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DECADENT EKPHRASIS IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* as a novel about aesthetes and decadent artists, has several acts of ekphrasis, the process by which visual art is detailed using a verbal description. Unlike the traditional use of ekphrasis, Wilde tends to leap past the surface of the portraits in his novel and ponder the hidden depths of the painting's subjects. This mode of ekphrasis contains a gap between the actual depiction in the portrait and the affective response of the viewer and has its roots in the work of Wilde's mentor, Walter Pater. Pater believes that personality and emotional suggestiveness are what matter most in art, so his own ekphrases reflect these beliefs. This often requires a leap between what is seen on the surface to what is suspected in the depths in a manner similar to W.J.T. Mitchell's description of ekphrasis as a project about overcoming difference. Though Wilde uses this form of ekphrasis, his novel shows by the deaths of Dorian Gray and Sybil Vane that there is something wrong or dangerous about it. This study looks at this type of ekphrasis in Wilde's novel and how he critiques this mode.

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Introduction

After the death of his estranged love, the actress Sibyl Vane, midway through Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Dorian spends years absorbed in the book given to him by Lord Henry Wotton–a thinly veiled version of Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À rebours.* That novel's protagonist, Des Esseintes, a "wonderful young Parisian" who devotes his life to a series of aesthetic or sensory experiments, becomes the model for Dorian's own life: "[I]ndeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (Wilde 123). Like Des Esseintes, Dorian indulges in a variety of artistic hobbies, studying gems, music, perfumes, Catholicism, and tapestries. Each hobby gives Wilde the opportunity to produce a fantastic new ekphrasis, filling the chapter with descriptions of Dorian's evolving obsessions. When he visits his family's ancestral country-house, where portraits of generation after generation of his family cover the walls, Dorian contemplates the figures therein:

> Here, in gold-embroidered red doublet, jewelled surcoat, and gilt-edged ruff and wristbands, stood Sir Anthony Sherard, with his silver-and-black armour piled at his feet. What had this man's legacy been? Had the lover of Giovanna of Naples bequeathed him some inheritance of sin and shame? Were his own actions merely the dreams that the dead man had not dared to realize? Here, from the fading canvas, smiled Lady Elizabeth Devereux, in her gauze hood, pearl stomacher, and pink slashed sleeves. A flower was in her right hand, and her left clasped an enamelled collar of white and damask roses. On a table by her side lay a mandolin and an apple. There were large green rosettes upon her little pointed shoes. He

> knew her life, and the strange stories that were told about her lovers. Had he something of her temperament in him? These oval, heavy-lidded eyes seemed to look curiously at him. What of George Willoughby, with his powdered hair and fantastic patches? How evil he looked! The face was saturnine and swarthy, and the sensual lips seemed to be twisted with disdain. (137-138)

In this passage, three different portraits are presented via free indirect discourse, as the narrator conveys Dorian's impressions of the paintings in his ancestral house. Each portrait turns out, on examination, to depict a kind of aesthete or dandy. In the first painting, great care is given to the details of Sir Anthony Sherard's decadent image, the gilded and bejeweled clothes that he wears. Likewise, Lady Elizabeth has "pink slashed sleeves" and George Willoughby "sensual lips" on his "saturnine and swarthy" face (137-138). The narrator does not restrict himself to these details of surface, however, but also probes the moral character of these figures, straying from the physical features and speculating on potential sins that each may have committed. Each painting follows the same basic formula, in which a display of decadent fashion— "gauze hood, pearl stomacher," or "powdered hair and fantastic patches"—is followed by observations on the characters in the portraits that emphasize their moral quality, their sins, their lovers, and their evil souls (137-138).

Here, Wilde uses ekphrasis, the vivid description in prose or poetry of a work of art to explore these ancestral portraits and their decadent subjects. The presence of these aestheticized exteriors and clothing is unsurprising given Wilde's writing style and this particular chapter's focus on extravagance and wealth, but Wilde's exploration of each portrait sitter's moral temperament is striking in its own right. These figures are not directly important to the plot and

do not return after this passage. These ekphrastic meditations do, of course, seem to reflect Dorian's own questions and anxieties about his portrait as he looks in these paintings for the sins of others. Yet this does not explain why early depictions of Dorian through the eyes of Basil Hallward, Lord Henry Wotton, and others involve these same qualities of characterization and description.

Throughout the novel, aestheticized exteriors are directly linked to an immoral interior through moments of ekphrasis. The importance of ekphrasis as an aspect of Wilde's decadence, particularly in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has received relatively little critical attention, despite the novel's focus on art and artists, its central story revolving around a painter who fashions a "living" work of art. In one of the only works on ekphrasis in Wilde, *Estranging the Novel: Poland, Ireland, and Theories of World Literature,* Katarzyna Bartoszyńska explores the transformation of the titular portrait and of Dorian himself in moral terms: "As Dorian descends further into moral corruption, we learn that he has embarked on a pursuit of the real. His quest for beauty becomes, instead, a drive to ugliness, a movement that aligns the beauty of art with moral goodness, and that depicts both as imaginary" (100). Dorian's pursuit of beauty causes his moral descent. Wilde is "purposely evoking" Gotthold Lessing's *Laocoön*, she argues, by creating a character in Dorian who becomes corrupt because he wants to escape the flow of time and become a painting (90). Bartoszyńska treats Wilde's decadence in terms that align with Vincent Sherry's field-defining definition. Decadence, according to Sherry, is an inherently retrospective state that "represents a sense of historical loss" and thus is replete with fantasies of escape from the flow of time (Sherry 40). Bartoszyńska sees Wilde's decadence in *Dorian Gray* as one that arrests time through a literal escape into art. To become a work of art, though, is somehow immoral.

By contrast, in this paper, I am less interested in the temporality of art–art as a space to escape from time–than in Wilde's particular way of describing works of art–including people who become works of art. From Dorian's titular portrait to the numerous paintings of his ancestors, the decadent appearance of these works of art makes their viewers suspect (or project) a perverse interior. Regardless of the true personalities of the portrait's subjects, their appearances cause viewers to leap from appearance to the implied moral character. In Wilde's ekphrases, the most crucial part is this leap across the gap between what is seen and an invisible interior. Wilde's novel is not limited only to the depiction of portraits like those above. The living subjects of art, like Dorian and Sybil Vane, also are "read" in similar terms and described in a manner that repeats the pattern of ekphrasis elsewhere in the novel.

The aesthetes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* treat people in the same way that they treat portraits and sculptures and other works by looking at their visual exterior and then constructing an identity or personality for them through the act of what I am calling Wilde's "decadent ekphrasis." Wilde, as a figure who was similarly "read" by Victorian society, uses the effect of this ekphrasis on Dorian and Sybil to show the inherent problems in treating people as mute subjects that are limited only to surface and an assumed self. In order to get to the moralizing ending of the novel where Wilde demonstrates the difficulties of the practices of the decadent movement, we first need to consider how Wilde's decadence affects the way he depicts works of art. As a dandy, Wilde was a key figure in the decadent movement in *fin-de-siècle* England that was similarly judged based on his clothing and aesthetic, especially following his trial. Wilde's trial occurred primarily because of his "pose" and exterior which caused people to believe he was truly a perverse figure. I demonstrate the roots of Wilde's decadent ekphrasis in the writings of his mentor, Walter Pater. Examining the way ekphrasis involves a gap between visible surface

and the affective response of the viewer is central to W. J. T. Mitchell's theory on ekphrasis and will aid in then comparing Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde's use of ekphrasis in their work. Finally, I will look at the role that ekphrasis has in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as portraits are condemned as immoral and people are treated as works of art.

Decadence, Dandies, and *Dorian Gray* in *fin-de-siècle* England.

The relationship between an extravagant surface and a correlative moral judgment is treated frequently in Wilde's novel, perhaps stemming in part from his own experience as an aesthete and dandy in *fin-de-siècle* England. Besides his work as an author and poet, Wilde is perhaps best known for his personality–his role as the preeminent Victorian dandy. It was this very "pose" that was partly to blame for Wilde's 1895 arrest and trial on charges of sodomy (Adams, *Victorian Literature* 411). Wilde was accused of gross indecency, and his own decadent exterior contributed to his public image, playing a role in his arrest and trial. The dandy was always already coded as a figure of suspect sexuality, and thus the suggestion of an indecent act could be almost as harmful as the act itself (Adams, *Victorian Literature* 410). Wilde, much like the portraits of Dorian's ancestors, was himself convicted in part because he "read" as a morally corrupt figure in the fin-de-siecle. His dandified exterior offered a form of visual confirmation of his guilt or corruption. A sort of living portrait, the dandy carries with him certain connotations and expectations that link him to homosexuality and decadent extravagance. It should be no surprise that Wilde, himself a subversive character in Victorian society, treated his dandiacal surrogate, Dorian Gray, as well as the portraits of his decadent characters in the same way that he was treated in the years leading up to his trial (Ellman 315). Just as Wilde was read by society,

Dorian could also be reduced to a collection of decadent traits. In this section, I lay out the relationship between surfaces and depths in Wilde as one between aestheticism and decadence. In this relationship, we can see the ways that aestheticism is treated primarily as a tasteful appreciation of surfaces while decadence is often considered to be an interior hedonistic flaw.

At Wilde's infamous trial, he was accused of being a "posing Somdomite [sic]" (Ellman 438). This accusation effectively separated Wilde from the other aesthetes and, as James Eli Adams suggests, caused him to "pass the moral threshold" required to leave behind aestheticism and "become the decadent" (Adams, *Victorian Literature* 374). The trial was obviously the turning point in Wilde's career, and as Holbrook Jackson argued, it also made the decadent movement recognizable to the general public as a cultural movement in the 1890s (*Victorian Literature* 412). Following Wilde's trial, artists associated with the movement began to avoid using the term "decadent" to refer to themselves as it had become "one of the most inflammatory and protean slogans of the Victorian age" (*Victorian Literature* 377). Arthur Symons, a decadent figure of the 1890s, tried to avoid association with the movement following the trial by changing the name of his essay from "The Decadent Movement in Literature" to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* when it was published as a book in 1899 (*Victorian Literature* 412). The accusation and trial confirmed what many suspected about the perversity hiding behind Wilde's dandified surface, and it negatively affected the already polarized response to his *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* By proving public suspicions of his dandified pose, the trial ushered in a fear of Decadence as a movement.

Historically, aestheticism and decadence have both been used with some overlap as terms for the artistic movement in the Victorian era that prioritizes the pursuit of art and pleasure above all else. They are certainly related movements as they both serve as a defense of art against

commodification and utility, but the connotations and actual meanings of the words can differ widely based on usage. A particularly important dividing line involves public perception of their moral quality. Often associated with the technical mastery of what will become high modernism as with Henry James, aesthetes are expected to be "continent, clean, well-turned" (Freedman xviii; Gutkin 3). Decadents, by contrast, were often associated with immorality as they were linked to "sexual dissidence" and a "newly visible homosexuality" (Adams, *Victorian Literature* 380). This split between the more socially acceptable aesthete and the disreputable decadent is one of particular importance to understanding Wilde and his use of ekphrasis.

Most simply, decadence is centered in interiority while aestheticism focuses on surfaces. As Len Gutkin observes, "'aestheticism' tends to describe surfaces and 'decadence' depths" (3). Each tends to be implicated in the other, and the pose of the dandy could involve both tendencies at once. Thus, a Victorian dandy like Wilde has a "cult of surfaces–his attention to clothes and makeup, to dispositional composure, to fine objects d'art to affective control, to the well-turned phrase– [that] complements his decadent pursuit of fascinating, messy, and perverse interiority" (3). Gutkin is not alone in making this distinction. Indeed, aestheticism's surfaces have been understood to hide decadent depths since the late nineteenth century, as Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) suggested that beauty "might have just a touch of evil" (Ellman 49). Writing shortly after the *fin-de-siècle* in 1913, Holbrook Jackson, one of the earliest scholars of aestheticism and decadence, associates the "artificiality, egoism, and curiosity" of the movement with "perversity" in his book *The Eighteen Nineties* (Potolsky 2). The aesthete strives for an enlightened life, finding the beauty in everything. Decadence, on the other hand, becomes, as James Eli Adams suggests, "a tag encompassing styles, characters, states of mind, and historical figures, typically linking literary innovations with varieties of sexual dissidence"

(*Victorian Literature* 380). This line between the aesthete and decadent was a fine one that could be crossed–intentionally or accidentally. Wilde, as an intentionally subversive character in Victorian England, was certainly known to be an aesthetic figure with a dandy's dress and manner, but the Cleveland Street Affair in 1895 seemed to demonstrate to the general public that he also contained a decadent and perverse interior.

Though *Dorian Gray* had already been published four years before Wilde's trial, there are certain similarities between Wilde's own life and Dorian's in the novel. Dorian is a young and impressionable artist who becomes aware of aestheticism due to an older aesthete and an illicit book and is transformed into a figure that personifies the dichotomy between aesthetic surfaces and decadent interiors. Dorian has an elegant and ornate exterior and operates as an integral member of Victorian high society, but his true self is a perverse decadent that must remain hidden from society. Dorian becomes a dandy after claiming that dandyism is a form of art and "an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of beauty" (Wilde 125) in a manner that intersects with Wilde's own claim in his "The Decay of Lying" that "the real decadence" is a "trespass of life into art" (Ellman 302). Just as Wilde believed that his dandyism and decadence was a way to live as a work of art, Dorian, as a decadent figure, literally attempts to become a work of art that escapes from time and aging. This pursuit that leads to a blurring between Dorian and his portrait leads to characters in the novel treating Dorian in the same way as the paintings in the novel: as if he were only an aesthetic exterior and a corrupt interior. The similarity between how the portraits are described and how Dorian is viewed by society in the novel suggests a relationship between Dorian's character and these ekphrastic passages. Wilde's use of ekphrasis differs from some other common uses of the mode, reflecting the influence of his mentor Walter Pater.

Paterian Ekphrasis and the Gap in Representation

As James Heffernan writes in his article "Ekphrasis as Representation," ekphrasis is, most simply, "the verbal representation of graphic representation," the mode used by poets in describing plastic art using words (Heffernan 299). This definition helps in understanding ekphrasis at its most basic level, but Wilde's ekphrasis is strange in that it often does not focus on a direct or accurate representation of the art. Though he may describe the surface of the artistic object, as when he notes articles of clothing or extravagant jewelry in the portraits in Dorian's estate, he also attends to the affective response of the viewer looking at the art and the way they interpret the art in front of them. This style of ekphrasis has its roots in Oscar Wilde's mentor Walter Pater and can be better classified and explained using the theories of Murray Krieger and W. J. T. Mitchell. After exploring Krieger's foundational treatment on ekphrasis as the "stilling" of verbal discourse, I will move to Mitchell's theory, which focuses on the otherness of object described. Following the explication of these theories, I will examine how Walter Pater's own ideas about personality and emotion in art in order to consider how his use of ekphrasis in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* influenced Wilde. Finally, we will move to Wilde's novel to see the application of this form of ekphrasis and how Wilde focuses on the gap between description and the object.

Ekphrasis is fundamentally a mode that attempts to bridge different forms of artistic representation, and theorists often focus on the difficulty that comes from this shift from the visual to the verbal. In "The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laokoön* Revisited," Krieger argues that ekphrasis "imitat[es] a plastic object in language and time" (Krieger 91). Ekphrasis routinely blurs the boundary between the visual and the verbal, and the object's true shape or form can become skewed or lost to the reader of the ekphrasis.

Additionally, the ekphrasis can become a separate piece of art or as Krieger puts it "the fixed–or rather transfixed–object, its own urn" (105). This idea of creating a new work of art with ekphrasis is one of the areas where W. J. T. Mitchell modified Krieger's central concept and where the peculiar features of Wilde's ekphrasis are most easily seen. In his work "Ekphrasis and the Other," W. J. T. Mitchell details his three basic forms of ekphrastic realization: ekphrastic indifference, ekphrastic hope, and ekphrastic fear. These three different forms fundamentally attempt to combat the enormous gap between an object and its representation in different ways. Mitchell takes Krieger's idea of ekphrasis overcoming the difference between mediums, but he believes that ekphrasis is primarily concerned with the impossibility of that effort, the limitations of language, and the otherness of the work of art. Ekphrastic indifference is the belief that the language will never be as useful as visual depiction because "words can 'cite' but never 'sight' their objects" (Mitchell 152). This stage of ekphrasis believes the gap can never be crossed and that an object cannot truly be represented verbally. The inability or disbelief found in ekphrastic indifference is remedied somewhat by the next stage of ekphrasis which Mitchell calls ekphrastic hope. Ekphrastic hope is the belief that, although ekphrasis may never be able to accurately reflect the visual using the verbal, it can potentially add to the visual using metaphor, imagination, or allusion. Since this hope suggests these two "semiotic 'others,'" the verbal and the visual, can be bridged using language, it is the stage most interested in the "overcoming of otherness" (156). Unlike ekphrastic hope, which recognizes the complementary strengths of the visual and the verbal, ekphrastic fear is the stage where the two seem the most incompatible. Ekphrastic fear occurs when one realizes that the verbal and the visual can never truly work together and worries that the "difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse" which leads to a desired separation between the two again (Mitchell 154).

This ekphrastic fear, taken alongside the other stages of hope and indifference, suggests that there is always a gap between the object and description, and this gap is where both Pater and Wilde center their use of ekphrasis. If Krieger and Mitchell describe the difficulties–or even impossibility–that come from an attempt at ekphrasis, Pater creates a solution to that attempt by rejecting pure objectivity in description. Pater acknowledges that an accurate verbal depiction is not possible through ekphrasis, so he attends to personality and emotion that art evokes in the viewer in his own use of ekphrasis. Before considering how Wilde uses these forms, we should turn to Wilde's mentor Walter Pater who serves as his model for this form of ekphrasis which focuses on personality and the emotional suggestiveness.

Walter Pater was one of Wilde's literary idols from the moment that he first got his hands on *Studies on the History of Renaissance* at Oxford just a few short years before actually meeting Pater (Ellman 47). Once they finally met, they instantly became close friends. Their friendship would last for the remainder of Wilde's life, and Pater would provide feedback and criticism for Wilde when writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Just as Dorian is gifted a copy of Huysmans' *À rebours* that influences his life, Pater's *Renaissance* which Wilde called his "golden book" that "has had such a strange influence over [his] life," shaped Wilde's aestheticism and turned Wilde into an 'extreme aesthete'" which Ellman believes "in context [was] almost a euphemism for homosexual" (Ellman 47, 84). This is the work that most influenced Wilde's views on art, and so it is fitting that it also provides his model for ekphrasis, particularly in Pater's chapter on Leonardo da Vinci.

Pater's analysis of Da Vinci's portraits focuses on two central themes: personality as reflected in art and the emotional suggestiveness of art. The first of the notable concepts to pull from Pater's chapter on Da Vinci is the idea that Da Vinci's portraits reflected human personality

instead of merely showing the external aspects of the subject. When discussing Da Vinci's portraits of famous Italian women, Pater notes that Da Vinci chooses subjects not only for their physical appearance but also to "plung[e] also into human personality" (Pater 63). Naturally, this makes ekphrasis more than just an act concerned with describing the physical aspects of the work of art as it must also involve "reading" the character of the subject in the portrait.

For Pater, the reading of personality in the work of art is closely connected with the work's emotional suggestiveness. Writing on Da Vinci's portrait of Saint John the Baptist, Pater remarks:

> Returning from the last to the original, we are no longer surprised by Saint John's strange likeness to the Bacchus, which hangs near it, which set Gautier thinking of Heine's notion of decayed gods, who, to maintain themselves after the fall of paganism, took employment in the new religion. We recognise one of those symbolical inventions in which the ostensible subject is used, not as matter for definite pictorial realisation, but as the starting-point of a train of sentiment, as subtle and vague as a piece of music. (Pater 67)

Here Pater seems to suggest that Da Vinci was less interested in concrete detail or accurate visual representation and instead focused on sentiment or an affective portrayal of the subject. Pater takes two unrelated works of art in the pagan Bacchus and religious Saint John and pulls out a potential link between the two based on the emotional response of the viewer. This train of sentiment needs Saint John to look vaguely like Bacchus to cause the viewer to find profanity in the saint and consecration in the demigod. The artist crafts his painting with more than just the

accuracy of the portrait in mind and makes choices "for fancies all his own" when crafting the painting (Pater 69). For Pater, personality and feeling both involve the response of a viewing subject. Because these aspects are suggested by the painting and evoke a different response in different viewers, the act of ekphrasis is a highly subjectivized process that requires that leap from what is visible and seen to what is suspected or projected. Both this personality reflected in art and the emotions suggested by the work are both exemplified in Pater's infamous ekphrasis of Da Vinci's *La Gioconda.*

This ekphrasis of the *Mona Lisa* by Pater demonstrates both his theories on Da Vinci as artist and what a Paterian ekphrasis of a portrait looks like. Pater describes the portrait over the course of an extended paragraph and, yet, he rarely discusses the physical details of the portrait. Pater writes:

> The presence that thus so strangely rose beside the waters is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years man had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all 'the ends of the world are come,' and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by all this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed? All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the

> return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias, She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern thought has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea. (70-71)

With a less famous portrait as the subject of this paragraph, one would likely not have any real idea what the work of art actually looked like at all, but Pater's choice to use the infamous *Mona Lisa* makes this ekphrasis an excellent example of his style. Though the concrete details of the painting are barely represented, Pater does describe the personality found in the *Mona Lisa* which he evokes in part through mythic allusion. The face of La Gioconda wears an "unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it," and "[h]ers is the head upon which all 'the ends of the world are come,' and the eyelids are a little weary" (Pater 69-70). In these passages, the *Mona Lisa*'s subject is described as having both a potentially immoral or sinister nature and as being tired or exhausted even as it is linked to Biblical prophecy. The portrait depicts the infamous Mona Lisa sitting in a chair with her iconic expression without

much additional detail, yet Pater makes passes over her appearance to imagine instead her personality. Pater claims that the Mona Lisa's "beauty" comes from "strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions" which seems to suggest that the attractiveness of her surface is produced by this mysterious personality that is contained in her invisible depths (Pater 70-71). Following this claim that her beauty comes from her invisible personality, Pater compares her to both an undead vampire and the mothers of both Mary and Helen of Troy (Pater 70-71). These allusions and claims about the Mona Lisa vary wildly and do not often seem to correlate directly with each other or the visual portrait itself, but, in Pater's ekphrasis, what matters is not the consistency or validity of the claims but instead the effect of the portrait on the viewer. This ekphrasis of an interior is a crucial influence on Wilde's novel, so it is time that we turn to *Dorian Gray* to see how Wilde, too, crosses the gap between surface and depth.

Decadent Ekphrasis and the Tragedy of Aestheticism in *Dorian Gray*

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* there are few, if any, moments of ekphrasis that are focused on visual details of the subjects in portraits and several ekphrases that follow Pater or Wilde's typical ekphrastic passages. Some of Wilde's ekphrases mimic his mentor and are effectively pastiches of Pater's style, yet Wilde takes Pater's ekphrastic mode, with its focus on personality and affective response, and adapts it by treating living subjects, effectively turning them into living works of art. In the novel, the characters of Dorian and Sybil are "read" by aesthetes (including Basil Hayward, Lord Henry Wotton, and even Dorian himself) who effectively project a personality onto them. This Wildeian decadent ekphrasis is, like Pater's, based on the affective response of the viewer, but it often results in a damaging othering of the subject as the viewer makes the leap from surface to depth.

Though Wilde will later critique its usage by showing the effect that it has on the living subjects, Paterian ekphrasis is used often in the early parts of the novel by decadent characters as a way of aestheticizing the world around them with allusions to myths and art. Joseph Pearce claims that Lord Henry is "modeled on Pater" (230), and Ellman agrees as he suggests that Lord Henry and Basil serve as surrogates for Pater and other decadents such as John Addington Symonds and Wilde himself in the text with similar mannerisms and attitudes toward art, so it is only natural that it is through these characters that Wilde uses this form of ekphrasis (Ellman 317). There are some small examples of this type of ekphrasis early in the work when Lord Henry first sees one of Basil's portraits of Dorian and calls him "a young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves" and a "Narcissus" (Wilde 6). While this initial description is not an in-depth exploration of Dorian's personality, it has the same use of allusion to myth found in Pater's Mona Lisa passage with these references to Adonis and Narcissus adding layered meaning to Dorian due to mutual destruction in pursuit of beauty. However, there are two later descriptions that are nearly identical to the long Paterian ekphrasis of the *La Gioconda.* The first of these is in the ninth chapter when Basil is visiting Dorian and pleading for Dorian to pose for him again. Here, Basil produces an extended monologue about how he painted more pictures of Dorian as "Paris in dainty armour, and as Adonis with huntsman's cloak and polished boar-spear" (110). He claims to have painted Dorian in the past as what art "should be–unconscious, ideal, and remote," but that the infamous titular portrait was painted "as [Dorian] actually [is], not in the costume of dead ages, but in [his] own dress and [his] own time" (110). Finally, Basil claims the problem with this painting could be due to either the "realism of the method" or "the mere wonder" of Dorian's "personality" (110). This echoes the Mona Lisa passage from Pater in that it imagines the subject as different figures from myth and as living in a

romanticized past while claiming the portrait has its own personality on display. The second of these notable Paterian ekphrases comes from Dorian himself after he had spent an extensive amount of time with his decadent mentors. When telling Lord Henry about Sybil Vane for the first time, Dorian begins to describe going to see her in the theatre each night as he says:

> One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. I have seen her die in the gloom of an Italian tomb, sucking the poison from her lover's lips. I have watched her wandering through the forest of Arden, disguised as a pretty boy in hose and doublet and dainty cap. She has been mad, and has come into the presence of a guilty king, and given him rue to wear, and bitter herbs to taste of. She has been innocent, and the black hands of jealousy have crushed her reed-like throat. I have seen her in every age and in every costume. Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. (51)

It should be noted that this moment of ekphrasis is unlike the others in the text because it is a description of theatre instead of still art, but it remains important as it uses Pater's style and shows Dorian's transformation toward decadence. As in the previous example, the subject is compared to fictional characters through allusion–this time instead of myths, Sybil is in the role of Shakespearean heroines. Dorian loves Sybil not for her real personality or self but because "the only thing worth loving is an actress" because they are always playing characters that can be transfigured into art (Wilde 51). In both the ekphrasis of Dorian's portraits by Basil and this ekphrasis of Sybil in theatre by Dorian, the true personality of the subjects are ignored for their

role as mere characters in art with ornate outfits and manufactured personas. Basil imagined Dorian as the Platonic ideal as he depicted him as Paris and Adonis, and Basil finds himself in "mere wonder of [Dorian's] own personality" that he creates based on Dorian's visual aesthetics (110). Similarly, Dorian neglects to learn anything about Sybil's true self as he prefers the characters that she plays in Shakespeare; Dorian claims that "[o]rdinary women never appeal to one's imagination" after talking about how Sybil "has been mad" and "has been innocent" (51). In both cases, the viewer was more interested in the affective response and the constructed personality that they believed the subject of the art to have than the actual person. This dehumanizing form of ekphrastic fear takes the mute surface of a work of art and seeks to project a personality onto it. James Eli Adams writes that for Wilde "portraits are to be contemplated as faces, and faces as portraits, or masks," and this is on full display in the above passages with both Dorian and Sybil (*Desert Saints*, 199). The Paterian ekphrasis shown above is problematic in that it treats the work of art as a mute item, but it is contained to art; Wilde's own form of ekphrasis is used to criticize the subjects and has damaging effects on the subjects.

As the novel proceeds, we see Wilde pushing Pater's style of ekphrasis toward parody when he depicts the costumed exteriors and projecting a perverse interior onto works of art. The recurring elements of these ekphrases are a display of decadent fashion before speculation on potential sins or the evil souls of the portrait's subjects. This theme continues with Dorian's othering of his own portrait following the death of Sibyl Vane where he begins to take "pleasure" in corrupting the portrait (124). All of Dorian's "things of beauty" come to serve as a visual representation of his sins, but the portrait literally changes to reflect the immorality that Dorian feels (Lutz 152). The first time that the portrait is described following Sibyl's suicide, it is described as having a "vicious cruelty that marred the fine lines of the mouth" that Dorian

speculates shows "what passed within the soul" (101). Though Dorian should feel immediate regret and dread for himself and his own actions, it is clear that he does not associate his own beauty or appearance with that of the portrait as shown by his claim that "a sense of infinite pity, not for himself, but for the painted image of himself, came over him" (89). This separation between himself and the subject of the portrait is cemented later in the work as Dorian begins to bring a mirror with him when he looks at the portrait so that he can compare himself to the portrait. He would look first at the "evil and aging face on the canvas" before turning to the mirror to see "the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass" (124). In this passage, Dorian has disassociated himself from both of these surface images as he refers to them only as faces on flat surfaces without claiming either as his identity. While in the extended passage with the ancestral portraits, the perversity is assumed based on the decadent outer clothing that the subjects were wearing, Dorian's portrait has this assumed perversity or sin stemming from the ugliness or old age of the subject's exterior. Dorian observes later, in a manner similar to Gutkin's view on decadence, that "it was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come" and that "[t]hrough some strange quickening of inner life the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away" (150). Like the ekphrases of the ancestral portraits, the exterior serves as a form of visual guilt, but Dorian's portrait has this guilt shown in literal ugliness rather than just in decadent outfits that suggest the sin. This mixing of morality or conscience with art becomes problematic quickly though in Wilde's text as Dorian begins treating the rest of his life with this same aestheticist focus on surfaces.

Oscar Wilde believed that decadence was at its core a "trespass of life into art" so it is fitting that Dorian, as a premier example of a decadent dandy, blurs the boundaries between life and art (Cheeke 302). Stephen Cheeke, in his *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis*, posits

that Wilde is writing a parable about the dangers of "mixing Art and Ethics" as evinced by Dorian's choice to use art as his conscience leading to his eventual demise (93). Cheeke writes that: "Dorian in fact *reads* this corruption into the painting, he 'criticizes' his portrait in a fatal way because he is under the dangerous illusion that art should somehow mirror the ethical life, reproducing the 'reality' of moral choice, action and decision" (93). Dorian, as an aesthete, expects ugliness to always be associated with immorality and beauty to be associated with what is good in a manner that echoes Wilde's similar sentiment in "The English Renaissance of Art" where he claims that a child raised in a perfect city "will love what is beautiful and good and hate what is evil and ugly (for they always go together)" (Mao 87). Conflating beauty and goodness and attaching perversity to ugliness causes Dorian to focus on making himself beautiful or aestheticized as a dandy.

Dorian believes that dandyism is a way to "assert the absolute modernity of beauty," and he also states in this passage that "to him life itself was the first, the greatest, of the arts, and for it all the other arts seemed to be but a preparation" (Wilde 125). Looking at these quotes together, Dorian seems to believe that decadence and dandyism are ways of bringing art into life, but Cheeke believes that Wilde may have had concerns with this mindset. Cheeke writes that "[f]or Wilde as a theorist of the doctrine of Aestheticism such a notion of realism merely degraded art" because "[i]t was a mistake to insist that the ethical life should be represented at all by art, or that the language of the conscience, of will and decision, of human intention, politics, right and wrong [. . .] should ever be read into painting" (Cheeke 93). With that in mind, Wilde's use of ekphrasis and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* itself may be read as an intentional cautionary tale about the dangers of this decadent lifestyle that prioritizes beautiful surfaces and ignoring the true depths of people.

The Picture of Dorian Gray uses this decadent ekphrasis and its focus on judging interiors based on surfaces to show the harm in the aesthetic practice of treating living people as works of art. Though Wilde was a devoted follower of the aesthetic movement in the 1880s when giving lectures across the United States, *La Faustin*, a French novel from 1881 by Edmond de Goncourt that was critical of aestheticism about an actress who is only able to love when in the theatre, and the French version of the movement may have negatively influenced Wilde's opinions on aestheticism (Ellman 229). As Shelton Waldrep writes, "Wilde's novel can be read as a criticism of the life that follows the dictates of Paterian aestheticism" (17). In the novel, we are presented with two separate characters who are "read" through ekphrasis like works of art and eventually meet their downfall as martyrs due to aestheticism: Sybil and Dorian. Sybil's death serves as the greatest example for the dangers of this harmful mindset as she did not truly choose the aesthetic lifestyle and was instead a victim. Dorian and Sybil have contrasting views on their relationship as Dorian only wants to "take [his] love out of poetry and to find [his] wife in Shakespeare's plays" while Sybil believes their love is "something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection" which makes her want to give up her life of art for reality (Wilde 74, 84). Sybil attempts to escape her current life as a living work of art for the real, while Dorian chooses the complete opposite in his own life as he seeks to abandon his life in reality to become the work of art. Dorian expresses Gutkin's "aestheticist/decadent binary" both "melodramatically and moralistically" as he contains both a "rotting portrait [that] is the 'inside' (moral and aesthetic) of the outwardly lovely Dorian, a dandy shaped by another dandy" (Gutkin 4). This attempt to live as a decadent without any consequences ultimately fails for Dorian as the line between self and art disappears in a moment of ekphrastic fear as Dorian looks into the mirror and recognizes the portrait can no longer contain the sole burden of all of his faults. Dorian

claims that his "beauty had ruined him" before stabbing the portrait and committing suicide (Wilde 210). Ellman calls this the "tragedy of aestheticism" stating that "the life of mere sensation is uncovered as anarchic and self-destructive" and Dorian ultimately becomes "aestheticism's first martyr" (Ellman 315). In a moment of cruel irony, the last lines of the novel serve as Wilde's final ekphrasis. The servants enter the room and find a dead man who is identified not through his actual person but through a decadent exterior as it was only through "examin[ing] the rings that they recognized who it was" (Wilde 213).

Conclusion

In Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, there are multiple instances of ekphrasis that take works of art–paintings, theatre, or sculpture–or even living people as the subject. Wilde's form of ekphrasis, which focuses on decadent surfaces and the leap to invisible depths, has its origin in the writings of his mentor Walter Pater. In both the ekphrasis of Pater and Wilde, ekphrasis always has a gap between the actual object represented in art and the verbal description, and Wilde shows that leaping across this gap can have consequences for the subject who is misread by the viewer. This subject is judged based on their exterior and then has a personality projected onto them based on their appearance. The relationship between an aesthetic surface and the suspected decadent depths of a person is similar to how Oscar Wilde was treated in Victorian England with his trial. Though this trial happened after the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* there is evidence that Wilde had already soured somewhat on aestheticism as evinced by his removal of the term "decadent" from *Dorian Gray* and his recent reading of *La Faustin*. In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde writes on the limitations found in this form of aestheticism that seeks to find flaws or perversity in the beautiful. By having the decadent characters in his novel perform this

ekphrasis and find pleasure looking for immorality in art, as Dorian does with his own portrait, only to end up as martyrs, Wilde shows the inherent problems in trying to live this aestheticized lifestyle. In the preface to *Dorian Gray*, Wilde writes: "Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope" (Wilde 3). Unfortunately, his message was in vain as just a few short years after *Dorian Gray*'s publication, people ignored the beauty for the perversity that they thought they found in its depths. Like Dorian, Wilde and his novel are seen as decadent and corrupt and are shunned for it. In 1900, at just forty-six years old, Oscar Wilde died a penniless death as another martyr of the aestheticism that he tried to condemn.

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