggests the possibility of a Christian homosexuality in the figure of Basil Hallward but this possibility is finally negated by the novel through Basil's violent death as a victim of Dorian Gray. Nevertheless, Basil represents Wilde's personal belief that homosexuality and a Christian consciousness do not necessarily negate each other<sup>9</sup>. In the end, the novel escapes a clear paradigm if

<sup>6</sup> Lynne W. Hinojosa comments: "In this plot, however, God does not create and reveal Dorian Gray's 'true self'; rather, two human creators, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton, create not one true self but two 'true selves' of Dorian Gray" (88).

<sup>7</sup> Jarlath Killeen notes: "The picture that holds Dorian's soul is like a consecrated Host. The visual consummation of the picture is the equivalent to the consumption of Christ that occurs when partaking in the Eucharist. Ironically, Dorian behaves like a priest who decides to consume the transubstantiated Host alone and to refuse others access to the sacred body of Christ: he locks he picture away in the altar/schoolroom" (98).

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Robbins notes: "Sibyl and Dorian are both works of art. [...] His [Dorian's] story, however, shows that making the human subject – whether male or female – into an object, exposes him/her to a dangerous split. For Dorian and for Sibyl, who inhabit the slash line between the binary opposition of subject/object, this split is entirely destructive" (231-232).

<sup>9</sup> As Henry M. Alley notes about the representation of Basil's love: "We have, then, more than midway through the novel, a carefully wrought portrait of what a contemporary, healthy gay love might be, both sensual and spiritual in nature" (4).

Victorian sexual morals are bad or good for society. On the one hand, they can serve as guidance for men like Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray by promoting virtues such as care and moral responsibility. On the other hand, they try to repress homosexual attraction as a form of perversity. Overall, the ambiguous role of Christianity is set in an equally ambiguous representation of aestheticism, the framework of the novel.

## 2 Life as Art – Wilde’s Paterian Theory of Aestheticism

As in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde’s own theory of aestheticism was highly ambiguous: his position towards art was never stable, but changed over the course of his lifetime<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, this chapter will take into consideration Wilde’s aesthetic position around 1890, the year of publication of his only novel and the earlier published essay *The Decay of Lying* (1889), also examining the influence of Wilde’s Oxford education, especially the academic work *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* written by Walter Pater. The focus will further lie on an implicit critique of Pater in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde was influenced by Pater’s composition of aestheticism deriving from ideas of French symbolists such as Baudelaire and Gautier who coined the sentence “art for art’s sake” (Pestka 66). Art was regarded as an equivalent of religion by the French aesthetes (Pestka 66) and the worship of experience, as it also plays an important role in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, later led to the movement of decadence (Chai 99).

As Wilde stated in the highly discussed “Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all” (Wilde 3). For Wilde, art does not include any moral judgement since the artist is merely the creator of beautiful things with no ethical sympathies (Wilde 3). This statement calls forth Wilde’s distance to the social critique of nineteenth-century realism put into practice in Victorian England by authors such as Charles Dickens and Elisabeth Gaskell (Albers 63). Wilde’s disdain for the social ambitions of realistic literature can be further seen in his famous statement that “life should imitate art” in his essay *The Decay of Lying* (1889). Lawrence Danson sums up Herbert Vivian’s position in the essay:

With his disdain for the supposedly objective truths of science, economics, sociology, or anything not of his own making, the liar’s very existence, a constant act of self-invention, is a protest against the realist’s submission to nature and to social conditions that pose as natural (“Wilde as Critic and Theorist” 86).

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Sumpter claims that Wilde’s position was not static due to his articles in journals in which he reacted to contemporary evolutionary and artistic theory.

As an imitation of a dandy, a man who honors taste more than morality and tries to rebel against Victorian social and gender norms<sup>11</sup>, Wilde himself attempted to live a life as a product of art in which good taste was one of the highest achievements of a personal aestheticism. Consequently, Wilde's own dandyism and the dandyism of Lord Henry Wotton who tries to turn Dorian Gray into an artificial dandy can be seen as an aesthetic escape from the social and sexual conventions of Victorian society. Thus, Wilde's notions of style have, nevertheless, a political dimension (Sammels 111): the disruption and change of society. Since this obviously could not be achieved in Wilde's time at least his rebellion can be regarded as an attempt to challenge Victorian England about its own social norms. Even though the dominant category for Wilde might not be simply art but style (Sammels 110), his style implicates hidden social ambitions and Wilde's self-performance has thus more in common with nineteenth-century realism than Wilde himself might have been aware of.

When looking at Wilde's aesthetic position, the influence of the academic work *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* written by Walter Pater and read by Wilde in the time of his studies at Oxford cannot be underestimated.<sup>12</sup> As Stephen Calloway notes:

Wilde of course belonged initially to that generation of Oxford Aesthetes who, beginning as disciples of Ruskin, had first espoused his earnest, Christian, medieval and Pre-Raphaelite enthusiasm and his desire for "Truth to Nature" in art, only to be seduced in due course by the more indulgently neo-pagan, Renaissance-inspired, "decadent" and, consequently, rather dangerously glamorous teachings of Walter Pater (Calloway 35).

In his work Pater distances himself from Ruskin's claim of realistic art as true art, a form of art that should imitate nature<sup>13</sup>, and instead promotes the ideal of the Renaissance as represented by painters such as Michelangelo. Pater seeks an art that no longer imitates nature but strives to express an aesthetic experience of which nature might only be the trigger point. Wilde takes this recognition of the independence of art further when he claims in "The Decay of Lying" that nature should imitate art, not the other way around (Danson, "Wilde as Critic and Theorist" 85). Caroline

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<sup>11</sup> As Stephen Calloway puts it: "The dandy-aesthetes of the *fin-de-siècle* period above all honed their senses and cultivated the rarest of sensibilities; they made the perfection of the pose of exquisiteness their greatest aim and they directed all their languid energies towards nurturing a cult of aesthetic response that begins beyond ordinary notions of taste, that lies beyond mere considerations of fashion, and operates quite outside the dictates of all conventional canons of morality" (Calloway 34; emphasis in the original).

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Danson states: "The effect on Wilde of Pater's 'beautiful and suggestive essays' calls to mind the 'influence' of the 'poisonous' yellow book Lord Henry Wotton gives to Dorian Gray" ("Wilde as Critic and Theorist" 83).

<sup>13</sup> Levine analyses: "While Ruskin appealed to the realities of the natural world as the ground of the truth for representation, Pater moves back and forth from one [nature] to another [form] without allowing the process [of creation] to come to rest" (184).

Levine expresses that the similarity between Pater and Wilde is that “they drew attention away from the truths to be affirmed by narrative and pointed instead to the artifices of the form” (Levine 198).

For Wilde form, like style, was not a mere category or a by-product of the creation of art but art itself. Only in art could a perfection of form and style be achieved which nature could not offer the artist. Consequently, copying nature, as Ruskin claimed<sup>14</sup>, was not good art. Rather, works of art should stand independently from nature and their historical context of time in which they were created<sup>15</sup>. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* then can be read as an aesthetic experiment against realism: the protagonist of the novel himself becomes an object of art, crossing the borders between human nature and art by letting the portrait take over his soul, deceiving his realistic environment in order to fully become an artistic figure. Accordingly, human nature is valued as plain in the novel, it is something unnatural in itself, a state which has to be overcome through art and the decadent development of a consciousness based on aesthetic experience, not on rationality or morals. As Lord Henry states, his mode of individualism can serve to achieve such a consciousness:

“To be good is to be in harmony with one’s self,” he replied [...]. “Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One’s own life – that is the important thing. [...] Besides, Individualism has really the higher aim. Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one’s age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality.” (Wilde 76).

Influenced by Pater, Wilde still echoes the patterns of Ruskin’s realist experiments while questioning and destabilizing their claims (Levine 192), most prominently the claim that good art should imitate nature. This can be proved by Lord Henry’s statement that “to become the spectator of one’s own life [...] is to escape the suffering of life” (Wilde 107), a quote that Dorian uses when Basil blames him for Sibyl’s suicide after Dorian has left her. Only when Dorian can enjoy his own life fully as a pleasure of aesthetic experiences – like watching a play on the stage – he can escape his dreadful human existence which is defined by suffering. “Only the individual [...] who is a creator not a product, is fully human. You have to be artificial to be really yourself” (Danson, “Wilde as Critic and Theorist” 87). In conclusion, aestheticism serves not only for Wilde himself but also for Dorian and Lord Henry as an escape from Victorian society and human suffering.

The influence of Walter Pater’s work on Wilde can further be seen in Wilde’s aesthetic conception of the role of literature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. “The effect on Wilde of Pater’s ‘beautiful and suggestive essays’ calls to mind the ‘influence’ of

<sup>14</sup> “Nature’s crude imperfections and unfinished condition, its failure to fulfill its good intentions, is a cause of art: ‘Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place’” (Danson, “Wilde as Critic and Theorist” 85).

<sup>15</sup> “in ‘The Decay of Lying’ Wilde reverses the course of wisdom: ‘Nature imitates Art’, and should be made to obey art’s laws” (Danson, “Wilde as Critic and Theorist” 85).

the ‘poisonous’ yellow book Lord Henry Wotton gives to Dorian Gray” (Danson, “Wilde as Critic and Theorist” 83). Reading literature is regarded in the novel as an experience addressing the aesthetic senses and consequently produces individual pleasure.<sup>16</sup> Reading has not a primarily intellectual aim, rather it can lead to temptation and a change of one’s attitude to life as can be seen by the corruption of Dorian Gray by the yellow book which seems to influence Dorian’s mind like his later addiction to opium:

One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some mediaeval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner. It was a poisonous book. The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain (Wilde 121).

While reading the yellow book, Dorian is “unconscious of the falling day” (Wilde 121), he loses his sense of time. The yellow book which Wilde himself defined in his trial as J.-K. Huysmans’s *À Rebours* (Calloway 48) becomes a guide to an aesthetic lifestyle for Dorian who fully turns into the artificial figure of a dandy by living up to the experiences of its protagonist. The yellow book then functions as Lord Henry’s most powerful tool in his aesthetic human experiment of totally influencing Dorian Gray. The decadent longing for new experiences holds Dorian in a firm grip and his pleasure becomes unattainable, thus leading to the moral decay of his soul. Dorian’s search for pleasure yields his morality: to deepen his consciousness by using art, sexual pleasure and drugs, he has to abandon his self-awareness, losing his consciousness at the same time. His desire, as Leon Chai notes, can no longer be satisfied; “it becomes in effect a desire *for desire*” (Chai 98; emphasis in the original).

This path of chasing desire leads Dorian to his moral corruption and alienation from the society he lives in. On the one hand, Wilde takes Pater’s conception of sensual aestheticism seriously as a refuge from suppressing Victorian conventions for figures such as Lord Henry. On the other hand, he criticizes Dorian’s isolation in his artificial life of a dandy by showing its moral consequences uttered through Basil Hallward who asks Lord Henry: “But, surely, if one lives merely for one’s self, Harry, one pays a terrible price for doing so?” (Wilde 76). Hence, Dorian seems to be like a young man seduced by Henry Wotton to follow Pater’s final statement in his work about the Renaissance that “young men should [...] ‘burn always with [a] hard, gem-like flame” (Calloway 36) and “seek primarily for sensation and ‘great passions’ in both art and life [...] to ‘get as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (Calloway 36) which in the novel ultimately leads to Dorian’s social isolation and loss of his human soul.

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<sup>16</sup> Stefanie Albers states that “whereas Victorians saw art as a tool that can be used as a form of oral enlightenment and social education, aestheticism’s aim was to free art from all responsibility, and aesthetes believed that art does not need to have any other purpose but to be beautiful” (Albers 63).

Through the rationality of Basil Hallward, the empathetic artist trying to live up to Victorian social norms by not acting out his homosexuality<sup>17</sup> in direct opposition to the irrational desire for pleasure in its utmost form represented by Lord Henry Wotton, the novel opposes two points of view: mainly, Christian morality versus aesthetic pleasure. As will be shown in the following analyses, aesthetic pleasure can be a refuge from strict Victorian convention, but once it totally dominates Dorian's life it inevitably leads to moral corruption and soulless artificiality. Art, which should always be a pleasure in Wilde's eyes, only bears suffering when human nature is abandoned in order to fully achieve art's ideal of aesthetic beauty and a decadent life of desire for new experiences. As Joseph Carroll realizes: "Wilde is intoxicated by Pater's aestheticism, but his own intuitions tell him that Pater's concept of human nature is profoundly false" (Carroll 302).

### 3 An Object of Art – *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an Aesthetic Experiment

#### 3.1 Dorian Gray – a Seduced Boy and an Aesthetic Object?

Many readings of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* focus on the role of its protagonist. Most prominently, Dorian's function as *Doppelgänger* has been closely analyzed<sup>18</sup> and the novel has been regarded as a Gothic tale sharing certain similarities with other works of the Victorian Age such as Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*<sup>19</sup>. Some critics even claim its framework as a *Bildungsroman* putting forward Dorian's process of learning which ends in catastrophe<sup>20</sup>. I will argue that Dorian's development in the novel is not only due to the influence of Sir Henry Wotton, but instead it is made possible by the fact that Dorian is not entirely regarded as a human subject by both Lord Henry and Basil Hallward right from the beginning of the novel. Thus, the novel cannot be seen as a *Bildungsroman* focusing on the development of a human being

<sup>17</sup> As Henry M. Alley observes: "Both men [Basil and Dorian] are pressed by a vision of the past to take action. Both ultimately turn to the closet, Hallward pursuing an extension of his monkish life in art, and Dorian moving on to become the ultimately secretly gay Narcissus, who acts out his own inner hatred by destroying the lives and loves of both men and women alike. In this sense, Hallward's undisclosed truth about himself is not far from Dorian's about the portrait" (5).

<sup>18</sup> As Linda Dryden notes: "*Dorian Gray* is also inspired by any number of doppelgänger tales" (Dryden 115).

<sup>19</sup> Linda Dryden also marks the contrast between the two works in her comparative analysis when she writes: "In *Dorian Gray*, the deviant in society exhibiting regressive tendencies is not a monster, whose degeneracy is figured in his repulsiveness, as in Hyde, but rather a monster whose deviancy is caused by his extreme narcissism, a decadent Gothic subject whose beauty is the wellspring of horror" (Dryden 114).

<sup>20</sup> Guy Willoughby writes: "the story traces Dorian Gray's attempt to realize his life as art in the interest of an expanded selfhood, akin to that advanced in *The Sould of Man*. In this sense the novel is an aesthetic *Bildungsroman*, an intense study of its hero's (aestheticized) knowledge and experience after Pater or Huysmans" (Willoughby 63).

but instead requires to be read as an aesthetic experiment set in the Victorian society Wilde himself lived in. Under the ongoing influence of Lord Henry, Dorian slowly develops into the artificial figure of a dandy losing his soul gradually the more his portrait shows the effects of his committed sins. At the end, Dorian has become a criminal dandy who values art but at the same time sacrifices his morality for the price of beauty. Such a figure was Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, an artist, aesthete and poisoner worshipped by Wilde in his essay *Pen, Pencil and Poison* from 1889 (Sheehan 337)<sup>21</sup>.

Lord Henry does not produce Dorian's evil nature by the power of his speeches; instead, his mere words trigger the evil part of human nature in the young boy so that his unconscious (sexual) phantasies become a real possibility to Dorian (D'Alessandro 69). When Dorian is first exposed to Lord Henry's influence he reacts as follows to Lord Henry's speech about Dorian's soon coming loss of his wonderful youth soon coming:

For nearly ten minutes he stood there, motionless, with parted lips, and eyes strangely bright. He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work with him. Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself. The few words that Basil's friend had said to him [...] had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses (Wilde 21).

Dorian's reaction to Lord Henry's words – “the throbbing to curious pulses” (Wilde 21) – recalls a similarity to the reaction of the human consciousness to some kind of drug. Again, Dorian seems to lose his awareness of time. Here, Lord Henry's words function like opium: once absorbed by Dorian, their substance starts to reveal desires and horrible wishes to him that have until now resided in his sub-consciousness. Only under this “spell” Dorian can utter the dreadful wish to remain forever young and take over the role of the portrait that leads to his final transformation into an object of art, when his wish comes true and his portrait really starts to alter after he has left Sibyl Vane.

Even before Lord Henry sees Dorian for the first time, Basil describes Dorian to him in such a way that Henry's mind is already preshaped for viewing Dorian as a beautiful object rather than a human being:

“He is all my art to me now”, said the painter, gravely. [...] “What the invention of oil-painting was to the Venetians, the face of Antinous

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Sheehan acknowledges the influence of the dandy Wainewright on Wilde when he writes: “Though initially a talented artist, Wainewright later ‘sought to find expression by pen or poison’, and it is the relationship between the two spheres that fascinates Wilde. [...] Wilde's claim, then, is that some artists are naturally inclined towards criminality, just as some criminals are impelled to creative expression” (Sheehan 337). Sheehan regards Lord Henry as a character constructed after Thomas Wainewright, but in contrast to Wainewright, Lord Henry's talk is immoral but he does not act after his corrupting statements. Instead, as I will argue, he uses Dorian to fulfill these and turn his epigrams into reality.

was to late Greek sculpture, the face of Dorian Gray will some day be to me. [...] Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art. [...] He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and subtleties of certain colours. That is all." (Wilde 13-14).

Here, Basil mainly focuses on the aspect that at the beginning mostly constitutes his perception of Dorian: his desire for him as a (sexual) muse for his art and thus a beautiful object of his painting. This aspect is strengthened by the fact that at the beginning of the novel Lord Henry does not see Dorian in person but instead meets his half-finished picture in Basil's studio and immediately admires its beauty. He acknowledges this by telling Basil that the portrait was his best work until now and that he needs to exhibit the picture in the future (Wilde 6). That Basil resists such an invitation by admitting that he put too much of his own soul into the picture of Dorian (Wilde 9), illustrates that he sexually admires Dorian in a way that could offend the Victorian public. Whereas Basil is dominated by Dorian's beauty as an object, Lord Henry in contrast is so fascinated by it that he seeks to dominate Dorian by putting him totally under his aesthetic influence thus trying to turn him into the artificial figure of a dandy:

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 (Wilde 58).

Nevertheless, he also regards Dorian merely as an object, a soulless vessel that he himself can fill with his ideas<sup>22</sup>, reduced to its external beauty. As a consequence, Dorian is robbed of his own personality by both Basil and Lord Henry and is ascribed the status of a beautiful aesthetic, and for Lord Henry experimental, object. Michal Peled Ginsburg analyzes the triangle of relations between the three men and the portrait in the second chapter of the novel as follows:

Dorian now recognizes himself in the painted image, itself shaped by Lord Henry's words as well as by his own influence on Basil and by Basil's love. In the same way that Dorian influenced Basil's art so that in this new art Basil can recognize his love for Dorian, Lord Henry influences Dorian, who can then see his newly discovered/produced self in Basil's painting (Ginsburg 101).

Thus, Dorian's portrait is not merely a beautiful picture but a revelation of the denying of Dorian's individual personality since his pose in the picture is influenced by Lord Henry's words and his beauty as a sitter is his most valuable character trait of him for Basil (Ginsburg 100). Once turned into an aesthetic object, Dorian cannot

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<sup>22</sup> S. I. Salamensky notes: "He [Dorian] is an empty shell until Harry – as transmogrifying God to a son of God, or a Dr. Frankenstein to his monster – invests him with his 'own soul', and, in that, his own 'thoughts,' 'passions,' 'virtues,' and 'sins'" (Salamensky 127-128).

escape his fate anymore since Lord Henry does not cease viewing Dorian as an object and Dorian has fallen under his control. In the following, I will analyze which aspects reveal Dorian's status as an aesthetic, soulless object in the novel once his portrait has started to change.

After uttering his wish that he may stay forever young, Dorian loses his emotions gradually by his ongoing sins. After he has left Sibyl Vane for her bad acting caused by her love for him and she has taken her own life, he notices a change in the portrait. Interestingly, after his talk with Lord Henry about his faded love for Sibyl when he saw her bad acting, Dorian does not ascribe this change to his immoral cruelty towards Sibyl but to Sibyl's suicide itself:

No; there was no further change in the picture. It had received the news of Sibyl Vane's death before he had known of it himself. It was conscious of the events of life as they occurred. The vicious cruelty that marred the fine lines of the mouth had, no doubt, appeared at the very moment that the girl had drunk the poison (Wilde 101).

Consequently, Dorian tries to alleviate his bad conscience by telling himself that it was Sibyl's suicide which has changed the picture, not his immoral behavior. By adopting Lord Henry's view that her death was merely an aesthetic event incorporating the authentic tragedy of her good acting, an ability which vanished when Sibyl fell in love with him, Dorian adapts his mind to the views of an artificial dandy resenting Victorian social norms and Christian empathy. Moreover, he views Sibyl as Lord Henry and Basil Hallward view him: Dorian regards Sibyl as an aesthetic object (Brinkley 8). As Ruth Robbins notes, Sibyl's suicide "fixes her meaning in a remote aesthetic sphere. This attitude [of aestheticism] enables him [Dorian] to discern beauty in her death without having to examine its morality" (Robbins 231).

When Dorian resists Basil's attempt to take his own moral involvement in her death into account, he absolutely abandons his Christian consciousness and thus loses his human nature. As an object of art, he does not feel pity or empathy for other human beings anymore. From now on the picture functions as a moral marker showing Dorian the consequences of his committed sins (Bristow 211). Since the portrait alters instead of Dorian himself, he is finally dominated by his appearance after his personality has already been reduced to his looks by Lord Henry and Basil Hallward. Jerusha McCormack notices:

Seeking to numb his guilt, Dorian anaesthetises himself with things, inventing himself by means of his own collections. His relationship with himself, as with others, is dictated by an object; but which Dorian is now the artefact? Neither can live outside the world of the fabricated, nor tolerate the "life" which threatens it with destruction (McCormack 113).

What McCormack overlooks is that Dorian has already lost his feeling of guilt by not paying attention to Basil's moral considerations. Only at the end of the novel,

when Dorian tries to restore his moral consciousness by not seducing a young country-girl, he feels morally responsible. But even this sense of morality ends when he stabs the picture in a final egoistic attempt to hide the consequences of his sins from the outer world. The two Dorians, the young and the altering one, are both not alive: the picture only portrays Dorian's sins, whereas Dorian himself has lost his humanity (Cooper Harrison 11) by becoming an artificial dandy. The role of the portrait is therefore to function as a mirror of his soul, showing Dorian the visible results of his bad actions (Ginsburg 102) but at the same time it does not function as a real mirror since "it does not give Dorian an idealized image of himself as eternally young and beautiful" (Ginsburg 102).

As most critics highly disagree with each other, there exist different analyses of Dorian as a character. Whereas Jerusha McCormack regards Dorian as "the very image of the feckless Irish lad – the 'Great Irresponsible'" (McCormack, 112), Ruth Robbins focuses in her analysis on the treatment of Dorian as a young woman by Basil and Lord Henry: "Moreover, it is not only in the fact of Dorian's multiplying image that he is feminized. It is also in the substance of the image, in the ways in which the other two men, and the narrative as a whole, see him" (Robbins 229). Overall, "Dorian acts and is treated like a virginal young girl" (Robbins 230). According to Robbins, Edward S. Brinkley also takes the sexual implications of Dorian's representation into account, but mainly in a viewpoint focused on implicit homosexuality in which "the body of the young male, of Dorian, [...] comes into function both as icon, that is, as an enabling *fetish* in the text, and as a social experiment in *homosexualization*" (Brinkley 65; emphases in the original). Interestingly, also Esther Rashkin emphasizes Dorian's status as an object, but by applying the psychological theory of Sandor Ferenczi about child abuse, she regards Dorian as an abused child who, as an adult, tries to live up to the villain image of himself constructed by his grandfather and thus identifies himself with his aggressor (Rashkin 72). Other critics interpret Dorian's character as a stereotype of Narcissus, in love with his own image<sup>23</sup>, or as a young man, influenced by Lord Henry, their relationship a model of Greek Paterian love (Irmak 78) a model of male-male desire that Wilde worshipped himself (Irmak 79).

Esther Rashkin's interpretation to regard Dorian merely as a seduced or abused boy is tempting but it neglects the aspect that Lord Henry only triggers the immoral part of Dorian's nature by his first speech, a part which has already existed in Dorian

<sup>23</sup> González writes about Dorian: "His transformation after death is a reversal of Narcissus' metamorphosis into a flower: the epitome of Victorian beauty is turned into a monster of evil and ugliness. It goes without saying that Dorian-Narcissus has reached the self-knowledge he was looking for" (González 10). And Andrew Wenaus further notes: "So, in this sense, where Narcissus amputates his whole body, Dorian seeks oblivion by being transferred completely to the extension; yet the extension itself is entirely dependent upon the body" (Wenaus 69). In contrast Michal Peled Ginsburg notices: "Dorian is different from Narcissus, who falls in love with his image and wants to join it even at the cost of death. Dorian, by contrast, wants to exchange places with the portrait, which is quite a different thing: rather than wishing to unite with the image, he would like to keep the difference between them, only exchange their respective attributes" (Ginsburg 101).

and only has to be enforced to bear evil fruit. Consequently, reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* only as a parable of abuse or seduction is not fully taking into consideration the critique of Dorian's treatment as an object in the novel. Dorian himself is not a seduced or abused object without content, but he is treated as such by Basil Hallward and Lord Henry, a treatment which makes it easy for Dorian to develop a narcissistic obsession with his own beauty and regard Sibyl as an aesthetic object. Dorian does not consider his treatment as wrong and thus is unable to free himself of its consequences. Rather he embraces the aesthetic philosophy of Lord Henry, a philosophy which seems too dangerous as to regard Lord Henry as a good teacher of life in the way of the Greek model of Paterian love between an older and a young male<sup>24</sup>.

The aesthetic experiment that Lord Henry runs with Dorian is based on this false treatment of the young boy. But it is Dorian himself who voluntarily falls under its spell, living out the immoral side of his human nature and developing a disdain for Christian morality and Victorian social conventions. Dorian embodies an aristocratic young man who is frustrated with the boundaries of his age and the society he lives in, an anachronistic hero who tries – and fails – to free himself of these boundaries by worshipping a Paterian aestheticism. Furthermore, he finds pleasure in immoral and new experiences and thus becomes a decadent criminal dandy aesthete such as Thomas Wainewright. But unlike Thomas Wainewright, Dorian does not merely corrupt – and thus indirectly poison – people by use of his beautiful exterior, he also takes further pleasure in his own decay by watching the change of his portrait, “a masochistic pleasure of seeing his body degraded, seeing it being “punished” for his actions” (Ginsburg 102). The narrator tells that Dorian

would creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door with a key that never left him now, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul (Wilde 124).

For Dorian, aestheticism functions as a substitute for a belief or religion, a theory which dominates his life and turns him fully into an object by putting him under its spell. He has fallen for Pater's statement in his conclusion to *Studies in the History of Renaissance* to “burn with a hard, gem-like flame” (Calloway 36) and is unable to lead a life not dominated by the excesses of pleasure. His crime is not a worship of beautiful objects but worship of aestheticism over human nature, religious belief and

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<sup>24</sup> Burak Irmak puts forward this view when he claims that “Lord Henry finds relief in his new pederastia teacher role. He embraces it and uses it as an escape from his other performative roles” (79). But this statement is not supported by the view that Dorian has of Lord Henry, in a moment when he realizes how dangerous Lord Henry's influence is.

Victorian conventions<sup>25</sup>. His former self is dissolved in the hunger for new experiences and pleasure. “The heightened sensory experience of aestheticism entails the basic instability of the self because it is precisely that instability which enables, and is compounded by, aesthetic response” (Davis 554). But through his increasing desire, Dorian’s desire turns into a “*desire for desire*” (Chai 98; emphasis in the original) and Dorian’s emotions such as pity and empathy yield to the aesthetic hunt for pleasure. As an object of art and a criminal dandy he chases experiences but pays the price of losing his human soul. The aesthetic experiment of the novel is thus developed to fail and its failure exposes Pater’s aesthetic theory to a sharp critique, since when tested in real life, this isolates Dorian from society and robs him of his humanity (Cooper Harrison 11).

### 3.2 Lord Henry Wotton – a Soulless Paterian Aesthete or a Failed Modern Individualist?

No other character symbolizes Pater’s theory of an aestheticism based on sensual experiences and pleasure better than Lord Henry Wotton. As emphasized by many critics, he is the person who introduces Dorian to the beauty of the senses and makes him aware of his own beautiful youth, uttering the warning that he should not waste it by living up to Victorian norms and Christian morality<sup>26</sup>:

Yes, Mr Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away. You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you (Wilde 24).

Dorian is heavily influenced by Lord Henry’s and Basil Hallward’s obsession with his beautiful youth. Consequently, Dorian becomes intoxicated with the fear of the loss of his youth and thus the fear of ageing and death, foreshadowed by the decay of human beauty<sup>27</sup>. Sylvia Ostermann notes that

Between the pictures Basil Hallward had painted, and Dorian exists an autoerotic relation which is connected with the fear of growing older and the longing for eternal youth. The connection between death and eros is already indicated in the first two chapters (Ostermann, 299).

<sup>25</sup> Cooper Harrison notes generally: “It can be assumed that Wilde is satirizing the concept of material belongings as the new religion of the Victorian people, thus arguing that aestheticism is the result of a loss of faith in both man and God, both sacrificed for objects of beauty” (7).

<sup>26</sup> Jean M. Ellis D’Alessandro writes that “Dorian thus acknowledges implicitly that he accepts Lord Henry’s view that were he to follow a life of social morality and religious thought, and thereby save his soul, this very kind of life would mar his body through the suppression of his desires” (D’Alessandro 65).

<sup>27</sup> Ostermann notes: “Dorian’s increasing egotism is in fact the unconscious fear of death” (301).

Lord Henry himself does not seem to notice the consequences of having imbued Dorian with this fear. He merely regards Dorian as an experimental object, with which he can play around. What Lord Henry defines as Dorian's essence of being is the Dorian portrayed in Basil's pictures: a young and extraordinarily male representing his philosophy of a new hedonism (Ostermann 299). Thus he does not acknowledge Dorian's identity but a made-up stereotype which is fostered by Basil's notion that Dorian defines for him "the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek" (Wilde 13). Interestingly, Lord Henry seeks to achieve the harmony of soul and body in Dorian, which Basil worships when the artist claims: "The harmony of soul and body! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented [...] an ideality that is void" (Wilde 13). But in contrast to Basil, Lord Henry does not see this harmony already accomplished in Dorian's beautiful appearance. Instead, he wants to achieve this aesthetic aim by influencing Dorian with his aesthetic theory and so turn him into a substitute leading the fulfilled life of (sexual) sensual experiences of a criminal aesthete such as Thomas Wainwright (Sheehan 337) that he himself wants to lead but is too afraid of living. As Burak Irmak notes: "Filled with desires by Lord Henry, Dorian becomes more than what Lord Henry expects. At first, Dorian is a mere student, a personification of Lord Henry's phantasy" (Irmak 81). Whereas Basil views Dorian as a symbol of youthful perfection, Lord Henry worships Dorian's youth – both in his appearance as in his naivety – as the main tool contributing to the achievement of his experimental aims.

The multiple interpretations of the character of Lord Henry Wotton by contemporary Wilde critics seem to prove the opinion that Lord Henry is a far more interesting character in the novel than Dorian Gray himself. If the novel were not named after Dorian, it could even be questioned if he should be viewed as the protagonist or if not the main player in this aesthetic composition is instead the figure of Lord Henry. Given interpretations of his character include a queer Lord Henry, struggling with Victorian gender norms (Irmak 78), Lord Henry as a devil in persona inspired by Goethe's *Faust*<sup>28</sup>, a bored and rather morbid aristocrat and dandy who takes more pleasure in the end of desire than in desire itself<sup>29</sup> as well as Dorian's teacher of life as in the model of ancient Greek male-male love<sup>30</sup>. This range of interpretations shows a controversy concerning the question if Lord Henry as a character should be

<sup>28</sup> Guy Willoughby writes: "Thus inspired by his aesthetic Mephistopheles, Dorian Gray embraces a career of intense, scrupulous experience, both cerebral and sensuous" (Willoughby 66).

<sup>29</sup> Jeff Nunokawa analyzes the role of ennui in the novel and notes: "Like the secret longing for a long-anticipated death, the dandy harbors a never quite covert desire for desire's termination. However much his constitution inclines toward indolence, Lord Henry, [...] could hardly be more industrious finding new opportunities to mention passion's tendency to recede" (Nunokawa 78). I would like to emphasize here that the role of ennui in the novel expressed by Lord Henry rather needs to be read as a frustration with the non-ability of Lord Henry to act out his own desires than with a morbid longing for death as a dandy, as I will argue later.

<sup>30</sup> Burak Irmak also emphasizes Lord Henry's role as Dorian's teacher, but merely views it as platonic and without desire, a view I would clearly resist.

valued positively as an aesthete introducing the pleasures of life to Dorian, or negatively as an immoral person influencing him in a fatally wrong way. I will argue that the character of Lord Henry can only be analyzed by taking into consideration the context of his life as a character, mainly, the struggle with Victorian society and his own sexuality suppressed by a hetero-normative married life (Irmak 80). Burak Irmak writes: “As he is a teacher of desire, he turns Dorian into a personification of his own desires and the result of his escape from the normative gender. His teacher role, however, causes the collapse of his married life in the end” (Irmak 79).

Furthermore, Lord Henry symbolizes Pater’s theory of aestheticism and the desire for a life lived through sensual experiences. Nevertheless, Lord Henry himself cannot lead the life he desires. He watches Dorian’s change of lifestyle and enjoys influencing him for his own pleasure in order to satisfy his own (sexual) desires. His dissatisfaction with himself as an outsider not wanting to fulfil Victorian norms for an aristocratic male (Irmak 77), “the resistance to dictated male performativity and its results” (Irmak 77), leads to his urge for the aesthetic experiment he runs with Dorian. Thus, Dorian is merely a substitute compensating Lord Henry’s own failure to free himself from his social bonds as a married man of high status (Irmak 81). As Lord Henry himself states in the second chapter of the novel:

Because to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He 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 some one else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him (Wilde 20).

By influencing Dorian, Lord Henry unwillingly becomes one of the persons he despises because of their fear of themselves. His claim that many people in Victorian society have forgotten “the highest of all duties, the duty that one owns to one’s self” (Wilde 20), meaning the courage of true self-development, is revealing in two aspects: firstly, Lord Henry himself does not have the courage to develop himself freely and instead uses Dorian for this purpose, and, secondly, he is thus included as an involuntary victim of the terror of God and society which he claims govern England’s population (Wilde 20). So his sharp social critique cannot be taken entirely seriously by the reader since he remains a failed individualist trying to develop a modern identity but is unable to live out this modernism by himself. Lord Henry’s individualism is doomed to failure because it does not account for the general condition of society (Willoughby 70). Thus, his hatred for his own failure leads to his bad influence over Dorian. Lord Henry can be seen as the devil, whose self-hatred destroys Dorian’s life, but nevertheless, it cannot be argued that Lord Henry as a character is soulless since he himself is not aware of the total catastrophe to which his powerful influence leads. This can be proven by the aspect that he cannot believe in the murder of Basil committed by Dorian, even when Dorian indirectly confesses this awful action to him:

“What would you say, Harry, if I told you that I had murdered Basil?” said the younger man. [...] “I would say, my dear fellow, that you were posing for a character that doesn’t suit you. All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is crime. It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder” (Wilde 203).

This non-belief in Dorian’s crime by Lord Henry implies a sharp critique of Pater’s aesthetic theory by Wilde<sup>31</sup> and, at the same time, a reassurance of Christian social norms: unable to see beneath the surface of Dorian’s beauty and remaining youth, Lord Henry clings to his personal aestheticism without realizing its bad consequences. Beauty as a substitute for morality in a character, as Lord Henry unconsciously worships it in Dorian, is thus not justifiable. Consequently, Wilde indirectly claims that one has to worship morality over beauty and real personality over superficial appearance and so contradicts his claim in the preface to the novel, in which he states that “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written” (Wilde 3). Beneath the surface of aesthetic beauty, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* conveys a moral by illustrating the failure of Lord Henry, the dandy aesthete, and his aesthetic experience. Pater’s aim to lead a life adhering to experiences which evoke high personal pleasure remains opposed to the failure of Dorian’s attempt to lead such an aesthetic life free from social bonds under Lord Henry’s influence. Guy Willoughby emphasizes the limits of Lord Henry’s aesthetic theory of a free life, when he analyzes Dorian’s failure:

This is the central flaw in Dorian Gray’s quest: it is not that an aesthetic view is innately wrong, but that it needs to be redefined, to incorporate all of experience, no matter how demeaning or vicious, into a more complex vision. Because Dorian insists on rejecting the “ugly”, “horrible”, and “distressing” in life – in spite of the portrait’s insistence on their veracity – he is doomed to fragmentation and collapse, not expansion and “self-development” (Willoughby 68).

I claim that in order to achieve his aims and fulfill his desire by watching Dorian’s radical change of lifestyle, Lord Henry uses two strategies of discourse. Firstly, the conscious use of his rhetoric skill of ridiculing Victorian society as a tool to tempt Dorian to change his life by evoking fear in the young man of wasting his youth through a moral life adapted to the contemporary gender norms and conception of morality (D’Alessandro 65). D’Alessandro emphasizes that “Wotton [...] presents belief in society and religion as fanaticism producing terror [...], as against the joy coming from self-development” (D’Alessandro 64). The joy of self-development means a Paterian search for sensual and sexual pleasure. Lord Henry cleverly interweaves the possibility of a life of pleasure for Dorian and the full commitment to

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Bristow writes: “By exposing the damaging consequences of Lord Henry Wotton’s desire for Dorian to become the ‘visible symbol’ of a new ‘Hedonism’, Wilde is satirizing Pater’s emphasis upon ‘getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time’ we are allotted in life” (Bristow 212).

his youth with the decay of his soul and mental unhappiness as an opposing image negatively connoted, should Dorian follow the path that is outlined for him by Victorian society (D'Alessandro 65). This "psychological manipulation of Dorian" (D'Alessandro 63) starts immediately when Lord Henry sees him for the first time in the second chapter of the novel. Lord Henry uses Dorian's unsteady personality typical for the youth in order to turn him into the person he wants, or rather needs, Dorian to be (D'Alessandro 63). He does so by playing with Dorian's forbidden sexual desires (D'Alessandro 69) telling him that

The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. [...] It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also (Wilde 21).

For a young man like Dorian in an age where sex before marriage was considered a moral shame, these words are fatal. D'Alessandro notes that for Lord Henry

all is simply a game, a game to experiment with the power of words to bring to the surface passions that, through mental speculation, could be a source of delight for him, and Dorian, with his hidden passions and inexperience, is the perfect subject [...] for his analysis (D'Alessandro 63).

On the surface, Lord Henry's aesthetic experiment with Dorian might seem to be simply a game but it is much more than a game for simple pleasure. More likely, it is a game stimulating Lord Henry's own unfulfilled sexual desires (Irmak 79) and his radical want for personal freedom. This is indicated in the novel by the fact that Lord Henry regards Dorian merely as an aesthetic object. He tells Dorian to view Sibyl not as a human being but as an object of art by stating that "The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died" (Wilde 100), revealing that he himself regards Dorian in the same way. The narrator expresses that when he tells that for Lord Henry

It was delightful to watch him [Dorian]. With his beautiful face, and his beautiful soul, he was a thing to wonder at. It was of no matter how it all ended, or was destined to end. He was like one of those gracious figures in a pageant or a play, whose joys seem to be remote from one, but whose sorrows stir one's sense of beauty, and whose wounds are like red roses (Wilde 57).

To let Dorian fulfill his secret pleasures with all their dreadful consequences, Lord Henry needs to dehumanize Dorian at first, turn him into "a thing to wonder at" (Wilde 57) in order to be ignorant of his human fate when Dorian follows the theory expressed in Lord Henry's epigrams. Yet Dorian's joys only seem to be remote from Lord Henry, but truly they are not indifferent to him since they stimulate his own hidden sexual desires.

The second strategy Lord Henry uses in his conversations with Dorian is that of putting emphasis on a certain emotion: his own boredom with things<sup>32</sup>. Lord Henry constantly stresses his own *ennui* as a means of illustrating how bored he is with his life in Victorian society and that consequently, a life under the aesthetic principles of pleasure seems to be the only escape from this constant ennui for Dorian. A life dominated by boredom, as Lord Henry demonstrates to live, could according to him destroy Dorian's youth and leave the young man socially included but totally unhappy with his life (D'Alessandro 65). Lord Henry portrays Dorian's youth as a way through which the young man could escape boredom:

We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth! (Wilde 25).

Thus, if Dorian successfully enjoys the pleasures of his youth, a certain youthfulness in his appearance will last and he can enjoy pleasure endlessly. As a consequence, his life would remain free from the dreadful boredom that Lord Henry has to experience in his own life. Jeff Nunokawa analyzes Lord Henry's comments on ennui as a symptom for the false lifestyle of Victorian aristocracy, merely a morbid attitude of a dandy, namely, the pleasure of pain found in the awareness that every fulfilled desire has to come to an end. Nunokawa writes:

Beyond the satisfactions it affords the aesthete and the advertiser, the ephemerality of desire that Lord Henry promotes offers the additional advantage of relieving its subject from the horror that befalls the subject whose desire persists (Nunokawa 84).

The desire that persists is interpreted by Nunokawa as the homosexual desire of Lord Henry towards Dorian. It might be true that Lord Henry's ennui is a symptom for his unfulfilled homosexual desire. However, Lord Henry uses the stress of his ennui consciously in order to manipulate Dorian by opposing the boredom of a life regulated by Victorian social norms and Christian morality with an aesthetic life of a dandy and modern individualist full of sensual experiences leading to pleasure (D'Alessandro 70).

Both strategies of discourse used by Lord Henry show that he is psychologically conscious of his manipulation of Dorian but unconscious of that he manipulates the young man in order to satisfy his own desire (Irmak 81). He hides this motivation for his aesthetic experiment under the veil of Pater's philosophy of aestheticism. As the narrator of the novel revealingly tells about Lord Henry's excitement about the planned marriage of Dorian and Sibyl Vane:

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<sup>32</sup> Nunokawa analyses the two most dominant feelings in the novel: "The contrast between desire's affluence and boredom's poverty of affect couldn't be more apparent: Where desire possesses, or better, is possessed by, all the thrill of investment, boredom is known by its lack, characterized by the condition of indifference" (Nunokawa 73).

It was the passions about whose origins we deceived ourselves that tyrannized most strongly over us. 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 (Wilde 58).

The experiment with Dorian by Lord Henry can thus be further read as an experiment testing the possibility if Lord Henry's (sexual) desire to lead a life free from the social bonds of Victorian society is at all possible. In this experiment Dorian acts as Lord Henry's substitute following Pater's wish to base his personal happiness entirely on the pleasure of sensual experiences (Irmak 79).

### 3.3 Basil Hallward – a Love-blinded Artist and Moral Judge?

As a contrast to Lord Henry's theory, the character of the artist Basil Hallward seems to be the moral judge of Victorian society (Hinojosa 99) who criticizes Dorian's sinful actions and his careless attitude towards other people, mainly the young actress Sibyl Vane. But Basil Hallward cannot be reduced to a simple moral judge (Hinojosa 99) or a personification of Jesus Christ<sup>33</sup> since it is clearly indicated in the novel that he feels for Dorian a true and honest love "that dare not speak its name" (Bristow 196). The narrator confesses Dorian's knowledge that

Basil would have helped him to resist Lord Henry's influence, and the still more poisonous influences that came from his own temperament. The love that he bore him – for it was really love – had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual. It was not that mere physical admiration of beauty that is born in the senses, and that dies when the senses tire (Wilde 115).

Basil's love for Dorian is honest and caring. It views Dorian not simply as a sexual object – as Lord Henry does – but it also fails to take into consideration Dorian's unstable young personality and thus to save him from Lord Henry's evil influence. Basil's worship of Dorian is simply too much, it veils his eyes from necessary actions that might hurt Dorian in his new self-esteem but save him from Lord Henry's poisonous words. As Guy Willoughby notes

Basil's failure to kindle Dorian's moral sensibility is marked by the progressive tightening of Lord Henry's hold over their mutual friend. The battle-lines between Wotton and Hallward for Dorian's "soul", [...] is given an ethical and philosophical focus on the eve of Sybil Vane's suicide – the suicide that confirms Henry's ascendancy (Willoughby 71).

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<sup>33</sup> Guy Willoughby claims that "Like Christ, Basil dies for excess of love, killed because the vision he bears is unpalatable to his sometime follower" (73).

Overall, Basil's silent but not hidden homosexuality, indicated in the novel, seems to stand in sharp contradiction to his function as a moral judge. Interestingly, his homosexuality, implicitly expressed in his portrait of Dorian as a work of art (Alley 4), is not judged by the narrator of the novel although, at a first glance, Basil seems to be punished for his love for Dorian through being a victim murdered by the personality he once admired the most (Danson, "Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves" 92). I will argue that the murder of Basil is not a punishment for his homosexual and true love for the young man but a consequence of his irrational and dehumanizing idealization of Dorian's personality, a "personality" which is merely the output of unconscious wishes Basil bestowed on Dorian (Danson, "Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves" 89) and Basil's desire for Dorian's outward appearance. Lawrence Danson describes Basil's emotional reaction when he first sees Dorian as Basil's self-discovery of his homosexuality:

Basil's terror [...] registers the homosexual panic of his *self*-discovery; yet that discovery can only occur through Basil's recognition of Dorian's personality – a personality which cannot exist in Dorian until Basil has first read it into Dorian by projection from the personality he discovers in himself by reading Dorian ("Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves" 89; emphasis in the original).

The "personality" that Basil bestows on Dorian is dominated by Dorian's youthful beauty (Carroll 297) which attracts Basil to the young man and creates – as an ideal – a new style of art. Basil, then, views Dorian as a homosexual young man unaware of his sexual desires, but like Lord Henry he dehumanizes Dorian. Instead of turning him into an experimental object, Basil worships Dorian as a God of his art and a suggestion of a new manner (Wilde 14), turning him involuntarily and unconsciously into a higher being. In other words: Dorian's flawed humanity is denied by Basil since he transforms Dorian as his muse into a higher sphere of art and existence.

Dorian's male body "is announced openly as a fetish" (Brinkley 66) when he is painted by Basil in a sexual pose (Robbins 229) with "half-parted lips, and the bright look in the eyes" (Wilde 22). What Basil claims as Dorian's "personality" is based heavily on the representation of Dorian's body as a male object (Robbins 228). The portrait Basil paints can thus be seen as a revelation to the reader of his homosexual desire (Brinkley 6). Michel Peled Ginsburg notes:

If Basil's fascination with Dorian is the result of a "face to face" encounter [...], his art betrays this secret fascination through the representation of the body when it is no longer "ideal and remote." It is only as a portrait of the full body that the picture of Dorian Gray can be the site of Basil's secret love; it is only as a portrait of the full body that it can accomplish Dorian's secret wish to exchange places with the portrait (Ginsburg 99).

Thus, both painter and sitter reveal their desire in the portrait. Dorian's pose is due to the words of Lord Henry and Basil's style of painting involuntarily declares his

sexual desire. This is further proved by Basil's fear of exhibiting the picture. He confesses to Lord Henry responding to his question why he would not exhibit the picture:

Because, without intending it, I have put into it some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry, of which, of course, I have never cared to speak to him. He knows nothing about it. He shall never know anything about it. But the world might guess it; and I will not bare my soul to their shallow, prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope. There is too much of myself in the thing (Wilde 14).

"It" here can be read as Basil's homosexuality, a sin he is afraid to reveal to the world by exhibiting his picture. Interestingly, Basil does not want Dorian to know anything about "it" as well. This caring attitude indicates that Basil – in contrast to Lord Henry – does not want to lead Dorian into the commitment of sexual actions that were considered as sins by Victorian society.

But while focusing on his art and Dorian's beauty, Basil is not aware of the beginning Lord Henry's influence and fails to acknowledge the awakening of Dorian's desires caught in the sexual pose in the picture. Basil merely states that the picture is finished and he has caught the effect (Wilde 22) without registering the subtle poison of Lord Henry's words. As Basil admits to Dorian: "I don't know what Harry has been saying to you, but he has certainly made you have the most wonderful expression" (Wilde 22). On the one hand, then, Basil's art portrays his powerful creativity (Alley 2) and ability to catch Dorian's pose, but on the other hand the process of painting the picture keeps Basil from participating in the ongoing discourse around him and thus from sheltering Dorian from Lord Henry's words. Basil's role as an artist must consequently be seen ambiguously: it puts his homosexuality in a beautiful aesthetic light (Alley 2), but it is also a mode of egotism since Basil uses Dorian as his muse but is ignorant to what happens to Dorian while he is painting the picture.

This egotism is diminished by the aspect that as a character who values morality more than aesthetics and thus denies Lord Henry's purely aesthetic theory, Basil Hallward tries to lead a life adapted to the morality and Christianity of his age. Basil's fear shows his religious belief in the illusionary idea that sins cannot be hidden from the world. This is illustrated in the novel when Basil cannot believe in the rumors he heard about Dorian because, as he states "Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things" (Wilde 143). Thus, blinded by Dorian's outward appearance, Basil fails to acknowledge his corrupted personality under the influence of Lord Henry until it is too late, a failure that will lead to Basil's death. In opposition to Dorian's youth, the portrait takes over the function of showing the consequences of Dorian's bad actions. Joseph Carroll notes that "Dorian himself thinks of the painting in the same terms Basil uses to explain the logic of moral consequences. The painting becomes 'the visible symbol of the degradation of sin'" (Carroll 298). Thus, the portrait

of Dorian shows the consequences of Dorian's sins as an outward expression of the morality of its creator (Hinojosa 91): the portrait is the painted proof of Basil's morality, a sign of warning that reminds Dorian of his corrupted soul each time he looks at it (Carroll 298). Consequently, the portrait does not simply show Basil's homosexual love but also his extended moral consciousness (Hinojosa 91), a consciousness that wants to show Dorian the sinful shame of his actions. As Lynne W. Hinojosa notes:

The painting performs a narrative typological function – it marks the life and time of Dorian, increasing in its horrors with the weight of events and revealing what experience does to Dorian's moral and spiritual nature. Basil, too, although initially overcome by Dorian's beauty, is and remains a moral agent (Hinojosa 99).

In conclusion, the murder of Basil Hallward by Dorian Gray has thus to be read as a last attempt of Dorian to escape Basil's judgements and not, as Henry M. Alley states as "an act of internalized homophobia because Dorian hates the male love that would seek him out and speak its name" (M. Alley 6). But, as Dorian soon has to notice, killing the painter of the portrait is not enough to calm him. Instead, he has to destroy the portrait, Basil's extended consciousness (Hinojosa 91), itself.

Whereas Dorian's corruption seems to be almost inevitable for the plot of the novel, the murder of the artist could have been prevented if Basil Hallward had not overlooked Dorian's horrible change. As Dorian himself tells Basil after Sibyl Vane's suicide: "You have not realized how I have developed. I was a schoolboy when you knew me. I am a man now. I have new passions, new thoughts, new ideas" (Wilde 107). Since it is Lord Henry who turns Dorian into a criminal dandy aesthete, Basil cannot be seen as the creator of Dorian's corruption. He painted Dorian's picture unaware that it was already dominated by a facial expression that Lord Henry's evil words triggered. Only before his violent death Basil realizes the flaws of his love. He cries out: "I worshipped you too much. I am punished for it. You worshipped yourself too much. We are both punished." (Wilde 151).

Interestingly though, the novel does not judge Basil's homosexuality. As argued above, the murder of Basil cannot be read as a punishment for his love for Dorian. Basil's homosexuality is not judged negatively within the work of art. Rather the novel portrays Basil Hallward's failure to be a teacher of life for Dorian after the Greek ancient model of male-male-love. Nevertheless, even though Basil fails because he worships Dorian too much, he comes closer to the Greek ideal of an older man teaching and desiring his younger student than Lord Henry ever does. It is clear that Basil's influence on Dorian is positive, but Basil cannot put Dorian under his positive influence.

However, even if Basil is, as an opposite of Lord Henry, positively connoted in the novel, he cannot be seen as a literary incarnation of Christ (Willoughby 73). Basil's belief in morality and his selfless love for Dorian might remind a religious reader of the suffering and victimhood of Jesus Christ, but whereas Christ took the

sins of mankind onto him and thus relieved mankind of their sins through his death, Basil's death cannot relieve Dorian from his sins. Instead, Dorian has to kill his picture in order to re-achieve the unity of his soul and body<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, even though the novel claims his love to be true and honest, this love of Basil for Dorian is – in contrast to the compassion of Christ for mankind – unable to save Dorian from Lord Henry and himself. For Lynne W. Hinojosa “Basil and the painting retain something like the Puritan function of art by which the self can see his own inner nature revealed in the narrative” (Hinojosa 92). She analyzes the failure of Basil's theory of morality and compassion:

Yet in the end, Basil's Dorian is also an inefficacious theory of the self because it is unable to take action in the world: even though it remains a moral function, the painting remains passive and alone in the attic, unavailable to others for viewing, judgement, or interaction (Hinojosa 99-100).

Basil's interaction with the altered painting comes too late for Dorian. The ignorance of Dorian's change at the beginning of the novel, when Basil paints the portrait of him remains fatal: once slipped through the entanglement of Lord Henry's influence, Basil is unable to destroy it effectively throughout the plot (Willoughby 71). His own fear of his silenced but not hidden homosexuality stops him from rescuing the young man he loves. Instead, unlike Jesus Christ, he becomes the involuntary observer of Dorian's fate, unable to intervene. In the end, Basil does not die to rescue Dorian, he dies because he fails at this attempt.

Overall, Basil Hallward is a character incorporating the moral judgement of Dorian by Victorian society (Hinojosa 99). Basil values morality and Christian ethos, nevertheless, from a perspective in the context of his lifetime, he is a flawed moral judge due to his own homosexuality. His sexuality is further the flaw that prevents Basil from becoming a moral guide to Dorian since he worships the young man irrationally (Carroll 300). Joseph Carroll writes: “The most likely candidate for the role of internal moral guide would be Basil, but Basil is fundamentally compromised by his subjection to Dorian's ‘personality’” (Carroll 300). Basil's sexuality turns him into a tragic hero<sup>35</sup>, a character which on the one hand, benefits from his male-male-desire as a great contribution to his art (Alley 2), but on the other hand is defined by the fear of revelation of his love, a love that blindly worships instead of facing a personality's reality (Carroll 300).

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<sup>34</sup> Anna Budziak remarks: “The split appears between two entities whose attributes are exchanged: between the eponym's picture and the eponym, or the Decadent dandy. This dandy is ultimately identified with the self-conscious and insatiable mind in an immutable though sensuous shape; he is the very incarnation of the fantastic Soul. The picture, in turn, must bear the weight of the body and of the violated morals; it is the body be-souled” (277).

<sup>35</sup> Henry M. Alley analyses the parallel between Wilde's life and the novel: “Yet, in both the artistic tale and the biography, a gay man comes to a tragic end because of an admirable attachment to a being who nevertheless would or could not return the “sacred love that dare not speak its name” (1).

## 4 Ambiguous Christianity in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

### 4.1 The Concept of the Soul in the Novel

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, religion and aestheticism are both regarded ambiguously. Whereas aestheticism is celebrated through the figure of Lord Henry and criticized by the character of Basil Hallward and Dorian's fatal fate, religion is attacked by Lord Henry even though overall a Catholic concept of the human soul remains present during the plot of the novel (Killeen 95). In the following analysis, I will contrast Basil's and Lord Henry's conception of the soul. It will be shown that even Lord Henry is unable to free himself entirely of the belief that each human being has a soul and that this soul is both a religious conception and a moral faculty (Salamensky 128). Furthermore, I will argue that only through the loss of his soul, Dorian can commit his sins, but through his suffering he does not achieve redemption at the end of the novel because he cannot feel remorse for his sins due to the loss of his soul (Killeen 95). Thus, at the end of the novel the Christian unity of soul and body might be restored by the stabbing of the portrait (Killeen 95), but it remains unclear whether Dorian's hideous soul stays in his dead body or is transferred to heaven or hell.

S. I. Salamensky claims that "while soul is a moral faculty in Basil's case, in Harry's, it is something like consciousness, and highly linguistic in nature" (Salamensky 128). Basil's idea of the soul is indeed that of a moral faculty judging the acts of the individual by whether they are morally right or wrong. This belief of Basil is linked with the idea that bad actions considered sins cannot be erased from the appearance of a man and thus, if a man merely lived for his own sake, he would, as Basil claims, pay for it in remorse and suffering (Wilde 76). Dorian's beautiful appearance manipulates Basil because the painter can only believe in the truth of the rumors about Dorian's sins once he has seen the altered picture. Basil's belief in the soul as a moral faculty (Salamensky 128) reveals his true religious belief when he tries to rescue Dorian by suggesting that he as a sinner should pray for mercy: "Let us say that together. The prayer of your pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered also" (Wilde 151). Nevertheless, the novel leaves open whether Basil's belief could have saved Dorian since the painter is murdered by him and Dorian does not pray for God's mercy. So, Basil's belief in the soul and in Christ's mercy remains without consequences. However, it should not be overlooked that Basil's belief is – although he is not referred to as an active member of any church – right in its presupposition that body and soul are a Christian unity<sup>36</sup> and belong together in each human being. This is demonstrated in the end of the novel when Dorian's hideous soul is transferred back to his body (Schuchard 385) once he has stabbed the portrait. Soul and body are reunited and their unity seems

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<sup>36</sup> As the painter states right at the beginning of the novel: "The harmony of soul and body – how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two" (Wilde 13).

to be confirmed. Basil's belief then is both reaffirmed and portrayed as useless: the corruption of Dorian's soul is – though too late – only fully acknowledged by the painter and not by the superficial Lord Henry, but at the same time Basil's belief does not save him since he fails to convert Dorian and is consequently murdered because he cannot escape the dominance of Dorian's sins conveyed by the hideous picture. Anna Budziak remarks:

Despite their multiplicity, the connotations of the “soul” seem to be generally divided into two groups: one linked with consciousness and the “soul's” metaphysical meaning and the other connected with the forms of desiring. The conscience and its metaphysical meaning are contained by the picture; together with the picture, the conscience undergoes a physical change. In that sense, the picture is a besouled body (Budziak 266).

It is Dorian's rotten soul, then, shown by the picture, which leads to Basil's murder and reaffirms the moral consciousness of the painter expressed in the painting. Thus, Catholicism is neither denied nor treated as a clear solution to the corruption of Dorian's soul, as a possibility of rescuing Dorian from his fatal fate.

Whereas Basil's belief cannot save him but acknowledges Dorian's religious role as a sinner, Lord Henry's superficial aesthetic hedonism even fails to trace the ugly corruption of Dorian's soul (Carroll 290), it even denies this change of Dorian's personality when Lord Henry states after Dorian has indirectly confessed Basil's murder to him: “It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder. [...] Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders” (Wilde 203). Instead of viewing the suffering of the sinner as a possibility of receiving redemption as Basil does, Lord Henry regards suffering as a mere unpleasant aspect of human life which needs to be banned for aesthetic reasons:

“I can sympathize with everything, except suffering,” said Lord Henry, shrugging his shoulders. “[...] It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing. There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. One should sympathize with the colour, the beauty, the joy of life. The less said about life's sores the better.” (Wilde 41).

With the ban on suffering, Lord Henry denies the possibility of the existence of religious redemption for the human soul. He even views the category of sins as merely man-made. Thus, he cannot be seen as a parallel to Jesus Christ as Francis C. Rossow claims when writing: “Lord Wotton is epigram personified, suggesting by this characteristic a blasphemous parallel to the Christian doctrine of the World, which is both a person (Jesus Christ) and a book (The Scriptures)” (Rossow 136). For Lord Henry, a human life is only fulfilled when dominated by aesthetic pleasure and not by Christian morality. But by denying the corruption of Dorian's soul he automatically denies its fatal consequences for the young man and thus overlooks the split of body and soul in Dorian (Killeen 99). Nevertheless, Lord Henry does not deny entirely the unity of body and soul in human beings when he claims that

“Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul” (Wilde 23). Lord Henry believes that soul and senses depend on each other and aesthetic pleasure thus influences the soul. However, this belief is still based on a Christian – if not Catholic – conception of the soul, namely that the soul is shaped by human joy as well as by human misery. Even though Lord Henry does not admit the last, it seems clear to him that one does not go without the other when he utters his detest for the later. Consequently, Lord Henry cannot deny that the soul is shaped by perception of the senses relying on good or bad actions although for him outward beauty defines the soul and not a moral soul defines outward beauty. That Lord Henry secretly thinks in Basil’s terms of the soul is further emphasized by the aspect that he talks badly but does not commit bad actions (Killeen 96). This indicates Lord Henry’s fear of corrupting his own soul. Instead, he joyfully corrupts the soul of a young man and watches this process like a scientist. As Jarlath Killeen notes:

Lord Henry can talk flippantly about the soul, but the reader is fully aware that he has not lost it. He has his soul conveniently still with him. The irony is that Dorian, the only character who has truly managed to banish the soul as Lord Henry insists all should want it back, and dies in the attempt to get it back (Killeen 95).

Whether Dorian really wants his soul back at the end, or if his longing is just another aesthetic pose as Lord Henry puts it, is unclear<sup>37</sup>. Nevertheless, the consequences of Lord Henry’s ignorance of Dorian’s split of soul and body show that the concept of the soul in the novel can only be properly understood in Catholic terms (Killeen 95). Such an understanding of Dorian’s loss of the soul might have saved him since he cannot receive redemption at the end because he is unable to feel remorse for his sins. Thus, his suffering does not lead to mercy through Christ who took mankind’s sins upon himself through his crucifixion, but it remains senseless in purely aesthetic terms.

As a character driven to ruin by the loss of his soul, Dorian does not deny his soul as a moral faculty, but he neglects it. As Donald R. Dickson notes:

Dorian fails to achieve these ideals [of aestheticism] because he neglects the development of his soul. Though he always recalls Lord Henry’s epigram – “Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul” [Wilde 23] – he in fact devotes himself entirely to the senses, hoping to mask the sickness of his soul in the oblivion of opium (Dickson 12).

However, it is indicated in the novel when Dorian looks at his picture that he views it as bearing his soul life and thus his sins. He consequently implicitly acknowledges

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<sup>37</sup> In contradiction to Jarlath Killeen, Anna Budziak claims that Dorian’s “testing of self-hood, begun with luxuriating in melodramatic self-reproach for having rejected Sibyl, ends with Dorian examining his pose of ostensible selflessness after the Sybil-like Hetty has been spurned” (Budziak 278).

Basil's view of the conception of the soul as a moral faculty (Salamensky 128)<sup>38</sup>. The narrator tells that in a moment of self-awareness Dorian tries to resist Lord Henry's poisonous words and thus leading a life of sins:

It [the portrait] had altered already, and would alter more. [...] For every sin he committed, a stain would fleck and wreck its fairness. But he would not sin. The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry anymore – would not, at any rate, listen to those subtle poisonous theories. (Wilde 89).

The portrait bears Dorian's soul life and thus becomes a religious symbol (Killeen 97-98). At the same time, Dorian becomes an Anti-Christ acting immorally, influencing the people around him in a bad way instead of leading them to mercy and God's glory. The loss of his soul is the necessary precondition for Dorian's sins. With the wish to dominate his emotions, Dorian finally denies the uncontrollability of his soul and puts himself into a God-like position as a total master of his own soul when he tells Basil:

It is only shallow people who require years to get rid of an emotion. A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them. (Wilde 105).

However, the ending of the novel denies the possibility that such an attempt of total human self-control can succeed. Although Dorian does not seem to be punished for his sins because his picture suffers from the whole burden of his soul life, his death can be viewed as a reinforcement of the Christian unity of body and soul and a Catholic depiction of his soul-life (Killeen 97). A man whose body and soul are divided cannot live a moral life. But on the other hand, the ending leaves open if a hideous sinner like Dorian can still find mercy despite of his sins without being a believing member of the Catholic or any other church. This avoidance of a solution for the ever-present problem with Dorian's soul at the end is opposed by Wilde's own death-bed conversion to Catholicism as a last act of hope to achieve redemption despite of having committed sexual acts which were considered as sins in the Victorian Age. Ronald Schuchard writes that "we should not longer deny the fact that beneath the glittering *carnival* of the Happy Prince of Aesthetes was the *dans macabre* of the decadent Catholic" (Schuchard 392; emphases in the original). This decadent Catholicism is depicted in Wilde's only novel in its darkest form by a sinner who suffers beautifully but who cannot achieve Christ's redemption. As will be shown in the next chapter, the sin of homosexuality – as it was considered in the Victorian Age – stands in contrast to Catholic religious morals but, nevertheless, this contrast

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<sup>38</sup> This becomes obvious as well when Dorian reflects in front of Lord Henry after his picture has become horribly hideous: "The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, or made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it." (Wilde 205).

is solvable in the novel through the character of Basil Hallward. For Basil – as for Wilde himself – homosexuality and Catholicism do not necessarily exclude each other.

#### 4.2 Sexual Morals – the Possibility of a Christian Homosexuality

Like religion, sexuality in the novel is dealt with in a hidden and not straightforward way. As Wilde himself stressed in a letter, the sins of Dorian are never named<sup>39</sup>. Thus, the imagination of the reader is stirred since the desire between the three men is mostly hinted at with aesthetic descriptions such as Dorian's pose which Basil paints (Brinkley 67). Only Basil's love for Dorian is explicitly named as such when Dorian reflects about Basil's compassion for him a few years after Sibyl Vane's suicide<sup>40</sup>. As I will claim, the subtle descriptions of homosexuality serve Wilde's purpose as an author of his age in two ways: firstly, the implicit hints at homosexual desire introduce the topic sensitively to the Victorian reader by trying to prevent the outrage of the Victorian public, an attempt that did not succeed for Wilde but which he nevertheless tried<sup>41</sup>. Secondly, the careful presentation of homosexuality as a love of higher virtue (Brinkley 65) – portrayed in the Greek model of an ideal relationship between a younger and an older man – does not negate the possibility of a homosexual love that is closely linked to Christian terms such as compassion and care. This possibility of a homosexuality remaining within Christian morality is most prominently in the figure of the artist Basil Hallward. As an older man loving Dorian and caring for him at the same time, Basil does not act out his homosexuality but his love is nevertheless portrayed in a way that it does not oppose Christian virtues. It even enhances them. Thus, Basil Hallward represents Wilde's own life attempt at reconciling his homosexuality with Catholicism. Wilde's decadent Catholicism<sup>42</sup> is not based on the institution of the Catholic church but on the attraction to the personality of Jesus Christ (Quintus 518) and a subjective belief in a model of him as an artistic individualist (Schuchard 387). Basil Hallward represents this belief of Wilde not only because he is not named as a member of a certain church in the novel but because he feels compassion for the sinner Dorian Gray. Even though Basil Hallward cannot be regarded as a parallel to the figure of Jesus Christ, his love, then, is like the love of Christ forgiving those who bring shame upon their names

<sup>39</sup> Ronald Schuchard notes: "And Wilde leaves each reader to discover in *Dorian Gray* his own sins: 'What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows', wrote Wilde. 'He who finds them has brought them'" (Schuchard 385).

<sup>40</sup> The narrator states: "The love that he bore him – for it was really love – had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual" (Wilde 115).

<sup>41</sup> Ellmann notes that "*Dorian Gray*, besides being about aestheticism, is also one of the first attempts to bring homosexuality into the English novel" (Ellmann 300).

<sup>42</sup> Ronald Schuchard states: "Gradually realizing that his perverted sensual desires are manifestations of subverted spiritual desires, he [Wilde] finds temporary solace in a Catholicism that is seasoned with 'a touch of magic' and 'a touch of sadism', a decadent Catholicism based on a subtly depraved and perverse type of mysticism" (Schuchard 379).

(Willoughby 73). As Chris Mounsey writes: “God [or Christ] remains in Wilde’s writing as its central theme: and as a resolution to the paradox in which he found himself” (Mounsey 30).

As many critics have noted, homosexuality is a subtle theme in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As an author of his time, Wilde tried to prevent the outrage of the Victorian public by at the same time being truthful to himself<sup>43</sup> and addressing male-male desire as a higher form of artistic love that was mostly regarded as a sin by many Victorians. Dorian Gray’s fate is thus closely linked to his “personality” as an object of desire (Brinkley 65). Nevertheless, desire is not put forward directly in the novel. Rather it is subtly hinted at, when the narrator states for example Lord Henry’s view of Dorian Gray:

The pulse and passion of youth were in him, but he was becoming self-conscious. It was delightful to watch him. With his beautiful face, and his beautiful soul, he was a thing to wonder at (Wilde 57).

An exception to this common subtle representation of desire in the novel is Basil Hallward’s love for Dorian. At first also subtly presented by Basil’s talk about Dorian as a beautiful young man and his fear of having put too much of himself in Dorian’s portrait (Wilde 14), the representation of Basil’s love changes during the plot when it is finally clearly commented on by the narrator as noble and intellectual (Wilde 115). This move of Wilde to openly proclaim male-male-love as an author was morally possible for him in this case because Basil’s love is like the love of Shakespeare and Michelangelo the fulfillment of a higher aim<sup>44</sup>. It is selfless and rendered with compassion. Basil’s love for the sinner Dorian Gray can be seen in analogy to the role Wilde ascribes to Christ in *De Profundis*: “Christ, he says, loved sinners” (Quintus 524). Wilde considered Christ as an individualist and artist (Quintus 516), a forerunner of the romantic movement in the arts (Quintus 515). Basil equals Christ in his profession as an artist who celebrates the virtue of mercy<sup>45</sup> but over his fixation on his art he loses Dorian to Lord Henry. Nevertheless, Basil’s love is clearly framed within Christian terms and supported by his role of a Christian believer, even though it remains open whether he is a member of a certain church community or not. This uncertainty whether Basil’s personal belief is Anglican or Catholic mirrors Wilde’s

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<sup>43</sup> Chris Mounsey writes: “Reading his attitude to Catholicism together with Wilde’s sexuality, we can understand Wilde’s response to desire for the forbidden as one which began with self-justification, led to ‘coming-out’ to others about the desire, and then was full of surprise and hurt at the negative response to his being truthful. And being truthful to himself and others was probably the strongest driving force in Wilde’s life” (Mounsey 27).

<sup>44</sup> “It was such love as Michelangelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself” (Wilde 115).

<sup>45</sup> Wilson Knight writes about Wilde’s relationship to Christ in the last decade of his life: “From the start Christian sympathies had run concurrently with his Hellenic and aesthetic passions. Now Christ is his central interest. He [Christ] is seen as, above all, the supreme artist; more, as the first and greatest romantic, behind the romances of medievalism, of Shakespeare, and of more modern times” (Knight 296).

own doubts about the fitting institution for his personal religious faith<sup>46</sup>. Rather than linking Basil's Christianity in the novel to a powerful institution and thus enforcing it, Wilde's subjective belief is illustrated in the figure of Basil Hallward (Alley 7). Thus, Basil's homosexuality is turned into the realm of spirituality. It can be argued that this embedding of Basil's love in a spiritual context is an attempt by Wilde to escape the judgement of the Victorian public as at the same time it is a revelation of his own belief and sexuality.

Consequently, Wilde tries to reconcile two opposing forces of his time: Christianity and homosexuality<sup>47</sup>. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* opens the possibility of a Christian homosexuality embodied by the figure of Basil Hallward, an indirect question of Wilde whether his homosexuality could be respected by society when seen as a spiritual entity which holds creative power (Alley 5). But the ending of the novel negates this possibility by portraying Basil's failure to rescue Dorian from his shameful path. Instead, the painter becomes a victim of murder, an aspect one might read as a foreshadowing of Wilde's own fate of Reading Gaol when looking at his biography (Quintus 521). Consequently, the novel negates the opportunity of a modern form of male-male-desire. It is important to note that Wilde himself has only been identified as a homosexual since the 1980s. In the Victorian Age, homosexuality remained to be seen as an unacceptable and prohibited form of perversion<sup>48</sup>. As Foucault notes in his work *The History of Sexuality*:

Up to the end of the eighteenth century, three major explicit codes – apart from the customary regularities and constraints of opinion – governed sexual practices: canonical law, the Christian pastoral, and civil law (Foucault 37).

Nevertheless, as in Wilde's novel, Foucault emphasizes the parallel world of "perversion" which existed along (Victorian) society and strict sexual norms:

There emerged a world of perversion which partook of that of legal or moral infraction, yet was not simply a variety of the latter. An entire sub-race was born, different – despite certain kinship ties – from the libertines of the past. From the end of the eighteenth century to our own, they circulated through the pores of society; they were always hounded, but not always by laws; were often locked up, but not always

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<sup>46</sup> Chris Mounsey claims that "Had either the Anglican or Catholic churches been able to welcome him [Wilde] as a homosexual, they would have had a devoted servant. However, since each form of Christianity with which he associated himself attempted to turn him against his immutable sexuality, he rejected both for their obduracy" (Mounsey 11).

<sup>47</sup> Mounsey brings Wilde's personal dilemma to the point when asking: "why should he accept a religion which condemned his private behaviour as unacceptable, but whose saving grace he wanted and needed?" (Mounsey 18).

<sup>48</sup> Mounsey notes: "In the late nineteenth century, the homosexual drive was conceptualized in terms of inversion and perversion, and it is hard to believe that Wilde did not wonder on which side of that opposition he fell?" (Mounsey 19).

in prisons; were sick perhaps, but scandalous, dangerous victims, prey to a strange evil that also bore the name of vice and sometimes crime (Foucault 40).

In conclusion, the question of sexual morality in the novel needs to be dealt with in a framework which is aware of its modern presuppositions. It is unclear, then, whether Wilde thought of himself as a homosexual (Bristow 199). Mainly, he struggled with his male-male-desire as a form of sin that needed to be hidden in order to maintain moral immunity in the public eye but which at the same time was an aesthetic fulfillment producing new experiences.

The fact that Basil Hallward does not act out his homosexuality seems to be a tribute to Wilde's age of time and its moral framework. Nevertheless, Basil's love is not reduced to a perversity which should not exist. It serves as a powerful force for both fear and shame of the painter as well as strengthening his artistic creativity<sup>49</sup>. Homosexuality thus remains as ambiguous a religion and aestheticism. So do sexual morals implied in the novel, which at the same time are ridiculed by Lord Henry's epigrams and reinforced through Basil's moral and caring love for Dorian. Struggling with his own desire and claiming that he is punished for the worship of Dorian, Basil nevertheless holds on to his rather traditional thoughts about marriage and love when uttering concerns about Dorian's marriage proposal to Sibyl (Wilde 72), a girl of lower rank. Only when he sees Dorian's love as noble and truly motivated, Basil agrees to the marriage and even promotes it as a steady moral and aesthetic framework for Dorian's life as an aristocratic young man:

she is worthy of all your adoration, worthy of the adoration of the world. This marriage is quite right. I did not think so at first, but I admit it now. The gods made Sibyl Vane for you. Without her you would have been incomplete (Wilde 80).

Thus, Basil Hallward with his love for a sinner is the character in the novel who is mostly driven by moral motives<sup>50</sup>. Through his failure to rescue Dorian, sexual morality in the novel is neither celebrated – since it leads to Basil's death and Lord Henry's divorce – nor denied any worth because Basil's spiritual love is clearly positively connoted although it probably would be mocked as dominated by “traditional” and “medieval” thoughts and virtues in Lord Henry's eyes. Overall, the novel escapes a clear paradigm whether Victorian sexual morality causes more problems than it is a helpful sexual guidance for men such as Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray

<sup>49</sup> Henry Alley states about Basil: “his gayness compromises some of the grandeur of his personality, a valuable endowment which emphasizes his capacity for creative admiration” (Alley 2).

<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, Michael Patrick Gillespie writes about the common awareness of certain values in the Victorian population: “Of course, throughout the nineteenth century certain values – duty, respectability, commercial success, middle-class morality – occupied a central position in the Victorian consciousness, but Victorians also became increasingly aware of how frequently the behavior of individuals and of society as a whole undercut the ideals that purportedly characterized their age” (*What the World Thinks Me* 5). Basil's homosexuality and Lord Henry's hypocrisy can be seen as individual modes of desire or behavior that undercut those characteristic ideals of the Victorian Age.

by proclaiming virtues such as care, moral responsibility and fidelity. However, the test of the possibility of a Christian homosexuality embodied by the figure of Basil fails through his fate as a victim of Dorian's murder.

## 5 Conclusion

Wilde's only novel remains highly ambiguous. Its setting is a test of Wilde's theory of aestheticism in Victorian society, an aesthetic experiment of Lord Henry's which is set up to fail. Lord Henry's epigrams mock Victorian society and its values but overall the novel is unable to free itself from the social norms and the historical context of its time. This is shown by Dorian's violent death which enforces the Christian unity of body and soul (Killeen 95). However, both Christianity and aestheticism are not clearly negated as possibilities to escape Victorian society. Whereas Lord Henry tries to escape from his heteronormative married life with its restricting norms by watching Dorian's change of lifestyle into a criminal dandy for his (sexual) pleasure (Irmak 81), the character of Basil Hallward holds on to Victorian norms by not living out his homosexuality (Alley 5). Basil honors Christian norms such as compassion and care for others, especially Dorian, and regards his Christian religion as a moral guidance to life (Alley 4). In the end, both Lord Henry's individualist hedonism and Basil's moral religion fail as idealized concepts for Dorian's life (Willoughby 73). Lord Henry is incapable of realizing the consequences of Dorian's moral corruption through his influence (Carroll 300) and Basil's attempt to rescue the young man is too late, so that instead of being a moral guide for Dorian, the artist is murdered by him. As I have shown, Dorian's fate is a result of his status as an object rather than an individual human subject for both Basil and Lord Henry: Basil worships Dorian as his muse and transfers the "personality" of the young man into a higher being by worshipping him without rationality, and Lord Henry uses Dorian merely as a substitute for leading the aesthetic life full of sensual pleasure that he himself is too afraid to live (Irmak 78).

By taking Pater's aestheticism to its utmost form, Wilde criticizes this concept of a hunt for pleasure. The novel shows that Dorian's aesthetic pleasure can be a refuge from strict Victorian conventions (Irmak 78) but once this "desire *for desire*" (Chai 98; emphasis in the original) completely dominates Dorian, his new form of lifestyle unavoidably leads to moral corruption and soulless artificiality. Nevertheless, it would be too easy to view Dorian merely as an abused object since the young man has a character of his own which is abandoned at the beginning of the novel, when Dorian totally falls under Henry's control in at their first meeting in the second chapter. His beauty covers his character to a fatal degree: his appearance is so powerful that it dominates Basil Hallward and Lord Henry. The male-male desire between the three men – and especially Basil's love for Dorian – is depicted in a subtle presence in the novel (Brinkley 67). Only Basil's love for Dorian is open named as such. This is possible for Wilde since he turns Basil's love into a spiritual sphere by

comparing it to the love of Shakespeare and Michelangelo. Thus, homosexuality is valued in the novel as a love of a higher virtue (Brinkley 65) which can be combined with a Christian consciousness and morality as the character of Basil Hallward represents. In this aspect Wilde's novel does not banish Victorian sexual morals. Rather, it broadens their spectrum to male-male-desire as well as heterosexual relationships as the episode between Sibyl Vane and Dorian.

The Catholic concept of the human soul (Killeen 95) further underlines this ambiguity concerning the topic of religion in the novel. The soul is a moral faculty and human consciousness (Salamensky 128) which is shaped by experiences – an aspect on which Lord Henry is focused – but which can also be corrupted as Dorian's portrait shows. His picture functions both as a religious symbol (Killeen 98) showing his sins and as Basil's extended consciousness (Hinojosa 91) reminding him of his wrong path of simple pleasure every time he looks at the artist's work. As a sinner Dorian is unable to receive Christ's redemption due to the loss of his soul (Killeen 99) through his fateful wish at the beginning of the novel that the picture should grow old instead of himself, he cannot really feel guilt and remorse for his sins. In the end, his picture is as well a revelation of the denying of Dorian's personality since it only focuses on his outward appearance and enforces this as dominating his character.

However, the unity of Dorian's body and soul is restored when he and his picture switch place and his soul is transferred back to him (Killeen 99-100), turning his body into an ugly shape, after he has stabbed the picture. Overall, Wilde's novel criticizes the conception of Pater's aestheticism by framing it as a theoretical artistic experiment of Dorian's life (Bristow 212). At the same time, Christian norms seem to be reassured by this fate of Dorian as a criminal dandy and Anti-Christ, even though Basil's personal belief – like Wilde's own religious belief – cannot save the artist from his suffering.

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