

OSCAR WILDE'S GOTHIC: THE PRESENCE OF EDGAR ALLAN POE IN *THE PICTURE*
OF DORIAN GRAY

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AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis examines the influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Oscar Wilde and argues that Wilde used several Gothic motifs and themes in the fashion of Poe in his production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. While many scholars note the significance of Poe in Wilde's works, there is currently no substantial assessment of Wilde using Poe in his own writings. This study aims to alleviate this gap in scholarship by closely examining the Poe stories that are reflected in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, including Poe's "Metzengerstein," "The Assigination," "The Oval Portrait," "The Imp of the Perverse," "The Black Cat," and "William Wilson." This study offers an extensive review of the relevant literature and locates Poe's influence on Wilde in the enthusiasm of Charles Baudelaire, who provided a robust following for Poe in Paris. Finally, this study concludes that in using Poe's Gothic motifs, Wilde was exploring the blurry distinctions between art and reality that were similarly important to Poe.

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Introduction: Influence Studies and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself. The few words that Basil's friend had said to him – words spoken by chance, no doubt, and with willful paradox in them – had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses.

-Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

I first encountered Oscar Wilde's writings when I happened to see *The Importance of Being Earnest* at a local Shakespeare festival. The humor and wit of Wilde's dialogue captivated me and I left the performance wanting more.

Coincidentally, I found more when I enrolled in a course on Victorian literature and was pleased to see Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, on the syllabus. Having experienced Wilde through his plays before his prose, I was surprised at the Gothic themes of Wilde's horror novel and at how far away it strayed from the humorous quips and comical dialogues of his playwriting. Nevertheless, it was the singular difference between *Dorian Gray* and Wilde's stage dramas that stirred my interest in the historical and critical backgrounds of Wilde's writings. There was something alluring about Wilde's decision to undertake an extended piece of writing with a Gothic magical portrait, a seedy underworld of obsession and pleasure, and a horrific, spectacular ending.

As I surveyed the literature more carefully, I found that many scholars were equally interested in Wilde's Gothic themes in *Dorian Gray* and more specifically in which writers might have influenced his development of the Gothic in the novel. To be sure, there has been much scholarship on the influence of English writers on Wilde's writings including Walter Pater and John Ruskin, as well as extended studies of how the French writers Théophile Gautier and Stéphane Mallarmé factored into his

work. Even so, there are certainly places in such scholarly works where further exploration is necessary, more specifically in the area of American influence on the author.

Biographical evidence proves that Wilde was very much interested in his American predecessors and especially the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. In Poe, Wilde found an American who had engaged in the same literary efforts characterized by the Aesthetic movement in which Wilde was absorbed. Wilde also thought of Poe as someone unaccepted by American society and thus on a similar literary and political fringe as himself. Beginning with Pater's assertion that *Dorian Gray* was good novel following the "manner of Poe" (83) in 1891, there is critical attention to Poe's influence on Wilde. In Germany in 1917, Walther Fischer found Poe's *döppelgänger* motif present in *Dorian Gray*, Edouard Roditi in 1924 sees Poe-esque elements in *Dorian Gray*, and in 1950 J. D. Thompson compared Poe's "Usher" to Wilde's "The Harlot's House." After a twenty-year gap in scholarship, the Wilde-Poe connection was again studied in the 1970s and has continued since. Scholars during this era include Lewis Poteet (1971), Isobel Murray (1972-74), Lawler and Knott (1976), Kerry Powell (1979), Richard Ellmann (1982), Karl Beckson (1998), Jean Paul Riquelme (2000), and Nils Clausson (2003). Therefore, given the fact that Poe is generally recognized as an important contributor to the artistic development of Wilde, it is likely that the connection between the two authors would be fully examined in an extended study. However, other than tangential mention of the similarities between the two authors, there is currently no scholarly project solely dedicated to Poe's influence on Wilde.

In this study, I aim to fill this gap in scholarship, first by basing my work in the aforementioned connections between Wilde and Poe and second by examining closely the explicit links between Poe's stories and Wilde's *Dorian Gray*. For the latter, I aim to prove that Wilde was interested in following a long-established Gothic mode that culminated (at least for Wilde) in Poe's use of the magic portrait, perversity, and doubling. In Poe's "Metzengerstein," "The Assigination," and "The Oval Portrait," we can observe a more complicated theme emerging in his emphasis on the unsteady gulf between art and reality. Wilde responded to Poe's theme, using this complex notion of life influencing art through his magical portrait of Dorian Gray. Wilde also found useful motifs of perversity in Poe's "Imp of the Perverse" and "The Black Cat" that are echoed in Dorian's struggle with vice and virtue. Finally, Wilde adapted the doubling of Poe's "William Wilson" into his own novel to explore the psychological torment of Dorian Gray's sins transmitted onto a double, in this case a portrait. By emphasizing this connection between Poe and Wilde with this project, I hope to illuminate the attitudinal and stylistic similarities between the two authors in a way that allows for fresh perspectives on and new interpretations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

My research responds directly to scholars interested in the influence of Edgar Allan Poe on the literary landscape of the late nineteenth century and Wilde scholars seeking to explore sources for his works. Given the vast array of scholarship on both authors, I have limited my survey to scholarly works that address the question of what literary works influenced the production of *Dorian Gray*. Wilde himself argued for the importance of influence studies in "The Critic as Artist":

[H]e who desires to know Shakespeare truly must understand the relations in which Shakespeare stood to the Renaissance and the Reformation, to the age of Elizabeth and the age of James; he must be familiar with the history of the struggle for supremacy between the old classical forms and the new spirit of romance, between the school of Sydney, and Daniel, and Johnson, and the school of Marlowe and Marlowe's greater son; he must know the materials that were at Shakespeare's disposal, and the method in which he used them.

(Collected Works 1033)

For Wilde, source studies are absolutely necessary in literary criticism. Whereas he found knowledge of previous literary methods and materials important for understanding of Shakespeare here, it is necessary to examine the Gothic to truly understand Wilde. By the time of Wilde's writing of *Dorian Gray*, the Gothic was a long-established tradition with a multitude of themes and topics ranging from haunted castles, monsters, and vampires to persecution, paranoia, hallucinations and narcotics. Due to this multiplicity of thematic devices in the Gothic mode, it has remained difficult to define and examine precisely what Gothic elements Wilde was tapping into in *Dorian Gray*. Within the novel, Wilde evokes the reader's primary emotions of wonder, desire, and horror through a character whose growing depravity is revealed via the supernatural trope of a magical and eventually monstrous portrait. Given Wilde's brief experimentation with the Gothic,¹ these elements of Gothic

¹ Wilde's exploration of the Gothic mode is generally limited to three works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Salome*, and *The Sphinx*, with *Dorian Gray* offering the chief example of Wilde's utilization of the trope.

sensationalism have perplexed critics and instigated a debate as to what writers might have enticed Wilde into using the Gothic mode in his formulation of *Dorian Gray*.

Walter Pater initiated the search for sources of *Dorian Gray* when he wrote in 1891 that the book contains an “adroitly-devised supernatural element after the manner of Poe . . . which makes the quite sufficing interest of an excellent story.” Pater’s connection of *Dorian Gray* to Poe is important because it shows Wilde moving away from the aesthetic principles of Walter Pater that would eventually change their friendship as well. Denis Donoghue’s *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls* offers an important study of the friendship between Wilde and Pater that was eventually complicated by *Dorian Gray*. Donoghue finds that the “friendship [...] virtually came to an end in the winter of 1891” (83), when the final version of *Dorian Gray* was published with the addition of a preface. Donoghue explores why the book seems to forge such an important divergence for the two authors, finding that Wilde’s aesthetic angling in the novel, his depiction of a man corrupted by the aesthetic principles Pater sought to uphold, went too far in their playfulness. In relation to the current study, I would argue that Pater’s association of *Dorian Gray* to Poe would go a long way in answering the questions Donoghue proposes, because the link questions Pater’s disagreement with his French counterparts on the importance of Poe in the Aesthetic movement. Jean Paul Riquelme takes this argument up in “Toward a History of Gothic and Modernism,” finding that it was Wilde’s use of doubling in *Dorian Gray* that allowed him to “distance himself from Pater by writing a text that transforms realistic writing in complexly echoic and mythic ways” (593).

Apart from this initial connection of Poe by Pater to *Dorian Gray*, Poe was not mentioned in the context of the novel again until later critics began analyzing the text more carefully. In modern critical analyses of *Dorian Gray*, Poe is nearly always mentioned as a possible source, along with a rather long list of other equally appropriate candidates ranging from Henry James' *The Tragic Muse* to Goethe's *Faust* to Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Moreover, the list of critics who cite Poe as a source is equally long, beginning with Lewis J. Poteet's "*Dorian Gray and the Gothic Novel*" (1971), Isobel Murray's "Some Elements of Composition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" (1972), and Kerry Powell's "Massinger, Wilde, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" (1979). It is not my purpose to prove that Poe or any of his stories constitute the primary source of *Dorian Gray*, since Wilde was obviously (and admittedly) thinking of many authors and works when he wrote the text (works of Gautier are directly quoted in the book and Wilde refers to Huysmans' *A Rebours* indirectly). Rather, I would like to join the conversation of these various critics that seek to find parallel fictions in the authors known to have been read by Wilde.

In "Wilde's Reading of Poe through Baudelaire," I note that any encounter Wilde would have had with Poe's works would have certainly been mediated by Poe's reception among the French. Therefore, it is necessary to understand in what theoretical framework (more specifically, Baudelaire's own aesthetic philosophies) Wilde would have read Poe and under what contexts. Consequently, I argue that despite the variety of venues where Wilde would have had access to Poe's texts, Baudelaire is the most important influence on Wilde's reading of Poe. To reinforce

this argument, I reference several critical studies on Baudelaire and Poe, including *Poe Abroad* edited by Lois Davis Vines (and in particular her essay “Charles Baudelaire”), Lois Hyslop’s *Charles Baudelaire Revisited*, and Baudelaire’s own writings, *Edgar Allan Poe, His Life and Works* (1852), *Edgar Poe, His Life and Works* (1856), and *New Notes on Edgar Poe* (1857).

In “Reflections of Poe in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” I use a variety of primary and secondary sources to argue the importance of Poe in Wilde’s novel. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* as well as critical reviews by Wilde and his colleagues all prove fruitful in linking him to authors such as Walter Pater, Charles Baudelaire, Stephane Mallarmé, and Poe. Richard Ellmann’s definitive biography also provides clear evidence of Wilde’s interaction with these authors both in England and in France, as well as information about particular instances when such interactions included discussion of Poe (Mallarmé, for instance, personally gave Wilde his translation of Poe’s “The Raven”). I have also used a variety of scholarly articles and books on Poe and Wilde to aid in my central argument, and in particular G. R. Thompson’s *Poe’s Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales*, David Ketterer’s *The Rationale of Deception in Poe*, and Christopher Nassaar’s *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde*.

The following “Survey of the Relevant Literature” summarizes the critical work on Wilde and Poe and examines how each critic approaches the connection between the two authors. Generally, critics find Poe a provocative artist in the literary milieu of Wilde’s time but decide that his influence on Wilde is more of a footnote than a central argument. Others, however, including John Paul Riquelme

and Ellen Crowell, point to Poe as a major influence for Wilde's *Dorian Gray*.

Nevertheless, while the survey proves that there are scholars interested in addressing Poe as an influence in Wilde, it also reveals that such an interest has not yet led to substantial analysis of the connection between the two authors.

Chapter I: Survey of the Relevant Literature

In the following survey I aim primarily to catalogue and summarize as succinctly as possible the wide variety of source studies written on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The tracing of sources and parallels to *Dorian Gray* by critics over the last hundred years has generated a long and varied list of essays and books on the subject. Patrick Gillespie conjectures that Wilde encouraged such studies by "never losing sight of the power of multiplicity to invigorate his work" (388). He continues:

Wilde fostered this inclination in his audiences: Time and again one finds his writing stimulating approaches that support disparate methodologies, acknowledge the presence of multiple levels of reading (an aesthetic metasytem), and bind together disparate meanings into a response accommodating their inherent diversities.

Therefore, Wilde's "playful ambivalences" themselves encouraged critics into a frenzy of critical interpretations and led to a robust discussion of possible sources for the novel. While nearly all of these studies acknowledge the impracticality of a primary or fundamental source for *Dorian Gray* given Wilde's sheer eclecticism, there was a notable increase in the 1960s and 70s of scholars attempting to locate sources and analogues to the book with a far greater specificity. And so, in 1969 Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Dominick Rossi in separate studies examined *Dorian Gray* in its relation to Goethe's *Faust*. In 1971, Lewis Poteet found Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* to be a source worthy of further exploration (see below), and

in 1974 William Evans Portnoy catalogued areas where Wilde seems to have borrowed the themes and motifs of Alfred Lord Tennyson.

This smattering of critics involved in source studies of *Dorian Gray* serves only to illustrate the rising interest in connecting Wilde's literary output to his vast knowledge of the canon of Western literature. With this scholarship in mind, it shouldn't be a surprise that by 1997 Jerusha McCormack remarked, "It is hard to say anything original about the *Picture of Dorian Gray* because there is so little that is original in it" (110). McCormack finds simply that "One thing is clear: careers can be made in the hunt for originals of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But they would be careers in futility" (110-111). She redirects the discussion, stating, "As Wilde well knew, originality is simply not a value in oral tradition. The teller of tales does not aim for the novel; he counts on his audience's recognition of 'annexed' lines; their praise is to be reserved for the skill with which he turns them to his purpose." McCormack's point here is of course a useful one: it makes clear the concept that Wilde's purposes were never aligned with mere imitation. McCormack's suggestion that the myth of the story truly drives its popularity is also apt:

As every new "source" confirms, it is the book's very lack of originality that is the secret of its power. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde has tapped a root of Western folklore so deep and ubiquitous that the story itself has escaped the literary and returned to its origins in the oral tradition. Almost everyone knows the plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; very few have read it. The tale flourishes as a modern myth while the book itself lies rotting in the attic. (111)

It is certainly true that Wilde's book operates in a mythical/oral tradition in terms of its transcendent popularity, but McCormack fails to address where it stands in the Gothic tradition, an important aspect of source studies that can provide fresh perspectives and new insights. Moreover, while I agree with McCormack that any attempt to reduce *Dorian Gray* to a single or overriding source is not only misguided, but also fundamentally myopic, I would rejoin that there is certainly room to introduce fresh dialogue on why Wilde chose to use the particular literary and narrative devices in his book. Certainly, Wilde was making conscious decisions when he decided to write a Gothic novel developed around the central idea of a doubled portrait. Furthermore, it is my contention that through a careful examination of *Dorian Gray*'s themes and motifs in relation to similar devices in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, we can gain a clearer picture of what Wilde was attempting to do with a book admittedly aimed only at aesthetic perfection, yet in a contradictory twist seeming to carry a moral message as well.

The hunt for possible sources of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was initiated by the book itself in its frequent allusion to other contemporary novels. Wilde's often coy references to Huysmans' *À Rebours* and Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* immediately sparked discussions on the possible sources for the text, a debate which has continued through today. The goal of many later critics in establishing possible sources for Wilde's *Dorian Gray* has been to ascertain where the novel fits into the evolution of the Gothic narrative and how Wilde dealt with the variety of models from which he wrote his book. Important to the present study is an understanding of where and how Wilde factors into the literary culture of his time and

who might have affected this positioning. Because literary movements do not occur in vacuums, divorced from the writings of those before and around them, it can be productive to establish sources for such texts. Therefore, before we can launch into a textual study of Poe's influence on Wilde, we must first explore how other critics have dealt with the two authors in their scholarly projects.

Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe's influence in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared almost immediately after its publication in 1891 with Walter Pater's review of several of Wilde's works in *The Bookman*. In this review (centering on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), Walter Pater commends Wilde for his "convinced" and "valuable" advancements in his works *The Decay of Lying* and *Intentions* and their development of what already was the "brilliant work of Matthew Arnold" (83). However, what Pater finds convincing and important in Wilde's earlier works, he finds lacking and "fallible" in *Dorian Gray*. He writes, "there is a certain amount of intrusion of real life and its sordid aspects [in the novel] - the low theatre, the pleasures and griefs, the faces of some very unrefined people." Such aspects, Pater contends, distort Wilde's emphatic "protest" against the "so-called 'realism' of art" and instead give the novel a roughly textured brutality (83-84). Moreover, Pater finds that Wilde's "conversational ease" and "fluidity of life" in his earlier pieces get lost in *Dorian Gray* as Wilde has splashed "interludes" of real "middle class life" into a novel of high art. Nevertheless, Pater decides that the book, as a "supernatural story," displays Wilde's "first-rate" sense of "artistic management," as it often reached heights of "Epicurean niceties like so many exotic flowers" (84). Pater's concession to Wilde's "artistic management" is particularly important because he attributes

Wilde's mode of writing directly to Poe. He explains that Wilde maintains a "better sort of realism" by his "adroitly-devised supernatural element after the manner of Poe, but with a grace he never reached, which supersedes that earlier didactic purpose, makes the quite sufficing interest of an excellent story" (84). Pater's assumption, of course, brings into immediacy the possibility of Poe being an important source for Wilde's novel, while also bringing into consideration the extent of Wilde's indebtedness to the poet. Pater seems to imply that Wilde used Poe to invent the mystical world of *Dorian Gray* with a refinement that Poe didn't possess. What else we can make of Pater's opinion here is unimportant, but that he felt inclined to mention Poe (and only Poe) is of much relevance.

Pater's observation of the connection between Wilde and Poe comes up again at the end of his review:

[T]he skill, the real subtlety of art, the ease and fluidity withal of telling a story by word of mouth, with which the consciousness of the supernatural is introduced into, and maintained amid, the elaborately conventional, sophisticated, disabused world Mr. Wilde depicts so cleverly, so mercilessly [...] may fairly claim to go with that of Edgar Poe, and with some good French work of the same kind, done, probably, in more or less conscious imitation of it. (83)

Thus, Pater's opinion is quite clear. Wilde, with a "grace not reached" by his predecessors, adopted many of his more effective plot and stylistic elements from Poe and his French followers. And Pater's opinion would prove to foreshadow later criticism of Wilde in that many later scholars would assume the connection between

Poe and Wilde to be obvious enough to note, but not belabor. As a result, the connection Pater describes in his review doesn't emerge again until later critics examined the text of *Dorian Gray* with a more careful eye to Wilde's language, style, and revisions. In fact, there are no extended source studies of Wilde until nearly two decades after his death, the reason for which could probably be found in the tragic and dramatic aftermath of his fateful trial and imprisonment.

Poe's name surfaces briefly in the context of *Dorian Gray* twice in the early twentieth century in reviews of the novel. Charles Ricketts, musing in 1912 on Wilde as a talker and writer, finds *Dorian Gray* to be a "dreadful book [...] at most it contains the subject matter for a small story as Poe's 'William Wilson' or Gautier's 'Fortunio,' neither of which is good" (*Critical Heritage* 324). And again, in 1914, James Gibbons Huneker finds Wilde a mere imitator of other artists, arguing that his "*Dorian Gray*, apart from the inversion element, is poor Huysmans' – just look into the masterpiece of *À Rebours*; not to mention Poe's tale, 'The Oval Portrait'" (*Critical Heritage* 344). Neither review is particularly flattering, and both appear anxious to separate Wilde from his art in a way that makes him look to be at best a plagiarist. Other than critical reviews of Wilde, perhaps the first scholarly mention of the novel in the context of Poe occurs in Walther Fischer's 1917 essay "The 'Poisonous Book' in Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*," written and published in Germany. While the primary goal in Fischer's essay is to identify Huysmans' *À Rebours* as the "yellow-backed French novel" in the *Dorian Gray*, Fischer indicates and emphasizes the importance of Wilde's debts to Balzac and Edgar Allan Poe. Fischer locates the focus of Dorian's affection for Huysmans' novel and its scandalous, if not

“poisonous,” subject matter, but he also points to the importance of Poe’s stories in relation to the book (40). Even so, Fischer’s mention of Poe is brief, with no commentary or evidence to back up his contention that Poe influenced Wilde.

Poe’s influence is dealt with more specifically by two critics in the 1930s, Kelper Hartley and Louise Rosenblatt. Hartley mentions the importance of Poe’s “Oval Portrait” and “William Wilson” in *Dorian Gray*’s bargain-with-the-devil theme (186). However, due in part to the yet-to-be-published letters of Wilde, Hartley concludes Balzac’s *Peau de Chagrin* is a more “immediate influence,” since Poe is not mentioned in any of the available works of Wilde at the time (Wilde’s letters, in which he refers to Poe often, wouldn’t appear in published form until 1962). Rosenblatt goes a step further in her argument to claim that Wilde actually borrowed Poe’s technique of hinting at the crimes of his characters but leaving the real horror, the incident, up to the reader’s imagination (269).² After these critics, another ten years would elapse before Poe’s name would emerge in reference to Wilde, in particular when Wilde scholarship started to heat up in the 1940s and 50s.

In order to better group the kind of scholarship being produced on Wilde during this time period, it is necessary to examine the frequently changing mood and public perception of Wilde’s life and works. For nearly all Wilde scholars in the first half of the twentieth century, writing about Wilde and his works was always colored by his reputation as an artist and a homosexual. The trial and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde at the end of the nineteenth century left many of his critics and friends unsure of what stance to take on his art, while leaving his reputation to a later generation of

² I am indebted to Isobel Murray’s “Some Elements of Composition in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” for her location and analysis of these two critics.

scholars. Of course, there was a spate of books and articles published after Wilde's death that either condemned his immorality and challenged his artistic achievements or sought to explain his behavior to a public disapproving of his actions. In the former camp were old acquaintances of Wilde who would praise the jury's verdict, like Clement Scott in the *Daily Telegraph* and "friends" like Sir Edward Coley Burnes-Jones who simply wished Wilde would commit suicide in prison (Ellmann 479).³ In the latter were Wilde's closer friends who, after some time had past, wrote extensive accounts of their friendship with the dramatist and playwright, defending his lifestyle and their own relationships with him. Examples of these accounts include Lord Alfred Douglas' four attempts to clarify his relationship with Wilde⁴ and Robert Sherard's numerous books written on Wilde's behalf.⁵ As a result of this split, the image of Wilde has been distorted by the varying predispositions of the critics writing on him. It was not until the 1940s and 50s that more impartial studies were undertaken by critics like Douglas Bush (*Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry*) and Eduardo Roditi (*Oscar Wilde*). With Roditi in particular, there is a noticeable shift away from the more defensive studies of Wilde (projects that seek to exonerate him in some way) to more serious and scholarly examinations of the author and his life.

³ Ricketts' and Huneker's reviews referenced above also fall into this category.

⁴ See Lord Alfred Douglas' *Oscar Wilde and Myself* (1914), *A Letter from Lord Alfred Douglas on Andre Gide's Lies about Himself and Oscar Wilde* (1933), *Without Apology* (1938), and *Oscar Wilde: A Summing-Up* (1940).

⁵ See Robert Sherard's *Oscar Wilde: The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* (1902), *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1906), and *Andre Gide's Wicked Lies About the late Oscar Wilde in Algiers in January 1985* (1933).

As Roditi states in his introduction, the purpose of his study is to “indicate the central position that Wilde’s works and ideas occupy in the thought and art of his age, and in the shift of English and American literature from established and aging Romanticism to what we now call modernism” (5). Implicit in Roditi’s thesis is the necessity of realizing Wilde as an important literary figure in the late Victorian and early modern period and not as the symbol of the tragic end of the Decadence movement. Therefore, much of Roditi’s study attempts to parse out Wilde’s achievements and influences on the contemporary culture of his time. Roditi examines Wilde as a dandy and also as a serious literary and artistic critic. Moving quickly through Wilde’s early poetry, Roditi explores how Wilde incorporated authors such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé into his plays, allowing them to take on a form of French lyricism and tone. Many of Roditi’s arguments stem from the idea that Wilde did not believe that newer and more confusing art forms were needed to “express the novelty and confusion of modern life” (51), but that more traditional art forms could be revived in a more effective modern context. And it is for this reason that Roditi finds Wilde to be a “master of modern literature.” More important to the current study, however, is the amount of attention Roditi gives to the influence of Poe in Wilde’s works. On the first page of his introduction, Roditi states, “We had to discover Baudelaire and Mallarmé before we could learn to love our own Poe; and an appreciation of his poetry is still considered, in some quarters, the shibboleth of a high-brow cult rather than an indication of average understanding of, and normal respect for, one of our major classics.” Roditi attributes this belated appreciation of Poe to a lack of insight by early critics into “modern literature” (1). In its place,

English and American critics have dealt Poe the “fate that proverbially awaits the prophet in his own land” by recognizing Walt Whitman and Gerard Manley Hopkins instead of Poe as the true innovators of English poetry. In the same way, Roditi explains that many French critics argue that the modern movement of poetry in the nineteenth century began with Baudelaire, and yet Roditi traces Baudelaire’s tradition back to Poe. Roditi blames the “high-brow” prejudices of a generation of critics for misinterpreting Poe’s significance in literary history because of his vast, “less discriminating” wider audience:

Malcolm Cowley has observed that Poe, though known and admired amongst the poets of Caucasus, was long neglected by our best poets and critics; and this in spite of the fact that Poe’s works had been reprinted more often and more carelessly by less discriminating readers, than those of any other American poet. (2)

Therefore, if we can see past the missteps of earlier critics, as Roditi would have it, we will see Poe as the true poetic visionary of American letters, thus avoiding the mistake of neglecting “our good writers who have gained popularity with bad readers” (2). Moreover, Roditi argues, “[t]he same might be said of Oscar Wilde.” Roditi contends that Wilde suffered a fate similar to Poe’s in the fact that his works, while read favorably in France or Germany in translation, are constantly reprinted in England with “very little care” and at the “hands of hasty editors.” Roditi’s lamentation for Poe’s and Wilde’s wounded reputations after their untimely deaths is important, since it seems to recognize a core similarity between what the two authors were attempting to achieve with their art and what eventually led to their respective

breakdowns. Roditi doesn't expand his analysis beyond noting this similar biographical phenomenon in Wilde and Poe, but he does invoke Poe often in his critical analysis of Wilde's works.

In Roditi's section on "Prose and the Sublime II – The Poems in Prose," he explores Wilde's adoption of Baudelaire's love for the poetry of medieval Latin, "its puns and verbal patterns" (41). More specifically, Roditi explains that the Symbolists were especially interested in the "post-classical" fusion of Greek and Latin, leaving "a new poetics whose aims partook of thaumaturgy and of psychopathology" (41). In one way of expressing this new poetics, the poet became "a magician, emulating God, as some poets and estheticians had suggested from Tasso and Novalis." Another, and according to Roditi more important, form of this new poetics came when the "poet sought to hypnotize his readers, to project upon them, as Poe intended, specific moods or emotions; and thus become a psychopathologist or at least a dabbler in theories of madness and of suggestion" (42). Roditi argues that Wilde's own interests in "obsessive rhythms and alliterations or imagery" fall in line with those of Poe.

As Roditi moves to Wilde's shorter fiction, he again finds Poe to be an important source for Wilde. Roditi writes, "In two of his most effective stories, 'Lord Arthur Saville's Crime' and 'The Canterville Ghost,' Wilde had self-consciously burlesqued the manner of the macabre, introducing a note of satire to conceal his own awkwardness in creating atmosphere" (77). But this awkwardness disappeared as Wilde's confidence heightened in the "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," when he "inserted, within a macabre plot of forgery and suicide, another element of mystery or of the puzzle which had much in common with Poe's cryptographic interests" (77). While

Roditi doesn't pursue discussion of Poe in relation to Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, he does discover some interesting parallels between Wilde's and Poe's shared artistic values. In one instance of this he explains that Wilde "condemned scientific or psychological exactitude in fiction"; instead, Wilde took the opposite stance that "it [fiction] can make things artistically probable; can call for imaginative and realistic credence; can, by force of mere style, compel us to believe" (qtd. in Roditi 192). Roditi compares this attitude of style and art over realism to Poe's own artistic theories, using the collapse of the macabre building in "The Fall of the House of Usher" as textual evidence of this similarity. In all, Roditi's study of Wilde is far-reaching and goes a long way in furthering the critical understanding of the author. Roditi's insistence on Poe's influence on the Aesthetic movement in general and on Wilde in particular makes his book an important scholarly achievement for the current study.

Following Roditi's book-length study of Wilde, a variety of critics gave credit to Poe in Wilde's works. The first of these articles, by J. D. Thompson, appeared in 1950, titled "The Composition of Wilde's 'The Harlot's House.'" Thompson attempts to locate possible sources for the short, darkly mystical poem about a couple who encounter a bizarre brothel. Thompson expands on Barnhard Fehr's assumption that the theme of Wilde's "The Harlot's House" came from Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Thompson agrees with Fehr's connection, but finds that Fehr "overlooked, however, another possible source in Poe," "The Masque of the Red Death" (487-488). Thompson argues that Poe's "Red Death" more aptly suggests "the dance-of-death motif" in Wilde's short poem. He also notes that Wilde's close friend Robert Sherard in *The Life of Oscar Wilde* "names Poe as a principal source of

inspiration to Wilde in the composition of *The Sphinx* and “The Harlot’s House” (488). From Thompson’s brief essay, we can clearly observe a growing interest in finding possible sources for a variety of Wilde’s works.

With *Dorian Gray* in particular, Lewis Poteet joins the source debate initiated by Epifanio San Juan, Jr. in *The Art of Oscar Wilde* (1967), in which San Juan claims that the “yellow book” of *Dorian Gray* – generally accepted to be Huysmans’ *À Rebours* – is the “main inspiration” of the novel (53). Poteet challenges this interpretation by pointing out the many differences between the two works, more specifically their decidedly disparate plot and character developments. He argues that *À Rebours* is a “psychological study of a single protagonist” (240), while *Dorian Gray* is a novel divided among three main characters and a “living portrait.” Moreover, Poteet finds large differences between the protagonists of the two novels. Dorian Gray is a criminal aesthete for whom society’s judgment plays a large role in the development of his character. Huysmans’ protagonist, on the other hand, neither breaks the law nor relies on society in his “exploration of his personal aesthetic” (240). Finally, Poteet concludes that Huysmans’ direct influence on the novel is limited to Chapters X and XI, in which Dorian “encounters the ‘yellow book’ and imitates the protagonist by collecting sensations.”

All of this amounts to Poteet’s central argument in his essay that sources for Wilde’s novel are more accurately located in the English Romantic literary tradition of the Gothic novel. Poteet lists William Godwin, Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, Dickens, the Brontës, and Charles Maturin as authors who contributed to the development of the Gothic novel. Poteet explores in detail the various patterns that

shape both Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and Maturin's book. The connections Poteet points to in this section are important, because many subsequent critics also front *Melmoth the Wanderer* as the quintessential source for Wilde's Gothicism. The appeal of Maturin in studies of *Dorian Gray* is twofold: there are many places where the plots of the books coincide, especially in the overarching theme of Dorian bargaining with the devil for eternal youth (a pact Melmoth also makes) and in the interesting biographical connections between the two authors. Maturin was Wilde's great uncle (something Wilde was admittedly proud of), and Wilde chose the surname Melmoth after his release from prison. Poteet explores the former connection in greater depth, explaining that from *Melmoth* "Wilde accepts the radical bifurcation of nature and art; he puts to original uses the Gothic novelist's conventional plot pattern in which an innocent child of nature is corrupted by the artificialities of society" (241). As evidence, Poteet points to the process of Dorian's destruction, beginning with Dorian's child-like innocence in the first chapter that degenerates into a "disillusioned" (242) aestheticism at the end.

Poteet also examines the bizarre portrait of the elder Melmoth that bears a peculiar resemblance to Dorian's magical picture. He states, "When young Melmoth tries to destroy [the painting] he finds hints that it may have a life of its own" (242). Poteet quotes the text directly to illustrate well the similarities between the climactic moment when Dorian destroys the painting and Melmoth's own obliteration of his ancestor's portrait: "He seized it; – his hand shook at first, but the mouldering canvas appeared to assist him in the effort. He tore it from the frame with a cry half terrific, half triumphant, – it fell at his feet, and he shuddered as it fell" (qtd. in Poteet 242-

243). But Poteet is careful here. He writes, “It is not only in *Melmoth*, of course, that this concentration on a portrait is to be found” (243). Poteet continues with a list of places where the “portrait motif” was used in effective Gothic literature of which Wilde would have been aware. And, not surprisingly, Poteet finds Eino Railo’s history of the portrait motif in English literature to be especially helpful in pointing out books that Wilde might have been reading and imitating. Most important for the current study is his mention of Railo’s specific attention to works by Poe. To be sure, as I explore later in this study, Railo offers much insight into the important role Poe plays in the development not only of the portrait motif, but also of Gothic doubling. But, for Poteet, Poe’s significance in *Dorian Gray* is a tangential point and one that he doesn’t elaborate beyond a mere mention. Poteet concludes his essay by comparing Wilde’s use of the Gothic novel to expand on the aesthetic principles he had already been developing in his critical writings. He writes, “The Gothic novel, itself a fin-de-siècle genre of the eighteenth century, cast off the conventional eighteenth-century homage to realism, credibility, and responsibility to an aesthetic of taste, reaching beyond accepted novelistic approaches to life and character to explore with brilliant if erratic flashes of a psychological universe” (247). With a reading of the Gothic like this in mind, Poteet finds it quite obvious that Wilde would have been drawn to Gothic writing since it “gave him a form through which he could test his own anti-Victorian aesthetic in a protagonist whose very woodenness is a function of his being partly allegorical and whose damnation is as inescapable as it is irrelevant to the ‘truth’ of his theories” (247-248). Therefore, as Poteet had claimed at the beginning of the essay, Wilde used *Dorian Gray* as a way to explore the faults and

deficiencies of the artistic period and the cultural milieu in which he was writing. Poteet concludes, “For the ‘truth’ of *Dorian Gray* is to be found, like the ‘truth’ of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, in the resonances and tensions of the work, rather than in any fidelity to the ordinary life of the society from which its author came” (248).

Poteet’s essay is important in the scope of source studies of *Dorian Gray* because it argues against earlier critics who took a facile approach to the book by claiming Huysmans’ *À Rebours* to be the only source of any importance to the novel. To be sure, Poteet’s discussion of Maturin’s *Melmoth* proves quite compelling and goes a long way in illuminating at least one source for Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*. By necessity of his focus, however, there seems to be a good deal that Poteet leaves out in his study of major influences in Wilde’s writing. For a fuller view, we must turn to Isobel Murray, who examines closely the different stages of composition of *Dorian Gray*, looking specifically at the differences between the original *Lippincott* edition and the 1891 version published in book form. Murray begins by chronicling the various sources of the novel, paying close attention to Poe’s influential works “William Wilson” and “The Oval Portrait.” She relies on Rosenblatt’s and Hartley’s conclusions that Wilde used Poe to refine the well-known motif of a character “making a bargain with the devil” (221). Murray finds eight instances in Wilde’s letters of “very laudatory references to Poe,” a fact she uses as proof of Wilde’s “great admiration” (221) for the author. Moreover, in reference to Hartley’s position on Poe,⁶ Murray feels that the letters clearly indicate Wilde’s indebtedness to the poet. Murray also agrees with and summarizes Rosenblatt’s claim that “Wilde

⁶ As mentioned above, Hartley argues that Balzac was more influential than Poe because Wilde’s letters were unavailable to Hartely.

borrowed from Poe his habit of alluding to strange crimes so indistinctly and yet with so much suggestion that they acquire an atmosphere of real horror” (221).

As for the Gothic element in *Dorian Gray*, Murray is of the same mind as Poteet, explaining that it is probable Wilde “directly and indirectly” used *Melmoth the Wanderer* as a model for *Dorian Gray*. Without citing textual evidence to sustain this claim, Murray instead relies on biographical support, referring to Wilde’s admiration of Maturin in his correspondence and his adoption of Melmoth as his surname after being released from prison. Despite these acknowledgements of Poe and Maturin as possible influences, Murray argues that *Dorian Gray* is not much of a Gothic novel after all: “the aesthetic preaching and theorizing interrupt the action too much for that atmosphere to be dominant” (221). As a result, Murray shifts her argument into an analysis of the contemporary influences, specifically Pater. Murray examines the similarities between Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* and *Dorian Gray*, discovering Pater’s use of Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* and Wilde’s use of *À Rebours* to be strikingly similar. She writes, “A whole chapter (V) is devoted to ‘The Golden Book’ and its effect on Marius, in a way which closely parallels Chapter 11 of *Dorian Gray*. Indeed, that chapter ends with a possible hidden reference to Pater’s most famous work” (222-223). Murray is of course referring to *The Renaissance*, and she is in a good company of critics that agree Wilde was intentionally echoing Pater at the end of Chapter 11 in the sentences, “The Renaissance knew of strange manners of poisoning – poisoning by a helmet and a lighted torch, by an embroidered glove and a jeweled fan, by a gilded pomander and by an amber chain. Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book” (123). Regardless of the source, however, Murray’s primary

purpose in her work is to chronicle the differences between the two editions of *Dorian Gray*, a task that does illuminate the many corrections and thematic additions to the novel that made it a more effective work of fiction. Two years later, Murray again credited Poe's "The Oval Portrait" and "William Wilson" in her introduction to the book in *Oxford English Novels*.

In response to critics like Poteet and Murray who are keen to find outside sources for Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, Donald L. Lawler and Charles E. Knott approach the book in a way "different from a conventional source study" (389) by focusing on Wilde's own "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." and "The Fisherman and His Soul." The authors state that "*Dorian Gray* appears to be a masterful reassembling of materials whose full potential had not been realized by Wilde in the earlier works" (389). Therefore, they argue that *Dorian Gray* takes its "origins from the matrix of ideas out of which Wilde conceived the two shorter stories and that many of its distinctive features as a novel may be traced to these stories" (389). The authors are right in reminding the reader that "Wilde was in the habit of borrowing from his own work. He did it all his creative life from the early poems to 'De Profundis.' Wilde copied almost a page of *Dorian Gray*, for example, from a review he had written in November 1888 when he was the editor of *Woman's World*" (390).

What is important for the current study in Lawler and Knott's work is their careful evaluation of the source studies on Wilde's *Dorian Gray* to date. As a sort of prefatory annotation, the authors include a lengthy footnote that surveys in a "general" way the types of source studies completed prior to theirs. They find that there are three kinds of source studies done on the novel. The first of these

approaches (and as they aptly contend the least useful) is an autobiographical approach to Wilde's works, an approach the authors mention was "encouraged" by Wilde in his own assessment of whom he might be best represented by among his fictional characters.⁷ In such studies (most of which were done in the early twentieth century) Wilde's book and characters are judged against his real-life relationships and experiences with people like Lord Alfred Douglas, John Gray, and Robert Sherard. The second approach involves "[c]ritics of a less biographical turn of mind" who seek out "more conventional" sources in literary history (389). It is here that they give credit to Huysmans and Stevenson and note that later critical attention came to Poe's "Oval Portrait," as well as the works of Maturin, Balzac, and Disraeli. Finally, the authors introduce a third, more neglected kind of source study that uses Wilde's own works to trace common themes and motifs throughout his fictional projects. They argue that beyond the "side glances" of authors like Roditi, there has been "no exploration undertaken of the use Wilde made of his own work in the composition of *Dorian Gray*."

To remedy the situation, Lawler and Knott carry out a thorough textual comparison of the three works, focusing on "verbal repetitions" (391), similarities of plot and narration, and parallel aesthetic and philosophical temperaments. The authors finally conclude, "In the reworking of his fund of ideas in the three stories, we find not a slavish imitation or weak-minded plagiarism by Wilde but an admirably inspired inventiveness in drawing out the full potential of his materials" (398). It is

⁷ In a letter to Ralph Payne on February 12, 1894, Wilde wrote: "I am so glad you like the strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Howard is what I think I am; Lord Henry what the world thinks of me; Dorian what I would like to be – in other ages, perhaps" (*Letters* 352).

this final point that proves Lawler and Knott's essay to be a truly important contribution to the study of sources since it identifies rightly that Wilde was chronically self-referential in his works, a point that seems to be too often forgotten by critics attempting to locate who *else* Wilde was echoing.

In a series of essays beginning in 1979, Kerry Powell sampled the growing variety of interpretations of Wilde's use of authors and writers in the production of *Dorian Gray*. In "Massinger, Wilde, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Powell reviews the popular theories on Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, finding that the works of Balzac, Gautier, and Huysmans "contain nothing like the miraculous picture which functions as the centerpiece of the novel" (312). In other sources, however, he identifies "extraordinary paintings" in the stories of Disraeli's *Vivian Grey*, Maturin's *Melmoth*, and, more important, Poe. Powell writes, "One, Poe's "Oval Portrait," describes a picture which drains life from the model, and another (his "William Wilson") a mirror in which the central character beholds by its pale, blood-stained visage" (313). He notes that "William Wilson" "more than the others approximates the situation in *Dorian Gray*," and yet, in Powell's interpretation, even this story fails to present "a painting which deteriorates from an originally beautiful condition to reflect the increasing moral obliquity of a character." Interestingly, Powell thinks he has found a source in a minor play of Philip Massinger, *The Prince*. Powell sustains an effective argument in his analysis of the play's "magicall [sic] picture" of a soldier's wife that undergoes "disfigurement if she is sexually unfaithful during absence" (313-314). In another essay on possible sources in Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, "Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray: Magic-Picture Mania in Late Victorian Fiction,"

Powell again concentrates on the possible sources for Dorian's magic picture, but as his title indicates he has expanded this thesis to include all late Victorian fiction as well. He begins this discussion by addressing all instances of supernatural portraits in Gothic fiction, finding Horace Walpole's 1764 *The Castle of Otranto* to be perhaps the first instance of a portrait "sighing deeply, heaving its breast, and stepping out of the frame to censure the evil behavior of Manfred" (148). He again recognizes Maturin's use of a bizarrely alive picture and references works by Walpole and Radcliffe. With these authors adequately explored, Powell then argues for the necessity of recognizing Poe in the development of supernatural pictures:

Once outside the boundaries of Gothic fiction proper, we begin to discern features in the remarkable portrait which bring it closer to the sophisticated treatment Wilde would lavish on it. Poe's "Oval Portrait," often cited as a source for *Dorian Gray*, employs the picture to illuminate the gulf between art and reality, the beautiful model in Poe's story dwindling by degrees until with the triumphant completion of the portrait she breathes her last. Acquaintance with the larger compass of picture-fiction will show us, however, that Wilde's use of the portrait to define a conflict between art and life might as easily have derived from a dozen works of the later nineteenth century—most of them unnamed as yet in the quest to pin down Wilde's sources, and many of them more like *Dorian Gray* than "The Oval Portrait." But Poe, together with Hawthorne and Gogol especially, can

be credited with transforming the magic portrait into more than just another appliance in the Gothic chamber of horrors. (148-149)

I will return to a number of Powell's points. First, and probably most important, is Powell's realization that Wilde used Poe's narratives to bring the portrait motif to a more sophisticated level when Wilde employs the trope to explore the "gulf between reality and art." Also, Powell's recognition of the significance of Poe, Hawthorne,⁸ and Gogol in treating images of life in the form of paintings and portraits is well put and aptly argued. Indeed, he continues this argument by adding, "It was these three who made organic to the picture itself an examination of the duality of art and life" (149). Moreover, he examines the intertwined power of life over art and vice versa up to the point when the fictional portrait "became the bonding – became, that is, the primary *donné* in fiction treating the magic picture with more subtlety, and lending it more importance, than Gothic novelists had done" (149). And, as I later argue, this bonding of art and life is precisely what makes a fuller discussion of Poe in relation to *Dorian Gray* useful in the broader interpretation of novel.

Before 1988, biographies of Wilde were for the most part biased arguments about the controversy of his double life, rather than impartial scholarly examinations of the life of the author. Rather harshly, Roditi writes in 1986:

Of the biographies, let it be said that those of Wilde are generally sensational and unreliably biased. [...] Most of the Wilde biographers

⁸ Powell elaborates on Hawthorne's significance in *Dorian Gray* and the mystical picture motif, comparing Hawthorne's "Prophetic Picture" to Wilde's novel in "Hawthorne, Arlo Bates, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" *Papers on Language and Literature* XVI (Fall 1980): 403-416.

have busied themselves with proving either that he was homosexual and not a sodomite, or that he was neither, or that the author of that biography was neither, or that the whole scandal was truly scandalous, or that there was no scandal at all. (208)

If we accept Roditi's claims in 1986, then we would surely disagree with them by 1988 when Richard Ellmann's biography of Wilde was published posthumously. While there are certainly areas of Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* with which critics take issue, there is perhaps no scholarly study of Wilde that is as generally accepted as authoritative.

Ellmann's treatment of possible influences on Wilde is both measured and comprehensive, surveying the wide variety of authors and artists Wilde encountered, both in real life and in print. In relation to Wilde's reading of American authors, Ellmann explains, "he had read Poe, Whitman, Hawthorne, Holmes, Lowell, Howells, Longfellow, and James" (155). Moreover, Ellmann turns to Wilde's travels in America to explore his varying appreciation of writers from the United States. When questioned by a reporter in Philadelphia about which American poet Wilde most admired, Wilde responded (as Ellmann states) "without hesitation" (167): "I think that Walt Whitman and Emerson have given the world more than anyone else" (qtd. in Ellmann 167). Nevertheless, Ellmann feels obliged to offer excuses for Longfellow, who "admirable as he was, was too close to European sources to have much effect in Europe" (167). Finally, Ellmann corrects Wilde's hasty assertion by adding that "Wilde actually valued Poe, 'this marvelous lord of rhythmic expression,' above the others, but Poe was dead" (167). Ellmann evidences his assertion by

explaining that Wilde at the time was especially partial to the American authors whom he would have had the opportunity to meet on his trip to the United States: “‘I do so hope to meet Mr Whitman,’ Wilde confided” (167). In chronicling Wilde’s admiration for Whitman, Ellmann also alludes to Wilde’s appreciation of Poe:

To Wilde, who shared Poe’s concern with “the fabric and cut of the garment,” the verse of Whitman was all subject and no form. As he said of Whitman later, “If not a poet, he is a man who strikes a strong note, perhaps neither prose nor poetry but something of his own that is grand, original and unique.” (170)

Ellmann also emphasizes Wilde’s connection to the French authors Baudelaire and Mallarmé, linking them to Poe as well. With Mallarmé, Ellmann explains that Wilde had a particular attachment:

Mallarmé was a new phenomenon for Wilde. His eloquence, depending upon uncommon vocabulary and syntax and a refusal to grandstand for an audience, was quite unlike the manner of great talkers. His *mardis* were famous, and his disciples came to listen to him rather than talk themselves. Wilde was prepared for the same sacrifice, though with his attentiveness to the “*maître*” he made his mark. (335)

In his account of Wilde’s triumphant visit to Paris after the publication of *Dorian Gray*, Ellmann follows Wilde to a meeting with Mallarmé that illustrates well the shared esteem of the authors: “He went to his first *mardi* on 24 February 1891, and the conversation must have lit upon Poe, for whom he and Mallarmé shared an

admiration. Mallarmé presented Wilde with ‘Le Corbeau,’ his translation of Poe’s ‘The Raven,’ which he had republished a year before” (335). Wilde’s gratitude was profound. In a response to Mallarmé’s gift, written in French and translated by Ellmann, Wilde states: “Dear Master, How can I thank you for the gracious way in which you presented me with the magnificent symphony in prose which the melodies of the great celtic poet Edgar Allan Poe have inspired in you” (qtd. in Ellmann 336). Ellmann doesn’t elaborate on the mutual appreciation that the two authors have for Poe, but he does indicate in an endnote that Wilde’s partiality for Poe can be best observed in his astonishment at Poe’s absence from a collection of the 100 best writers (see below).

Another comprehensive examination of Wilde’s life and works is Karl Beckson’s *Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia*. To say the least, Beckson’s *Encyclopedia* is a formidable literary achievement in bibliographic, biographic, and textual scholarship on nearly all subjects and approaches to Wilde. Ian Small commends Beckson on his “generally impeccable” scholarship (168), and contends that his *Encyclopedia* will join Mason’s bibliography, Rupert Hart-Davis’ *Letters*, and Ellmann’s biography as the authoritative works of Wilde scholarship. Beckson’s *Encyclopedia* provides a vast amount of information and chronicles well the various source studies published before the book’s appearance in 1998. As for his location of Poe in Wilde’s works (letters, reviews, plays, fiction, and poems), he misses nothing that has been brought up by the other writers surveyed in this study and adds a couple of fresh instances as well. In a review Wilde wrote on *The Children of the Poets: An Anthology from English and American Writers of Three Centuries* (1886), Beckson notes that Wilde

thought the idea of the book admirable, but that the final product was unsuccessful because of its many omissions. One such omission cited by Wilde is that of Poe's "Annabel Lee," a "little lyric full of strange music and strange romance" (qtd. in Beckson 48). In Beckson's entry on the aforementioned "Harlot's House"⁹ he finds that the poem "remains an original rendition of Decadent motifs" (129), but also finds reflections of Poe in the work: "Poe's poem 'The Haunted Palace' in his story 'The Fall of the House of Usher' ('And travellers now within that valley,/ Through the red-litten windows see / Vast forms that move fantastically / To a discordant melody') may also have provided inspiration for 'The Harlot's House'" (129). Beckson goes on to connect Poe-esque elements in the poem to similar scenes in Chapter 16 of *Dorian Gray*, pointing specifically to the fantastic shadows and dark windows of Dorian's opium den. Beckson includes an entry on a review Wilde wrote in 1885 of W. G. Wills's *Melchior*, in which Beckson explains that "Wilde questions whether an epic poem of more than 5,000 lines is 'a form of art [...] most suited to our century'" (218). Beckson argues that in the review Wilde was "alluding to Poe's contention that 'no poem should take more than an hour to read,' Wilde concludes that 'a work of art is to be estimated by its beauty, not by its size'" (218). This observation by Beckson underscores the probability that Wilde was actively putting to use Poe's aesthetic theories. In a longer entry on Wilde in relation to the "Religion of Art" that had started during the Enlightenment and was growing in the 19th century, Beckson points to such literary figures as "Poe, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud, who had either lost their religious faith or had unsettling doubt as to the result of scientific

⁹ See my discussion of J. D. Thompson's analysis of this poem above.

materialism” (301). Instead of conventional religious faiths, these authors, Beckson argues, “embraced the Religion of Art as a suitable substitute for a lost sacred order in a world incapable of providing comfort.” Accordingly, Wilde found himself struggling with his own aesthetic theory that affirmed an almost sacred role of the artist and his interest in the Catholic religion. Beckson also details the many mentions of Poe’s name in relation to *Dorian Gray* but doesn’t provide a direction different from the critics already surveyed in this chapter.

Thus far, we can observe a good deal of conversation about Poe as an author in whom Wilde was very much interested, and glances at how his works may or may not have influenced Wilde’s art, specifically *Dorian Gray*. However, much of this conversation is at best on the periphery of the main focuses of the surveyed studies. Indeed, the true focal point, in my mind, of Poe emerging as a likely source in Wilde scholarship comes in two essays published in 2000 by John Paul Riquelme. In “Oscar Wilde’s Aesthetic Gothic: Walter Pater, Dark Enlightenment, and the *Picture of Dorian Gray*,” Riquelme explores *Dorian Gray* from a variety of angles, examining most thoroughly the way Wilde merges the Gothic and the aesthetic in the book. He writes, “The merger is possible, and inevitable, because of the tendency of Gothic writing to present a fantastic world of indulgence and boundary-crossing and the tendency of the aesthetic, in Pater, to press beyond conventional boundaries and to recognize terror with beauty” (610). Riquelme examines Pater’s reception of the novel and is interested in the connection he draws between *Dorian Gray* and Edgar Allan Poe. Riquelme writes:

His assertion implies that *Picture* is also an act of imitation, but of American and French sources, and a British original. Wilde, in fact, does not *imitate* a British writer; he *echoes* his writing. He does so for the same reason that the mythological figure Echo repeats already existing language: in order to say something quite different. Pater would rather not admit that his own writings are at least as important as Poe's in the texture of Wilde's novel and that they are the object of the satire. He also faces only indirectly how thoroughly Wilde's transformation of aesthetic theory is fused with anti-British attitudes.

(613)

In this passage, Riquelme rightly identifies Pater's subtle denial of his influence in the book, and he also hints at Pater's squeamishness at the thought of his and Poe's works merging in one novel. Riquelme further examines the fusion of Pater's writings with those of Poe's in *Dorian Gray* when he looks at the doubling motif in the novel. He writes, "The narrative's intricate doublings, which derive not only from Poe but from Pater's comments on the Mona Lisa, include a multitude of parallels that anticipate a related complexity in *Dracula*" (615). Riquelme doesn't draw out a textual argument on Poe's influence on the doubles in *Dorian Gray*, but he does find that Poe is particularly important in the "echoic quality" of Wilde's style: "The echoic quality of the prose finds one origin in the stories of Poe, the most echoic stylist among earlier prominent figures in the Gothic tradition. In 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' for example, the opening sentence begins 'During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day [...]' (95). And the title of the story, 'William Wilson,' about a man

with a double, which provides one precursor for *Picture*, includes echoic doubling” (619). Riquelme’s point rings true when he examines a passage from the novel when Wilde’s language “literally echoes: ‘blossoms [...] branches [...] bear [...] beauty [...] birds’ and ‘flame-like [...] fantastic [...] flight flitted’” (619).

Riquelme returns to Poe in another essay in 2000, “Toward a History of Gothic and Modernism: Dark Modernity from Bram Stoker to Samuel Beckett.” As the title indicates, Riquelme’s focus is more general in his treatment, but Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* is an important player in his study, and Poe proves to be significant as well. With Poe in particular, Riquelme writes, “The influence of Edgar Allan Poe, for example, on British and Irish writers, including Oscar Wilde, is often mediated by his reception among the French, who read him in Charles Baudelaire’s translation” (586). This predicated measure, Riquelme argues, can often lead to preoccupations that overshadow other interpretations of Poe’s influence. More specifically, he writes, “the anthropological perspectives that Poe’s American stories sometimes evoke, which emerge from a social situation involving slavery, resonate for Irish writers and for others facing racial, ethnic, class, and gender prejudice in colonial and postcolonial contexts” (586). Regrettably, Riquelme doesn’t expand on this idea with specific examples from Poe, but he does expand on the concept of the Gothic of *Dorian Gray* as an invitation “to recognize our own faces in his portrayal of ill” (587). The primary aim of Riquelme’s paper, however, is to provide a survey of

works in the genre of “dark modernity,” much of which is not particularly relevant to this thesis.¹⁰

Finally, in “The Picture of Charles Bon: Oscar Wilde’s Trip through Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha,” Ellen Crowell chronicles Wilde’s travels through and obsession with the American post-war south. While the specific aim of her paper is trace the influence of Wilde’s writings on Faulkner, she provides a good deal of insight into Wilde’s fascination with the South. Of Wilde’s trip, Crowell writes:

To modern readers, the fact that Oscar Wilde toured America at the age of 28, lecturing on topics as diverse as interior decorating, the Aesthetic movement, and Irish nationalism, in locations as far-ranging as San Antonio, Montgomery, and Sioux City, fascinates by virtue of unexpected juxtaposition: the Irish aesthete shaking hands with the Colorado cowboy; blue velvet knee-breeches showing up against somber late-Victorian black; and lectures on “The House Beautiful” ceremonially intoned for the farmers of Griggsville, Illinois. (599)

And, as fascinating as each of Wilde’s tours may have been, Crowell argues that “his trip through the postbellum South emerges as its most surprising and illuminating segment” (599). Crowell finds Wilde to be almost giddy with excitement. She

¹⁰ Nils Claussøn’s paper “‘Culture and Corruption’: Paterian Self-Development versus Gothic Degeneration in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” (2003) represents the most recent of articles on Wilde to seriously treat the book as a Gothic novel and the possible sources that went into its composition. Nevertheless, it seems to reiterate many of the same arguments put forth by critics more successfully in the 1970s about contemporary influences being the most important in the novel’s Gothic development.

quotes a lecture of his given at De Give's Opera House, "peppered with praise" for the South:

It should be—the south [sic]—the home of art in America, because it possesses the most perfect surroundings, and now that it is recovering from the hideous ruin of the war I have no doubt that all these beautiful arts, in whose cause I will spend my youth in pleading, will spring up among you. The south produced the best poet in America—Edgar Allan Poe: and with all its splendid traditions it would be impossible not to believe that she would continue to perfect what she has begun so nobly. (qtd. in Crowell 599)

While Crowell finds Wilde's flattery to be a bit overblown, for the current study, Wilde's connection with Edgar Allan Poe and the South is of particular interest. Crowell argues that Wilde was seduced by the sharp contradictions of the South, writing "Passion, and ruin, beauty and failure are twinned forces that comprise the weight of the South's impact on Wilde" (600). Moreover, Crowell finds that "Wilde's mention of Poe as the South's greatest poet underscores the kind of southern aesthetics he values" (600). Thinking back to Riquelme, we might be less surprised to find that an Irishman would find such deep admiration for the defeated, vainly heroic American South. To be sure, Crowell makes an effective case for the somewhat unexpected obsession Wilde had for the South and its authors, and she carries this through to make a thorough comparison of Wilde and Faulkner.

To summarize, Poe's name can be found in just about every source study of *Dorian Gray*, and this survey suggests numerous ways of approaching the subject that

cannot all be dealt with in the scope of this thesis. Instead, this study seeks to expand on what has been said by critics as far back as 1891, not arguing that Poe was a primary source for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but that there are important reflections of Poe in the book that can shed new light on the subject. Moreover, this study aims to build on the ideas of Riquelme and Crowell that Wilde had an unusual obsession with the South and its poet Poe, and to develop more fully what critics have been mentioning and footnoting for years.

Chapter II: Wilde's Reading of Poe through Baudelaire

In 1878 Wilde took his final step toward an Oxford graduation and passed his Divinity examination a year later than planned, but with the congratulatory approval of his examiners (Ellmann 98, 104). They found particular pleasure in his answer to what Aristotle would have thought of Whitman. Ellmann muses that Wilde must have “divorced Whitman’s cult of ‘myself’ from any considerations except that of self-development” (96), an answer that would have left the examiners pleased at Wilde’s instinct to deemphasize Whitman’s celebration of the “individual spirit” in “Song of Myself” in a well-minded move to embrace Aristotle’s insistence on the proper pursuits of man toward science, logic, and progression.

That Wilde would have to entertain a question on Whitman is testament to the necessity of his understanding of contemporary American authors in his studies at Oxford. Regretably, for my purposes, he wasn’t quizzed on the critical importance of Poe’s literary theories on past and current authors. While a question on Poe may very well have been common in Oxford examinations, there might have also been good reasons to keep him out of such studies. For, as was the case in America, Poe’s reputation was not necessarily ironclad in England at the time of Wilde’s undergraduate examination. Miller explains that by 1870 there was an expanding “interest on both sides of the Atlantic in Poe’s genius.” Miller writes:

The power and beauty of Poe’s writings, available only in Griswold’s edition, caused enough interest to call out a number of editions and to produce varied reactions to the discrepancy between Poe’s personal

character, as Griswold had pictured it, and the purity of Poe's artistic achievements. (9)

Nevertheless, Miller explains that since Griswold's comments came as a preface to the authorized edition, the disparaging *Memoir* was generally accepted as "regrettably true" (9). Thus, biographers sympathetic to Poe's condition and vehemently against Griswold's sketch of the author, like John Henry Ingram, had the odds stacked against them as they attempted to reclaim Poe's image.

Despite the desperate state of Poe biography in England, there was an already robust following of the author in France that had been initiated nearly two decades before with Baudelaire's 1852 work, "Edgar Allan Poe, His Life and Works." In this essay and several others published throughout the 1850s, Baudelaire presented Poe in such an enthusiastic light that he established for Poe an entire following of French writers and critics, the French Symbolists. Writing on the relationship between Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray, Patricia Clements in *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* argues that "'the romance of art,' as Wilde called the relationship between Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray (12), helped fix the image of Baudelaire" as an "inert" plagiarist of Balzac and Victor Hugo, "poisoned" by his chronic "imitativeness" (181). However, Clements finds that "[a]lmost all of Wilde's early memoirists are fascinated by his admiration for Baudelaire." As I examine more closely below, Clements picks up on Robert Sherard's observation of the influence of Baudelaire's "morbid" poetry on Wilde's "The Sphinx" and "The Harlot's House" (181). Clements also highlights Wilde's own provocation of "identification with Baudelaire at every stage of his career, and there is a sad appropriateness in his

fascination of Baudelaire's suffering," a fascination that stemmed from Baudelaire's own sympathies with Poe's tragic life. With Clements' conclusions in mind, it is important to examine how Wilde might have encountered Poe before he experienced Poe's writings through the Poe-admiring French Symbolists, especially in his absorption of Baudelaire's sense of Poe's life and art.

To gain a clearer idea of the extent to which Wilde might have accepted the ideas of Baudelaire, a bit of biographical evidence is needed to prove that Wilde was interested in the work Baudelaire was producing on Poe and on his own. There are two instances in Wilde's letters that seem to stem from Wilde's reading of Poe through Baudelaire, because they insist on the tragic life of Poe as opposed to referencing his writings directly (something Baudelaire did in nearly all of his biographical sketches of Poe).¹¹ The first occurs in Wilde's *De Profundis*, written from prison to Lord Alfred Douglas in 1897 and later published in Wilde's collected letters. Near the end of Wilde's extended letter, he attempts to explain why he engaged in the activities (more specifically his relationships with a variety of young men including genuine romantic partners as well as male prostitutes) that led to his prison sentence:

People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But they, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approached them, were delightfully suggestive and stimulating. It was like

¹¹ For example, in Baudelaire's *Life and Works of Edgar Poe: 1852*, he writes, "It is a very great and very useful pleasure to compare the traits of a great man with his works. Biographies, notes on the manners, habits and physical appearance of the artists and writers have always excited a very legitimate curiosity" (59).

feasting with panthers. The danger was half the excitement. I used to feel as the snake-charmer must feel when he lures the cobra to stir from the painted cloth or reed-basket that holds it. [...] They were the brightest of gilded snakes. Their poison was part of their perfection.
(*Letters* 492)

It is in this passage that we get a deeper sense of confession for Wilde as he admits that it was his preoccupation with the exotic sensations and the sin of the deed itself (as opposed to the deeper love that he felt for Lord Alfred Douglas) that led him into the risky behavior that weighed so heavily during his cross examinations. And yet, Wilde refuses to feel shameful for the “intensely interesting” atmospheres that he joined; rather, he describes feeling embarrassed by the “horrible Philistine atmosphere into which you [Douglas] brought me” (492). He blames Douglas for tempting him into a “wrestle with Caliban” that led ultimately into a series of “long lawyer’s letters” and the telling of “serious lies to a bald man [C. O. Humphreys]” (493). In place of shame, however, Wilde contends that “[to] entertain them was an astounding adventure. Dumas *père*, Cellini, Goya, Edgar Allan Poe, or Baudelaire, would have done just the same” (493). Wilde’s comparison of his life to the lives of other well-known French, English, and American writers is an interesting form of justification for his “adventures” because it highlights the connection Wilde feels for other artists. The process by which an artist can turn dark, sorrowful, and even immoral experiences into beautiful creations is readily apparent in the preceding passages. From the “feast of panthers,” Wilde found stimulation more mental than physical, more spiritual than sexual. And, even more important, Wilde highlights the

significant difference between the artist and mere spectator, giving to the artist and his many experiences a transcendent quality. This concept, especially in its fusion of the artist and objective experience, is something Baudelaire found in Poe and executed in his own works.

In another aforementioned letter, Wilde finds Poe a “great poet whom America put to death” (*Letters* 567), a comment that echoes Baudelaire’s own assessment of the poet when Baudelaire writes of Poe’s rejection of the errors of bourgeois mediocrity: “What a grievous tragedy was the life of Edgar Poe! What a horrible ending was his death, the horror of which was increased by vulgar circumstances! – All the documents that I have read lead to the conviction that for Poe the United States was nothing more than a vast prison which he traversed with [a] feverish agitation.”¹² Baudelaire continues in a later version of Poe’s life to elaborate on the harsh environment that imprisoned the genius of Poe in America:

Poe reacted against these errors as often as he could, and with all his might. We might not be surprised then that American writers, while recognizing his singular power as a poet and a story-teller, have always tended to question his ability as a critic. In a country where the idea of utility, the most hostile in the world of beauty, dominates and takes precedence over everything [...] Edgar Poe, on the contrary, dividing the world of the mind into *pure Intellect, Taste, and moral Sense,*

¹² Baudelaire, Charles. *Baudelaire on Poe*. Lois and Francis E. Hyslop, Jr., trans. and ed. (State College, PA: Bald Eagle P., 1952), pp. 90-91. Hereafter cited as *Baudelaire*.

applied criticism in accordance with the category to which the object of analysis belonged. (*Baudelaire* 132-33)

From Wilde's letter and from Baudelaire's quote above, we can observe that both authors viewed the American middle-class' insistence on utilitarianism and its rejection of the superiority of art as a constant plague for Poe. Baudelaire found the "vengeance" of the middle classes to be a sort of literary violence, while Wilde saw it as a form of death sentence for the poet. What's more, both Baudelaire and Wilde felt a sympathy for Poe's difficulties in life and found a kinship in Poe's arduous and ultimately tragic existence. Whether Wilde absorbed these sympathies and kinship for Poe from Baudelaire seems quite likely given his contact with Baudelaire in France.

Robert Sherard writes in his biography, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, of Wilde's "intense" (40) admiration for Baudelaire and pays particular attention to the "inspiration" that came from "Poe and Baudelaire" during Wilde's staging of *Duchess of Padua* (1883). Later, when Wilde was the editor of *The Woman's World*, Sherard speaks again of Wilde's comparison to the French poet who was similarly engaged in editorial work with the Old Bailey and Bankruptcy Court. Sherard muses that like many of the "most gifted men of letters" (268), Baudelaire was forced to write *Fleurs du Mal* and translate Edgar Allan Poe while simultaneously editing a "local paper." Sherard implies that Wilde was aware of Baudelaire's constrained working conditions and his constant attempt to make deadlines indicates that Wilde felt strongly connected to the translator and poet. Ellmann too makes clear Wilde's interest in Baudelaire by finding that as early as the former's Oxford years Wilde was

already quoting Baudelaire's poetry: "O Seigneur! donnez-moi la force et le courage / De contempler mon coeur et mon corps sans dégoût!" (Ellmann 41).¹³ Wilde's blending of "poison and perfection," and his conception of decadence as the new renaissance are also elements Ellman describes as originating in Wilde's reading of Baudelaire. Finally, Ellmann draws attention to the fact that Wilde had not forgotten Baudelaire's attitude towards his audience by the time of Wilde's writing of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: "The parallels [between Wilde himself and the soon-to-be executed inmate] were not limited to two men. Like Baudelaire, [Wilde] would insist that his hypocrite reader was in the same image" (532). With Wilde thus engaged artistically and personally with Baudelaire, an examination of Baudelaire's reading of Poe is fundamental to this study.

For Baudelaire and the general literary community in France and England, Poe represented, of course, the Gothic tradition in American letters, but his intense genius transcended this rather dated fashion in letters and made its own contribution to art and aesthetics. In America he was ignored after his death, but even during the last few years of Poe's life, Baudelaire in France was reading Poe's stories and poems. Of Poe's contribution to American letters, Turquet-Milnes concludes:

[I]t should be remembered that Poe did really bring a new element into literature – the element of the *artistic* horror. [...] Poe, in one side of his work, brought to this crude supernatural a psychological and artistic interest, and thereby showed the way to a new and fertile field

¹³ "O Lord! Give me the strength and the courage / To contemplate my heart and my body without disgust!" (Ellmann's translation.)

of literature into which domain Baudelaire was the first to follow. (63-64)

Baudelaire's translations of Poe, among the first to be published in France, appeared in 1847. In 1865 Baudelaire issued his definitive *Histoires Grottesques et Sérieuses* of Poe. Baudelaire's translations were so notable and well-known that Rémy de Gourmont believed that they alone promised literary eminence in French history.¹⁴ What's more, some critics go so far as to say that Baudelaire's translations are superior to their American originals, but this is unfair to the themes and theories which are obvious in the original.

As with my arguments on Wilde, there is no intention here of proving that Poe was Baudelaire's only source, but simply of showing the influences and reassurances Baudelaire derived from Poe. It is true that Poe did not influence Baudelaire so much as he acted as a verification for the attitudes which Baudelaire had already formulated. Nevertheless, Poe was his kindred spirit, and the affinity between the two poets is amazing (Hyslop, "Introduction" 30).

The first place one should look for Poe's contributions to aesthetic theory is in his prose writings, "The Poetic Principle" (1846) and "The Philosophy of Composition" (1850). Poe's first intentions center upon the belief that dedication to Beauty is the only rewarding occupation: "That pleasure which is at once most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense, is derived, I maintain, from the contemplation of the beautiful."¹⁵ Poe makes the contemplation of Beauty into a

¹⁴ See Rémy de Gourmont, *Promenades littéraires* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1904).

¹⁵ Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*. Ed. A. H. Quinn and E. H. O'Neill (New York: Knopf, 1946), p. 1027. Hereafter cited as *Poe*.

religion by implicating the soul: “The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating *excitement of the soul*” (Poe 1027). This absolute worship of beauty, which Baudelaire incorporated so thoroughly into his writings, is so characteristic of Poe that another quotation is necessary. So that there can be no doubt as to the sole supremacy of the study of beauty, he denies all relationships with and responsibility for ethics and scientific truth:

I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as the *Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Its sole arbiter is taste. With the intellect or the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless accidentally, it has no concern whatsoever with either duty or with truth.” (Poe 1027)

This defiant cult of beauty for its own sake is deeply characteristic of Baudelaire as well. He embodies beauty in women, as does Poe, but he combines this idealism with a realism, a sensuality, which does not appear in Poe. He usually identifies beauty with his African-American mistress, Jeanne Duval, and therefore his descriptions depart from accepted European ideas of beauty. In this he follows Poe, who says in “Ligeia,” ““There is no exquisite beauty,’ says Bacon, ‘without some *strangeness* in the proportion”” (223). In “La Chevelure,” Baudelaire’s celebrated poem to his African-American mistress’s hair, he loses himself in the perfume and exotic associations of Africa it brings to him. Beauty, in “Semper Eadem,” is his only consolation against the presentiment of death: “Ignorant, ever charmed one, spare your breath! / O lips the childlike laugh! / For often Death / Still more than Life, binds us in subtle ways. / Grant that my heart grow drunk on that which *lies*, / Plunge

as in fine dreams into our fine eyes / And in those shading lashes ever laze” (*Flowers of Evil*, Mathews, ed., 51-52).¹⁶

Despite his sensual poetry to his mistress; mortal beauty, for Baudelaire as well as for Poe, was of the transcendent, Platonic order. When Poe says, “It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us – but a wild effort to reach Beauty above. [...] In the contemplation of Beauty we find it impossible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement, of the *soul*, which we recognize as the Poetic Sentiment (*Poe* 1026). Baudelaire applauds Poe for arguing that “the aspiration toward a superior beauty, and the manifestation of this principle is in an enthusiasm, an excitation of the soul, – an enthusiasm altogether independent of passion which is the intoxication of the heart, and of truth which is the food of reason” (*Poe* 141). In his poem entitled “La Beauté,” Baudelaire describes his ideal:

The poets, seeing me adopt my grand, majestic stance,
 Borrowed, apparently, from some heroic moment,
 Will waste their days considering its true significance;
 For docile lovers such as these I have my blandishments;
 My mirrors pure which make all things on earth more beautiful:
 My eyes, my great and wondrous eyes with light perpetual. (53)¹⁷

¹⁶ “Taisev-vous mon-vous, ignorante! / âme toujours ravie / Bouche au rire engantin! / Plus encore que la Vie, / La Mort nous tient souvent par des liens subtils. / Laissez, laissez mon Coeur s’enivrer d’un *mensonge* / plonger dans vos beaux yeux comme dans un beau songe, / Et sommeiller longtemps à l’ombre de vos cils!” (276). Translated by Peter Hellings.

¹⁷ “Les poètes, devant mes grandes attitudes, / Qeu j’ai l’air d’emprunter aux plus fiers monuments, / Consumeront leurs jours en d’austères études;/ Car j’ai pour fasciner ces dociles amants / De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles : / Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles” (52). Translated by Joanna Richardson.

It is at this point that Baudelaire's theory of the Platonic ladder becomes codified in its assertion that artifice is superior to nature. The ideal beauty, never fully attained in nature and only recognizable in art, is the true aim of poets.

A more specific aesthetic theory that Baudelaire assimilated from Poe was his idea that the artist should be regarded as a highly skilled craftsman rather than as a seer inspired and undisciplined. Poe took the art of poetry seriously and developed his ideas of technique in his essay, "The Philosophy of Composition." There he set forth the idea, still shocking to many, that the poet must know his craft and even order his inspiration around the technique at his command. Imagination is the prime requisite, but the poet must work it with reason and analysis.

From Poe's "Philosophy of Composition," Baudelaire accepts that the poet must be "cool, calm, impassioned" (*Poe* 1025), an ideal which Baudelaire puts to use in "The Splendid Ship": "Oh soft enchantress, I'll record with truth / The diverse beauties that adorn your youth./ Yes I will paint your charm / Of womanhood with childhood arm in arm. [...] With grace triumphant, mild, / And strange, you go your way, majestic child" (66-67). Recognizing that his subject matter should always ultimately concern beauty, the poet determines the appropriate internal rhyme, refrain, rhyme scheme and meter, sonority, and lastly the specific idea. Form is superior to content, which derives from it. In *Charles Baudelaire Revisited*, Hyslop explains this characteristic of Baudelaire's writings:

It was this desire for perfection of form, in addition to his mastery of expression, that explains much of the greatness of *Les Fleurs du mal*.
Had the expression been too weak or banal, the reader would have

been less moved by the anguish and despair, the sensual joy and spiritual needs that he voices in his greatest and most haunting poems.

(43)

It is necessary to note that Baudelaire seems to have taken Poe's claims in "Philosophy of Composition" at face value without considering the possibility that Poe's motives might not have been as clear-cut as the text suggests. For many later critics, "Philosophy" has been interpreted as an essay more tongue-in-cheek than serious or more necessary for financial gain to alleviate what was at the time for Poe a desperate state of poverty.

Of Poe's personal life, Baudelaire knew very little outside of his writings, a point that comes through when, after Poe's death, Baudelaire wrote to Mrs. Clemm that he had completely misjudged Poe's living as a wealthy gentleman, for whom poetry was merely a diversion:

For a long time, Madam, I have wished to please you by this translation of one of greatest poets of this century; but literary life is full of vicissitudes and stumbling blocks. [...] Two years before the catastrophe which horribly destroyed his life, so full and so ardent, I had already undertaken to introduce Edgar Poe to the literary public of my country. But at that time his ever stormy life was unknown to me; I did not know those dazzling growths were the product of a volcanic soil, and when I compare the false idea which I had formed of his life with the reality, – the Edgar Poe created in my imagination – rich, happy, – a young gentleman of genius who sometimes turned his hand

to literature in the midst of the countless activities of an elegant life, – when I compare that with the true Edgar, – poor Eddie, whom you loved and succored, whom I shall make known in France, – the ironic antithesis fills me with an inescapable compassion. (*Baudelaire* 163-64)

We can assume that Baudelaire's awareness of Poe's financial condition made its way to Wilde, who in turn found in Poe a man attempting to be a proud and successful Southern aristocrat and yet living out a double life in abject poverty.

Besides his observation that Poe was devoted to beauty and ignored "conscience and truth," Baudelaire found other elements in Poe's works that he would emulate in his own life and writing. Poe's William Wilson is an elegant squanderer, delighting in the number of sins he can commit, surrounding himself with the most luxurious apartments and apparel. Most of Poe's descriptions are over-ornate and err on the side of excess, as in the bedchamber descriptions in "Ligeia" where Poe seems to almost burlesque the Gothic. G. R. Thompson writes on the double and sometimes triple perspectives of Poe's Gothic romanticism:

[...] not only is nearly half of Poe's fiction satiric and comic in an obvious way, also the Gothic tales contain within them satiric and comic elements thematically related to the macabre. Poe seems very carefully to have aimed at the ironic effect of touching his readers simultaneously on an archetypal irrational level of fear and on an almost subliminal level of intellection and philosophical perception of

the absurd. The result in the Gothic tales, as in many of the poems, is a kind of ambivalent mockery. (14)

Thompson singles out “Ligeia” specifically as a tale that plays on this duality of meaning, writing that the “rationale of the tale is psychological. [...] But its primary impact is spooky and weird” (17). The result, Thompson claims, is a “double impact,” where one part of Ligeia is truly terrifying while the other is “satiric innuendo.” Despite this realization by later critics of a more playful, ironic Poe,¹⁸ his preoccupation with the voluptuous sensation is a trait Baudelaire would reproduce often in his own work.

Baudelaire clearly derived his interest for the psychological dark side of humanity from such stories of Poe as “The Imp of the Perverse” and “The Black Cat,” where Poe’s narrators say they committed murders because of the irresistible “spirit of *perverseness*” (Poe 478). Poe’s grotesque stories or descriptions, such as “A Predicament,” in which the narrator is decapitated in an oddly lighthearted fashion, were seized upon by decadents as a new field of exploration. Baudelaire would experiment with the perverseness of Poe in longer prose poems like “La Mauvais Vitrier,” in which a poet cruelly tortures a street merchant for no justifiable reason.

Hyslop conjectures:

There seems every reason to believe that the incident recounted by Baudelaire is also related to his belief in an Evil Spirit, or as he states in the opening paragraph, to a “mysterious and unexplained impulse” that causes “natures which are purely contemplative and wholly unfit

¹⁸ This duality is more important in my discussion of Wilde’s use of Poe later.

for action” to perform “the most absurd and often most dangerous of actions” (96).

And, as Baudelaire explored this new field of decadence, so did Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

From Baudelaire’s translations and biographies of Poe and his own literary endeavors, it is clear that Poe had a profound effect on Baudelaire. Moreover, from biographical evidence and parallels in their writings, it is also clear that Wilde absorbed Poe through Baudelaire in a way that very much affected his own fictional works and aesthetic theories. As the next chapter argues, Wilde, like Baudelaire, was entranced by Poe’s aesthetic theories, his musings on the perverse, and especially his literal and figurative double lives.

Chapter III: Reflections of Poe in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

With the premise in mind that Wilde read and admired Poe in a way similar to Baudelaire's own admiration for the poet, we can now proceed to an examination of how Poe is reflected in Wilde's writings. Just as Poe struggled with a questionable reputation in the United States (continual allegations of alcoholism, drug abuse, and total lack of conscience), Wilde was stymied by issues of middle-class mediocrity and aesthetics, as well as identity issues of his own. Wilde lashed out at the middle classes and in particular resented the way in which art had been put to didactic use (usually by the bourgeoisie). In a *St. James Gazette* review of the *Lippincott's* version of *Dorian Gray*, Samuel Henry Jeyes writes of the book: "Not being curious of ordure, and not wishing to offend the nostrils of decent persons, we do not propose to analyze 'The Picture of Dorian Gray': that would be to advertise the developments of an esoteric prurience" (*Letters* 257). Wilde responded to the negative review of his book in a letter to the *St. James* editor by stating that while he believes in "perfectly free and easy" criticism of an "ordinary" sort, "I must admit that, either from temperament or from taste, or from both, I am quite incapable of understanding how any work of art can be criticized from a moral standpoint" (*Letters* 258). Wilde's disdain of "ordinary" or bourgeois criticism is obvious, and his tone and condemnation of critiques of his book based on ethical or moral standards come through in all of his responses to negative reviews of the novel. Despite this disdain, however, *Dorian Gray* is a text that complicates the notion of aesthetics and ethics because it offers a scenario in which a hedonist is tortured for his over-indulgence in life's "sensations." Therefore, in his addition of a preface to the expanded 1891

version, we can observe Wilde mocking middle class expectations by instructing readers on how to appreciate art but leaving the thinly-veiled moralistic quality of the plot untouched. Regardless of the preface, Dorian is still punished for his cruel deeds.

In a similar fashion, Poe identified common fears and anxieties which he played upon or tapped into in his own tales, using some to induce fear, while evoking humor and satire in others. In “Never Bet the Devil Your Head” Poe prefaces the story by referencing Tomás de Las Torres, who because of his immoral love poems is “now in Purgatory” (*Poe* 365). Poe sarcastically proclaims that “Every fiction *should* have a moral; and, what is more to the purpose, the critics have discovered that every fiction *has*.” He continues by refuting the claim that he has never published a “moral tale”: “There is no just ground, therefore, for the charge brought against me by certain ignoramuses – that I have never written a moral tale, or, a tale with a moral.” The problem, claims Poe, lies with the critics who have unjustly accused, for “[t]hey are not the critics predestined to bring me out, and *develop* my morals: – that is the secret.” To be certain that they get it right, Poe even adds to the title of this story, “A Tale with a Moral.” As one might expect, Poe’s tale is loaded with humor and sarcasm at every turn, as the narrator follows the life of poor Toby Dammit, a character whose immorality grows out of being beaten “left-handed,” a grave mistake since “[t]he world revolves from right to left” and “every thump in the opposite [direction] knocks [evil’s] quota of wickedness in” (*Poe* 366). Thus, Toby Dammit, doomed from his first whipping, carries out a variety of arbitrarily immoral actions that eventually lead to his beheading in the most absurd style. Poe doesn’t spare any

punches in his story, taking the time to specifically mention Coleridge, Kant, Carlyle, and Emerson, and describing the “transcendentals” having an illness that eventually infects Toby. Poe is doubly harsh with the transcendentalists as the narrator is forced to sell Toby’s body for dog meat after they refuse to pay for his burial. While nothing even comparably farcical occurs in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we can certainly observe that both authors were deeply concerned with the necessity of art existing beyond the realm of morality and ethics. Moreover, keeping in mind the general similarity explored above in Wilde’s preface and Poe’s “Never Bet the Devil Your Head,” this study examines closely the specific similarities in the works of Poe and Wilde in which each author uses analogous themes and motifs for what I would argue to be the same artistic purposes.

My intention in this chapter is to argue that connecting the works of Poe and Wilde is useful if one wants to fully understand the subversive narrative that Wilde was crafting when he wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. *Dorian Gray* is simultaneously a Gothic novel and paradoxical treatise on art and aesthetics. It is also a parable of sorts, describing in grim detail the horrors that ensue from debauchery and hedonism. Consequently, it is subversive in its highly complicated and contradictory format. At one moment Wilde lambastes readers who find his book immoral, while at another he appears deeply conflicted with the notion of art influencing life. To balance these themes within the Gothic framework, Wilde turns to Poe, finding in his stories currents that work in his own fictional project. The most important motif in *Dorian Gray* is the Gothic concept of a magical portrait that eventually destroys its own subject. For this notion in the novel, Wilde picks up the

Gothic picture motif that Poe explores in “Metzengerstein,” “The Assignation,” and “The Oval Portrait.” In his framing of Sybil Vane, Wilde evidently uses Poe’s “Ligeia” to craft a character that embodies both the feminine ideal and the objectified art form. Wilde also taps into Poe’s experimentations in perversity by forcing Dorian’s sinful impulses into a new realm of pain and pleasure. Finally, Wilde uses doubling akin to Poe’s “William Wilson” in order to pit Dorian against his picture, ultimately leading to his own self-destruction.

It is important to emphasize that Poe was working in a long-established Gothic tradition and that there were many authors and literary works that affected Poe’s own adaptation of the Gothic themes into his work. In fact, Poe’s use of the haunted and/or haunting portrait can be traced back to Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), while his use of doubling has a variety of occurrences throughout Gothic fiction (Railo 170, 188). Where Poe’s Gothic diverges from these forms is also important since it is exactly what Wilde imitates in his own adaptation of the Gothic magic picture and doubling. For Poe, the portrait motif allowed him to explore the boundaries between art and life and the notion that art can somehow transcend death. Doubling is another Gothic trope that Poe adapted into a newer, more sophisticated psychological study of conscience and the inevitability of crimes and vices being exposed through a character’s double. And, again, Wilde uses the newer Poe-esque doubling motif to explore the corrupted life of Dorian Gray. To understand why these themes might be appealing to Wilde at the time of writing *Dorian Gray*, and how Poe might be

involved, it is helpful to look at what Wilde was doing prior to *Dorian Gray*'s publication.

By 1889 Wilde's homosexual lifestyle was by no means a secret. He was frequenting cafes and bars with young, good-looking men, and London was rife with rumors about what Wilde was up to in his personal as opposed to public life. In the years leading up to this period, Wilde was involved in several conspicuous relationships with younger men, including Rennell Rodd, Hunter Blair, and James McNeil Whistler (Ellmann 129-130). While all three took pains in letters to show that their relationships with Wilde were not sexual, as early as 1877 these "personalities of Tite Street were increasingly the talk of the town" for their aestheticism and peculiar intimacy with Wilde (Ellmann 134). During this time, Ellmann maintains that Wilde and his close group of friends "became fair game for parodist playwrights at the end of the seventies" (134). As a result, Wilde not only knew of his growing infamy, he both nurtured and avoided it. Wilde loved the idea of a life of contradictions. He was content to have people speak ill of him behind his back, so long as he was still able to function as a respected man of letters.

Jerusha McCormack explores Wilde's cultivation of a divided life by examining Wilde's positioning as an Irishman writing in England. His divided identity, McCormack argues, allowed Wilde to foment a type of "controlled chaos" in his life and work:

[Wilde] was a figure with a public who came to recognize in him a parody both of the Irishman and the proper English gentleman. The Irishman was straight out of the Celtic stereotype – wild, anarchical,

imaginative, witty, passionate, and self-destructive. The Englishman, a straight aristocratic prototype – cool, elegant, contemptuous, manipulative, obsessed with position and its signs in dress and manner. At some point, both colluded: the Irishman was lazy, the aristocrat leisured; the Irishman paradoxical; the aristocrat systematically rude – contradicting others as the Irishman contradicted himself – the Irishman bull rendered as an English snob. (85)

In McCormack's assessment, Wilde came to England as a fractured identity long before he began to lead a double life as a married aristocrat and a closeted homosexual, a fact that further complicates Wilde's contradictory personae. With homosexuality in particular, though, Wilde fashioned his secondary life much more surreptitiously than he did his Anglo-Irish descent, and for the good reason that it was illegal to be homosexual in England at the time, a point explored further below. Nevertheless, Wilde was not ashamed in his attitude toward homosexuality, but rather enthusiastic. In a post-imprisonment letter to Robert Ross in February 1898 from France, he writes of the nobility of homosexual love: "To have altered my life would have been to have admitted that Uranian [i.e., homosexual] love is ignoble. I hold it to be noble—more noble than other forms" (*Letters* 795). Wilde's argument for the nobility of love between two men and his use of term "Uranian" are important because they indicate the public's utter lack of understanding of homosexuality; in fact, the term "homosexual" had not even been coined at the time of Wilde's

relationships with other men.¹⁹ Neil McKenna explores the Victorian conception of homosexuality in *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, writing that Wilde himself struggled with his feelings towards other boys during his years at Oxford: “There are no words that could accurately or adequately describe the feelings Oscar was beginning to experience in his first year at Oxford. [...] In 1828, in the lifetimes of Sir William and Lady Wilde, the penalty for sodomy had been increased from imprisonment to death” (5). McKenna continues, “When, in 1895, the Marquis of Queensbury publicly accused Oscar of being ‘a ponce and sodomite’, it was the worst insult that could be thrown at a man.” The surging intolerance for same-sex relations in England at the time also complicates how Wilde would view his own homosexual feelings. As McKenna argues, “Nor could Oscar described himself or his feelings as in any way ‘homosexual’, as the term had been coined only five years earlier in Germany by Karl Maria Kertbery, and would not come into common usage in English until the turn of the century.”²⁰

Therefore, Wilde’s life at the time of his writing of *Dorian Gray* was very much in a doubled form. He was married with children, accepted into the highest ranks of society, and a successful and accomplished poet and editor. And yet, Wilde was simultaneously engaged in activities that would not have been accepted by the people whom he was desperate to keep in his company: the established elite. The double lives of Oscar Wilde became more significant as he approached the writing of

¹⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first textual evidence of the term being used in English to C. G. Chaddock’s translation of *Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1892 (*OED Online*).

²⁰ Due to this lack of a term for same-sex love, McKenna uses Wilde’s term for homosexuality, “uranian.” However, since the current concept of same-sex love is termed homosexuality, hereafter I will use that term for Wilde’s sexuality.

Dorian Gray, a biographical element that surely affected the themes and motifs in the book.

Wilde would have also been drawn to the double life of Poe at this time as well, because much of Wilde's knowledge of Poe was coming from Baudelaire's popular biographical sketches of the author. Wilde would have sympathized with Poe's struggle as a tortured artist in an unsympathetic country, further complicated by his desire to rank among the aristocratic elites. Of Poe, Baudelaire feels "convinced that for Poe the United States was a vast cage, a great counting-house, and that throughout his life he made grim efforts to escape the influence of that antipathetic atmosphere." The image came through to Baudelaire that Poe was always at odds with the American obsession for money and that his livelihood as an artist was consistently under threat. Despite this adversity, however, Baudelaire argues that Poe was able to balance his artistic duties with the obligations of a gentleman as well, describing Poe's dressing "well, but a little carelessly, like a gentleman who has more important things to do" (*Baudelaire* 61). What Baudelaire is suggesting in Poe's dress is that he was able to maintain as best he could the image that he was an aristocratic gentleman, while also struggling in abject poverty. Baudelaire sums up Poe's conflicted nature by concluding that his genius was simply at odds with his circumstances: "The color, the turn of mind of Edgar Poe make a violent contrast against the background of American literature. His compatriots consider him scarcely American, and yet he is not English" (*Baudelaire* 42). And it is here that Baudelaire compares Poe directly to William Wilson, saying quite simply, "[a]ll of Edgar Poe's stories are, so to speak, biographical. The man is to be found in the work ["William

Wilson”]” (*Baudelaire* 43). It is certain that Wilde accepted the double life of Poe as a Southern aristocrat and as a tortured, impoverished artist, since in his own correspondence he would refer to Poe as the “great poet whom America put to death” (*Letters* 567).

Evidence of Poe’s aversion towards American society that might have appealed to Wilde is located in Poe’s “Philosophy of Furniture” (1839). In this essay, Poe chides Americans for their “preposterous” taste in the “internal decoration” of their homes (“Furniture” 6) and instructs them in the art of tasteful décor. Poe blames greed for causing “[t]he rage of *glitter*” (9) in American homes and ultimately finds American taste to be in a state of “perversion”: “It is an evil growing out of our republican institutions, that here a man of large purse has usually very little soul which he keeps in it. The corruption of taste is a portion of the dollar-manufacture” (10). In particular, Poe makes clear his distaste for the glare that comes from “harsh and unsteady” (8) gas lamps and “huge and unmeaning chandeliers,” the latter offense being “the quintessence of all that is false in taste or preposterous in folly” (9). An interesting parallel to Poe’s essay comes in Wilde’s American lecture, “The House Beautiful,” where he instructs his audience to avoid glaring lights by using smaller windows and to do away with large gas chandeliers in place of sconces (Ellmann 194). Wilde’s own interest in taste and interior decoration would have made him particularly receptive to Poe’s arguments and would have also contributed to his belief that Poe was truly an artist struggling against an inartistic society. At the very least, Wilde found in Poe a kindred spirit of sorts, since both men were able to critique their respective societies through wit and satire, and yet

both were imprisoned by their standing in society: Poe was still impoverished and Wilde was still Irish. Thus, Wilde and Poe were forced into lives of contradiction, paradox, and doubling.

An instance of Wilde playing with doubling before writing *Dorian Gray* can be noted in his 1889 story, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." In this story Wilde plays with the concept that Shakespeare dedicated his sonnets to a Mr. W. H., or Willie Hughes, a stage boy. As Ellmann points out, Wilde must have consciously been thinking of himself when writing this piece, by the nature of the story itself: "The story came closer to him still. He imagined Shakespeare, a married man with two children like himself, captivated by a boy as he had been captivated by Ross" (297-298). Ellmann gives backing to this statement by recalling a letter Wilde wrote to Ross explaining, "indeed the story is half yours, and but for you it would not have been written" (qtd. in Ellmann 298). As was to be expected, Wilde had a bit of trouble having the story published, because even in its more guarded versions (ones in which Willie Hughes is more like a "professional friend" [299], in Ellmann's terms, than a lover) it was still quite homoerotic. It is in instances like these that Wilde seemed to be forcing his closeted homosexuality into the public eye, but only in a subtle, roundabout fashion. With this in mind, it is no surprise that Wilde would undertake at this time in his life a novel about a man caught up in a double life, one in the aristocracy and one in unmentionable sin.

One of the most indelible qualities of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the paradoxical nature of the novel when read with the preface in mind. Multiple levels of meaning give the novel a puzzling, mysterious property that has compelled readers

and critics to debate the book since its publication. In *Dorian Gray* Wilde simultaneously engages elements of the Gothic, the grotesque, social comedy witticisms, and the comic in a fusion that both binds and complicates the novel's plot. As I've discussed earlier, when *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was originally published in 1890 as a novella in *Lippincott's Monthly*, it was immediately criticized for its immorality and homoerotic suggestions. In his 1891 preface, Wilde sought to complicate what he thought to be myopic mistakes in interpretations by emphasizing the gulf between art and reality. In the preface, Wilde instructs the reader to appreciate artistic creations as "beautiful things," not as didactic or utilitarian devices (3). This aesthetic framework is of course grounded in the concepts of the nineteenth-century Aesthetic Movement that insisted on the existence of art for art's sake and on the permanent separation of aesthetic creations from morality and utility. Wilde's preface to *Dorian Gray* functions both as a kind of treatise for this notion of art as intrinsically separate from anything utilitarian and also as a warning to his readership not to read his book without his aesthetic principles in mind. He writes, "The artist is a creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. [...] Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. [...] All art is quite useless" (4). Thus, in Wilde's philosophy, by its separation from the utility of things, no work of art can be judged faulty for its representation of "vice" or immorality. In fact, he finds that "vice and virtue" are merely "materials" that an artist uses to create art and that the only measure of success or failure of an artist is whether he uses these materials well.

Wilde included a preface to the second edition of the book was to respond to the critics who had already viciously attacked the novel and to diffuse any further conjectures that any work of art could be moral or immoral. The preface reinforces philosophies that were already well established in Paris and to some extent in England.²¹ And while they are not new testaments to the theories of the Symbolist period, their contexts trace decisively back to Poe. It is important that Wilde emphasized the phrase “Art for art’s sake,” a term that Pater borrowed from Poe, who was using the adage before some French authors, a point emphasized by Kevin Hayes in “One Man Modernist” (225). Hayes examines Poe’s influence on artists of the nineteenth century, finding that Poe was “doing something that no one else at the same time was doing.” Despite the American nineteenth-century idea that art should both “delight and instruct,” Poe actually subscribed to the European idea that was gaining popularity of “art for art’s sake.” Hayes evidences this point by referencing Poe’s 1831 essay which emphasizes the emerging French aesthetic theory of “*l’art pour l’art*” (226)²², in which art is in a realm outside of societal influences, over the English theory that art has an explicit function and purpose in society. For instance, in his preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), Gautier argues this principle:

Pictures are made according to models, and not models according to pictures. Some one has said somewhere that literature and the arts influence morals. Whoever he was, he was undoubtedly a great fool.

²¹ In France, the Symbolists had taken up the cause of separating art from ethics, and in England Walter Pater’s work also reinforced the concept of art for art’s sake.

²² Hayes cites Poe’s 1831 introduction to his *Poems* “Letter to Mr.____,” an introduction that preceded both Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” and “The Poetic Principle,” as well as any French formulation of the concept.

It was like saying green peas make the spring grow, whereas green peas grow because it is spring. (xxi)

Gautier contends that art is independent from those who would like to put art to use by demanding a moral from a piece of fiction. To such critics who would want a moral in every book, Gautier simply states, “There is nothing truly beautiful but that which can never be of any use whatsoever; everything useful is ugly” (xxv). That Poe was accepting this new conception of art in 1831, two years before the earliest printed use of the French phrase “art for art’s sake,” Hayes explains, made him particularly popular with French artists who would later use his works to explore the boundaries of their new aesthetic theory.

In establishing Poe’s primacy here, I am not simply repeating the generally accepted point, as argued by Isobel Murray and John Paul Riquelme, that Poe was a major source for Wilde’s aesthetic sensibilities. Rather, I want to draw attention to the similarities in language between Wilde and Poe when each author espouses his principles on art and writing. To quote further from the preface, Wilde writes:

The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved. No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything. (3)

As previously discussed, Wilde is constructing in this passage a set of parameters that separate a work of aesthetic beauty from a piece of didacticism. Compare this to Poe's own structuring of his theory of art in "The Poetic Principle":

I allude to the heresy of *The Didactic*. It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. We Americans, especially, have patronized this happy idea; and we Bostonians, very especially, have developed it in full. (*Poe* 1025)

The boldness and authority of their prose is notable, as is the distinctive subject matter of the two passages. Each author beards his audience by first calling attention directly to whom he is arguing with, and in high fashion declaring precisely why the person who holds their own position is wrong. The insistence on the pleasure of beauty being the true aim of art is also strikingly similar for the two authors. Later in "The Poetic Principle" Poe writes:

An immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man, is thus, plainly, a sense of the Beautiful. This it is which administers to his delight in the manifold forms, and sounds, and odours, and sentiments amid which he exists. And just as the lily is repeated in the lake, or the eyes of Amaryllis in the mirror, so is the mere oral or written repetition of these forms, and sounds, and colours, and odours, and sentiments, a duplicate source of delight. But this mere repetition is not poetry. He who shall simply sing, with however glowing enthusiasm, or with

however truth of description [...] he, I say has yet failed his divine title. There is still a something in the distance which he has been unable to attain. (*Poe* 1026)

The distant object that the faux artist is unable to reach is a transcendent form of beauty; all true poets “struggle by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements perhaps appertain to eternity alone” (*Poe* 1026). While this concept of a beauty that transcends death doesn’t appear in Wilde’s preface, it is a major component of *Dorian Gray*’s thematic framework, since Dorian is allowed immortality only to take it from himself in the end. Dorian even offers a description of himself that seems to have been inspired by the language of the quote above, musing that he is “a multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead” (119). In a sense, Dorian sees himself as the subtle and intricate object of complex beauty that is somehow entangled with past, present, and eternity. What’s more, Wilde’s preface certainly echoes Poe’s approach to beauty in his insistence that only an elect few can truly appreciate and create beauty. For Wilde, the artist is the “creator of beautiful things,” while the critic is “he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things” (3). In addition to the artist and the critic, there are Wilde writes “those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things,” a “fault” on their part. Therefore, Wilde concludes, “They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty” (3). While the transcendence of life in beauty from Poe’s “Poetic Principle” is missing in Wilde’s preface, the concept that true beauty exists

only for those who can truly appreciate the existence of a beauty outside of life is there. Wilde's placement of beauty above morality and beauty above those who are unable to see it clearly compares to Poe's theories on the subject.

While biographical evidence suggests Wilde's familiarity with Poe's "Poetic Principle," the Wilde enthusiastic for French Symbolists was also likely to have led him to Poe's poetry given the popularity of "The Raven" in France and Baudelaire's and Mallarmé's careful translations. In *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, Poe was already developing the concept of art and beauty as things only available to the artist – a concept reflected in Wilde's preface. Moreover, there are echoes of Poe's "Sonnet – To Science" (1829) in Wilde's condemnation of critics who attempt to expound utilitarian meanings behind art: "We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless" (4). In "To Science," Poe employs the same defense by setting the art and the "poet's heart" against science:

Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,
 Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?
 How should one love thee? Or how deem thee wise,
 Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
 To seek for treasure in the jeweled skies,
 Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?

Thus, for both authors the utilitarianism of science and industry, culture and society, serve only to sap art of its beauty and leave the poet's heart crushed. Whether Wilde had Poe's "Poetic Principle" or some of his early poetry in mind when he was writing

the preface to *Dorian Gray* is not important – many authors were expressing similar aesthetic sentiments during the time period – but the similar way that each author approaches the subject is significant when such a connection is applied to later sections of book. Moreover, beginning with the first chapter of the novel, we can observe several significant points where Wilde appears to allude specifically to Poe’s literary philosophies.

While the preface makes the claim for art’s uselessness, the first two chapters of the novel develop an almost paradoxical notion of art affecting life in significant ways. Such notions are vital in that they provide a framework for Wilde’s conflicting ideas about life and art that is comparable to Poe’s own fascination with art, life, and the transcendence of death. Therefore, a look at the first two chapters of the novel is needed before we begin to examine reflections of several of Poe’s stories and themes in *Dorian Gray*.

Wilde’s readers learn of Dorian Gray through the eyes of an artist in Chapter 1 as Basil Hallward, a painter nearing completion of a full-length portrait of Dorian, discusses his subject with the aristocrat Lord Henry Wotton. Wilde develops several levels of the idea of art influencing life in the discussion of Dorian’s portrait, first by acknowledging Basil’s expression of his own existence in the painting, second by examining how Dorian’s beauty has literally become the outlet for Basil’s artistic expression, and third by exploring the painting’s influence over Lord Henry, who becomes infatuated with the portrait itself (and with the yet-to-arrive Dorian as well). In the first level of influence, Wilde uses Basil to argue against the preface’s assertion that the aim of art is “[to] reveal art and conceal the artist” (3). For Basil, Dorian’s

beauty has allowed him to achieve an entirely new mode of expression; Lord Henry says as much when he congratulates Basil's portrait of Dorian: "It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done. [...] You must certainly send it next year to the Grosvenor" (6). While Basil doesn't disagree with Lord Henry, it isn't Dorian's beauty alone to which Basil attributes to the greatness of the painting. Rather, Basil admits to Lord Henry that the "gracious and comely form he had so skillfully mirrored in his art" (6) was a creation that came out of his own existence within the work: "I have put too much of myself into it" (7). He qualifies his theory to Lord Henry, explaining,

"[E]very portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit the picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my soul."
(9)

While there is of course a good deal of homoeroticism in Basil's comments (which suggests another interpretation for Basil's obsession with Dorian), what is important is his aesthetic theory. Basil seems to have gone quite the opposite direction that the preface suggests an artist should go, because he's revealed rather than concealed himself through his art. As for Dorian and his beauty, Basil "gravely" concedes to Lord Henry, "[Dorian] is all my art to me now" (13).

As Basil predicts, Lord Henry laughs at Basil's notion that he has put too much of himself in the portrait, joking that Basil is nowhere near as good-looking as

Dorian. Rather, Lord Henry contends that the new mode of art that Basil has found in Dorian comes from the uncanny beauty of Dorian himself, saying,

“Basil, I didn’t know you were so vain; and I really can’t see any resemblance between you [...] and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and roseleaves. Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus, and you – well, of course, you have an intellectual expression, and that is all.” (7)

Moreover, Lord Henry develops a theory of artistic expression in direct opposition to Basil’s in his argument that it is the beauty of Dorian that has allowed Basil to create a work of unrivaled excellence. Important to Lord Henry’s argument is the separation of beauty and the intellect. Lord Henry argues that ““beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face”” (7). For Lord Henry, artistic expression comes directly from an artist’s ability to realize the beauty in something and to recreate that beauty in art. Therefore, in his philosophy, the painting of Dorian is brilliant because it has caught the very essence of Dorian’s beauty.

Paradoxically, Basil agrees with Lord Henry on this point, arguing that an ““artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. [...] We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Some day I will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait”” (14). Thus, we have a tangle of aesthetic theories here, as Basil seems conflicted in his definition of true artistic beauty. On one hand, Basil wants to reject the emerging attitude toward art as a mirror of reality (Lord Henry lambastes the use of autobiography in fiction

when he says ““Nowadays a broken heart will run to many editions”” [14]), while on the other he wants art to speak to the world in way that inevitably reveals the passion of the artist. For the latter artistic interpretation, Basil’s passion for Dorian, his “curious artistic idolatry” (14), wouldn’t be an acceptable form of infatuation for late Victorian England and therefore would have to be concealed – as Basil does and certainly as Dorian does later in the novel. Since Wilde identified himself with Basil Hallward,²³ we can readily observe his struggle in this chapter to deal with these contradictory theories on art and its influence on life. Examining Wilde’s contradictory attitudes towards art and life in his introduction to *The Critic as Artist as Wilde*, Ellmann finds that Wilde was always attempting to find a balance that worked for him. Ellmann defines Wilde’s contradictory notions of art, writing, “[o]ne is that art is disengaged from actual life, the other that it is deeply incriminated with it” (xxvi). And while Ellmann admits that “Wilde never formulated their union” (xxxvii), the struggle to find a balance between art as both “sterile” and “infectious” leads into the third level of life’s influence on art in Chapter 1.

Nearing the end of Chapter 1, Wilde introduces his third engagement with the notion of art influencing life in the portrait’s effect on Lord Henry. While Lord Henry becomes infatuated with Dorian Gray by observing Basil’s overt passion for the young man, he is also strangely attracted to the beauty of Dorian Gray depicted by Hallward. Lord Henry has fallen in love with the aesthetic representation of Dorian; thus the portrait itself has influence over Lord Henry. In Basil’s words, Lord Henry desires the picture’s “harmony of body and soul – how much that is!” (13), to which

²³ “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks of me: Dorian is what I would like to be – in other ages, perhaps” (*Letters* 352).

Lord Henry exclaims, “Basil, this is extraordinary! I must see Dorian Gray.”

Therefore, we can observe another level of interpretation for Wilde’s theory of art and its influence, not only in the way Dorian’s portrait influences Lord Henry, but also in the way that it literally turns Dorian into a work of art.

In Chapter 2, Wilde further develops his theme of influence as Lord Henry, observing Dorian’s child-like innocence, proceeds to manipulate Dorian’s thoughts as though he were a blank canvas. In the scene Dorian poses not only as Basil’s model for his portrait, but also as Lord Henry’s for his philosophies on life. When Basil chides Lord Henry for his negative influence over people, Dorian ponders the distinction between good and bad influences. Answering Dorian, Lord Henry remarks, “[t]here is no such thing as a good influence Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral – immoral from the scientific point of view” (19). Confused, Dorian seeks further explanation, and Lord Henry gladly continues: “[b]ecause to influence a person is to give him one’s 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” (19). Paradox is rife here as Dorian’s facial expression changes and Lord Henry takes full control of Dorian’s mind. Wilde bends Lord Henry’s words with the contradiction that one should avoid the influence of others, because yielding to such forces ultimately leads to imitation; and yet, Lord Henry’s words will influence Dorian in a very substantial way.

After Lord Henry instructs Dorian on the true aim of life (“The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for”), he then issues the most fateful of his maxims: “The only way to get rid of

temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself” (19-20). He urges Dorian to appreciate his youth and to “Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! [...] Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing . . . A new Hedonism – that is what our country wants. You might be its visible symbol” (23).

Wilde makes explicit Lord Henry’s influence on Dorian when in his own mind Dorian wonders with amazement on the power of words and ideas: “Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them” (20). With Lord Henry in total control of Dorian’s mind, Wilde lays the groundwork for the picture motif when Dorian wishes that he were “to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old!” Dorian’s wish is granted in a two-fold manner; not only does the image age for Dorian, but it also records every sin and vice of Dorian in its ugly and hideous contortions.

Wilde’s struggle with art and life in Chapter 1 and 2 becomes important when we compare these themes and musings to some of the Poe’s earlier works, specifically “Metzengerstein” (1832) and “The Assignation” (1834). I begin with these stories not because they offer the best examples of comparison to *Dorian Gray*, but because they offer insightful detail to Poe’s development of the Gothic picture motif leading up to “The Oval Portrait,” which has strong parallels to Wilde’s novel. Both “Metzengerstein” and “The Assignation” deal explicitly with the act of art affecting life and use the picture motif that is so important to the dramatic drive of *Dorian Gray*. David Ketterer first paired these stories in *The Rationale of Deception in Poe*, finding that in these tales “the borderline between art and reality becomes

radically equivocal” (182). Metzengerstein approaches this borderline most directly in its depiction of Count Berlifitzing’s reincarnation into a powerful and demonic horse in order to enact revenge on Frederick Baron Metzengerstein. Similar to Dorian, Frederick is a young man with a “beautiful countenance” (96) and has a habit of meditating on the portraits of deceased ancestors in the “vast and desolate apartment of the family palace of Metzengerstein” (95). Dorian’s magical picture is also hidden away in an old school room at the top of the house, and in Chapter 11 he strolls “through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house” to “look at the various portraits of those whose blood flows through his veins” (119). Frederick also finds pleasure when he surveys the portraits of his ancestors:

The dark, tall statures of the Princes Metzengerstein – their muscular war-couragers plunging over the carcasses of fallen foes – startled the steadiest nerves with their vigorous expression [...] the voluptuous and swan-like figures of the dames of days gone by, floated away in the mazes of an unreal dance to the strains of imaginary melody. (*Poe* 95)

The “magical portrait” in Poe’s tale is among the tapestries that Frederick observes, and upon looking at it “his eyes became unwittingly riveted to the figure of an enormous, and unnaturally colored horse” (96). The tapestry reveals that the strangely-colored horse belongs to a Berlifitzing who is depicted as a “prostrate” body lying just below the horse’s down-turned head. Frederick finds himself unable to move his gaze away from the tapestry: “[t]he longer he gazed the more absorbing became the spell – the more impossible did it appear that he could ever withdraw his glance from the fascination of that tapestry.” After something happens outside that

causes him to look away from the painting, Frederick looks back and with “extreme horror and astonishment” finds the horse staring not at his slain rider, but at the Baron himself:

The eyes, before invisible, now wore an energetic and human expression, while they gleamed with a fiery and unusual red; and the distended lips of the apparently enraged horse left in full view his gigantic and disgusting teeth. (96)

While the portrait of Dorian is of course of a man, the changes of the “Metzengerstein” portrait are surprisingly similar to the mutations that Dorian’s image go through in the novel. On first seeing the alteration of the portrait, Dorian attempts to excuse the subtle changes around the mouth as “an illusion wrought on the troubled senses” (78), but Dorian isn’t allowed this denial: “Yet it was watching him.” This personification of the picture, where the painting seems to take on a life of its own, is relevant to the horse staring at Frederick and to the personified double in “William Wilson.” The proportions of the horse in “Metzengerstein” and its disgusting and monstrous attributes are also elements of Poe’s picture motif that reappear in *Dorian Gray*. Dorian feels compelled to examine “the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth” (106) only to recoil at the monstrosity of his own sins depicted in the painting.

Yet another similarity of the two pictures can be observed in the existence of the spectator in each. In *Dorian Gray* it is obvious because the painting is of Dorian, but in Poe, this effect is more subtle. As Frederick staggers in horror at the changed tapestry, his tottering forces him to assume “the exact position, and precisely filling

up the contour, of the relentless and triumphant murder of the Saracen Berlifitzing” (96). The horror and terror that each character feels at seeing himself thus depicted creates a shame that leads Frederick to order “a certain chamber” to be “immediately locked up” (97) and causes Dorian to have his painting hidden and secured in an unused portion of his house. Finally, Dorian and Frederick both come to a similar fate, when in one fantastic and fatalistic moment art and life converge.

In “The Assigination” a similar Gothic trope of art mingling with life appears, but in a decidedly more subtle way. Scott Peeples writes of this subtlety in *Edgar Allan Poe Revisited*, concluding that the “effect of the painting in ‘The Assigination’ is more subtle [than in “Metzengerstein”]: the hero seeks escape through art – in this case escaping the fact that his lover is married to another man – arranging a meeting ‘in that hollow vale’ beyond the grave” (49). Peeples’ point is apt, and his conclusions further display Poe’s interest in using art as a way of transcending death, where in the case of “The Assigination” the stranger completes what Peeples terms a “double suicide” by revealing the painting of his deceased lover just before committing suicide himself. While the similarity of this theme in *Dorian Gray* – Dorian’s painting also transcends death by offering immortality – could surely be called coincidental, there are interesting patterns in “The Assigination” that resonate in *Dorian Gray*.

The stranger’s grand apartment with its peculiar fusion of Greek, Italian, and Egyptian architecture and art (*Poe* 140) is comparable to Dorian’s own experimentation with exotic works of art and music in Chapter 11. The stranger is excessively proud of his skill at decoration, drawing attention to the narrator’s awe:

“I see you are astonished at my apartment – at my statues – my pictures – my originality of conception in architecture and upholstery” (*Poe* 140-141). With Poe’s later “Philosophy of Furniture” and other tales in mind, the stranger’s heavily upholstered walls and mismatched themes could lead to a satirical reading of the passage; and, if not satirical, then certainly paradoxical in Dorian’s bizarre experiment with the “harsh intervals and shrill discords of barbaric music” alongside “Chopin’s beautiful sorrows, and the mighty harmonies of Beethoven himself” (111). The narrator in “The Assignation” finds the stranger’s choice of “mingled and conflicting perfumes” that come “reeking up strange convolute censers” oppressive (*Poe* 140), while Dorian is fascinated by the “fuming censers” of Catholic rituals and proceeds to study such sensations by “distilling heavily-scented oils” and “burning odorous gums from the East” (111). With its distortion and blending of disparate artwork and decoration coupled by the stranger’s wealth, it would appear that we have almost stumbled into Dorian’s apartment during one of his revelries in experimentation.

In addition to the similarities of setting in “The Assignation” and *Dorian Gray*, perhaps the most compelling comparison between the two works is the affinity between Dorian’s portrait and the stranger’s painting of Marchesa Aphrodite. Even the Marchesa’s name creates a semblance between the two portraits, since Lord Henry compares Dorian’s image to the Adonis of Greek mythology (see above) who was the beloved of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. In Chapter 9, Basil admits to Dorian that at the height of his obsession for him, he had drawn Dorian as “Adonis

with a huntsman's cloak" (95). Moreover, Poe's language in describing the portrait is echoed by Wilde's description of Dorian's painting. Poe's narrator writes,

Human art could have done no more in the delineation of her superhuman beauty. The same ethereal figure which stood before me the preceding night upon the steps of the Ducal Palace, stood before me once again. But in the expression of the countenance, which was beaming all over with smiles, there still lurked (incomprehensible anomaly!) that fitful stain of melancholy which will ever be found inseparable from the perfection of beauty. (*Poe* 144)

In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde speaks of Dorian's supreme beauty "mirrored" (6) in Basil's art, and he uses the subtle expression of sadness and cruelty intermixed in Dorian's face in Chapter 7 to hint at the portrait's knowledge of "some dreadful thing":

In the dim arrested light that struggled through the cream-coloured silk blinds, the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly strange. (76-77)

Similarity in language also comes in setting as the stranger's painting is covered by "a drapery" and Dorian's is concealed in a "large purple satin coverlet": "It [the coverlet] had perhaps served often as a pall for the dead. Now it was to hide something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death" (98-99).

Art merges with life again in Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (originally published in 1842 as "Life in Death," and later under the current title in 1845), and in a fashion

that is also reflected in *Dorian Gray*. As we have observed in the survey of source studies on Poe, “The Oval Portrait” has been a commonly cited source for Wilde’s novel, but no analysis has emerged to examine how Poe’s work might have influenced Wilde’s writing of *Dorian Gray*. A possible reason for this lapse in scholarship is that on the surface the two texts appear similar – an artist’s rendering of his subject ultimately leads to the subject’s death – while not much else is comparable.²⁴ However, if we look closely at “The Oval Portrait” and *Dorian Gray*, there are several elements of the Gothic picture motif that seem unique to Poe that Wilde absorbed into his own work. As with “The Assignment,” the portrait itself resembles the painting of Dorian Gray:

As a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself. But it could have been neither the execution of the work, nor the immortal beauty of the countenance, which had so suddenly and so vehemently moved me. Least of all, could it have been that my fancy, shaken from its half slumber, had mistaken the head for that of living person. [...] I had found the spell of the picture in an absolute *life-likeness* of expression, which at first startling, finally confounded, subdued and appalled me. (*Poe* 383)

The narrator’s fancy that he was in fact viewing the head of a living person is important because it personifies the portrait, giving it the quality of true double.

Dorian’s painting is personified throughout the novel as it often sneers, smiles, and

²⁴ Christa Satzinger argues in *The French Influences on Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray and Salome* that beyond the “idea of art as opposed to life” in “The Oval Portrait,” there are no other similarities between the two works (115).

stares at him, mocking its own ugliness and the ugliness of Dorian's sins. Another aspect of the picture in the passage above is its spell-like influence over the narrator that leaves him at once "confounded," "subdued," and "appalled." As a spectator of his own soul, Dorian wonders often at the spell of his own painting, at times having feelings of "real pleasure in watching it" (89) mutate, while almost simultaneously wishing the spell to go away: "For a moment he thought of praying that the horrible sympathy that existed between him and picture might cease. It had changed in answer to a prayer; perhaps in answer to a prayer it might remain unchanged." Therefore, in Poe's exploration of the magical portrait first seen through the eyes of a spectator, before we learn of the supernatural story behind the painting, we can observe a similar blurring of distinctions between Dorian as an actor and as spectator in the novel.

Basil and the artist in "The Oval Portrait" are analogous in their obsessions for their subject and for art, but such similarities collapse under the more complicated homoerotic themes that Wilde explores in *Dorian Gray*. However, a more productive parallel occurs in the basic plot device of both narratives – aging. In "The Oval Portrait," the young bride of the artist is a "maiden of rarest beauty" and full of life, "hating only the Art which was her rival" (383). Her innocence is similar to the unspoiled youth of Dorian at the beginning of the novel, and the rivalry that Poe instigates between the subject and the portrait in his story is certainly reminiscent of Dorian's struggle with his own portrait. What is unique to both stories, however, is the role of aging in each piece: in "The Oval Portrait" it is the subject who ages; in *Dorian Gray* it is the artwork that must bear the burden of time. Wilde pays close

attention to age and mortality in *Dorian Gray*, especially in its merger with Dorian's portrait and also in its distinction as a force separate from Dorian's sinful lifestyle:

He [Dorian] would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. (106)

The horrific ending of "The Oval Portrait" also includes a body that is implicitly "withered" in health and in spirit:

And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice "This is indeed Life itself!" turned suddenly to regard his beloved: – She was dead.
(Poe 384)

The interplay of death, life, and art in "The Oval Portrait" is revised in *Dorian Gray* in the opposite direction, as Dorian transcends age through art in a way that the "maiden" of "The Oval Portrait" cannot. Yet, there is a character in *Dorian Gray* who does suffer a fate similar to the beautiful maiden in "The Oval Portrait," Sybil Vane.

Wilde was never short of inspiration for his female characters in plays and short stories. As the editor of *Woman's World* he encountered women of high society not only through their writing, but in his constant appearance at dinner parties and

other functions. Even in *Dorian Gray*, Wilde makes use of humorous witticisms and social banter to craft dynamic female characters like Lady Agatha, the Duchess of Harley, Mrs. Vandeleur, and Lady Henry. But Sybil Vane is a character very much different from Wilde's other female characters in that she exists, at least for Dorian, as an object of art, divinely beautiful, but ultimately lifeless. It is difficult not to compare her to some of the women that appear throughout Poe's own writing. Similar to the female in "The Oval Portrait," Poe's Ligeia is also confined and objectified by her own aesthetic beauty. The tale begins with the narrator, through murky images, attempting to describe his lost love: "I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the Lady Ligeia. Long years have since elapsed, and my memory is feeble through much suffering" (222). Nevertheless, he is able to distinctly describe "the *person* of Ligeia," emphasizing "the dear music of her low sweet voice. [...] in beauty of face no maiden ever equaled her" (Poe 222). While much of the narrator's fascination focuses on her humanly beauty, there is a statue-like quality to Ligeia when he describes "her marble hand upon [his] shoulder" and her forehead "faultless – how cold indeed that word when applied to a majesty so divine – the skin rivaling the purest ivory" (Poe 223). We also learn that Ligeia's genius is unrivaled:

I have spoken of the learning of Ligeia: it was immense. [...] I have never known her at fault. Indeed upon any theme of the most of the most admired because simply the most abstruse of the boasted erudition of the Academy, have I *ever* found Ligeia at fault. (225)

Richard Wilbur, writing on “Ligeia,” suggests that “she is the inspirer and heavenly goal of a kind of knowledge, purely aesthetic and superior to the rational, which soars intuitively toward the Forms of things, and assimilates the soul to the transcendental Beauty” (376). In these instances, we can observe the male narrator searching for a feminine ideal, an attempt that proves implicitly haunting for the narrator and fatal for Ligeia and for Dorian Gray.

Dorian is also faced with making his case for Sybil when he decides to tell Lord Henry that he is in love. Like Ligeia, Sybil is a “genius,” not in learning but in acting, and she is exceedingly beautiful:

“Harry, imagine a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little flower-like face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose. She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life. You said to me once that pathos left you unmoved, but that beauty, mere beauty, could fill your eyes with tears. I tell you Harry, I could hardly see this girl for the mist of tears that came across me.” (46)

Her low voice is marked “with deep mellow notes” and seems to be intended only for Dorian’s ears. In acting, Sybil has no equal, as she boasts an incredible range, playing a variety of diverse roles including Portia of *The Merchant of Venice*, Beatrice of *Much Ado about Nothing*, and Cordelia of *King Lear*. Dorian is enchanted with Sybil’s acting, confessing to Lord Henry that “[s]he is everything to me in life. Night after night I go to see her play” (46). But, Lord Henry is dubious about Dorian’s affections and asks, “When is she Sybil Vane?” “Never,” Dorian

replies, adding, “‘She is all the great heroines of the world in one. She is more than an individual’” (49). Therefore, similar to the narrator’s construction of feminine ideality in “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait,” Wilde creates a female character that Dorian can appreciate only as an object of art, or as a character in a play. Moreover, the objectification of the feminine in all these cases leads to the death of the women who are imprisoned by their perceived ideality.

In *Aesthetic Headaches* Leland Person argues that in such tales as “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait” Poe “criticizes the objectifying tendency of his male characters” (23). He further explains, “[t]he mental impulse towards idealism and its preference for secondary qualities is balanced by a tendency toward participation in the physical world and an indulgence of sensation – and by recognition of the need for relationship” (23). This proves true for Wilde’s Dorian Gray in that once Sybil becomes human – once she is no longer Juliet, Rosalind, or Imogen – Dorian must come to terms with her as a woman and not as an object of art. When Sybil resists Dorian’s objectification by acting badly, she falls victim to a fate typical of Poe’s women and dies. While Poe’s narrator’s are often haunted by the dead women in their past, Dorian is quick to accept Lord Henry’s view of the passing of Sybil as a “‘wonderful ending to a wonderful play. [...] it has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy’” (84). With Dorian fully accepting his life as that of a work of art, Wilde allows him to reiterate a theme of Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition”: “the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world” (*Poe* 982).

As Christopher Nassaar argues, Dorian’s experiment in romantics with Sybil Vane marks his first “decadent act” (43). He also concludes that “[b]efore Sybil’s

death, Dorian searches for pure sensations. After her death, the sensations he seeks become less and less pure” (54). Nassaar is referring to the steady decline of Dorian into a state of total hedonism, a state in which he both revels and prays to leave. It is at this point in the novel that the continually degenerating portrait begins to act as Dorian’s double, a symbol of his self-destruction and also a force that mocks and tortures Dorian as well. Perversity, as it is defined in Poe’s “The Imp of the Perverse,” can be traced to Dorian’s conflicted approach to the new age of hedonism described by Lord Henry. Dorian is originally enthusiastic towards Lord Henry’s philosophy of existence:

Yes, there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival. It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly; yet, it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. [...] Of the asceticism that deadens the senses, as of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it was to know nothing. But it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself a moment. (108)

Yet, in application, Dorian can see in his portrait the destruction that such a life of hedonism has on the body and soul. In one of many scenes in front of his portrait, Dorian is clearly a fractured identity, both loving and loathing the contorted image of himself. Wilde writes, “he would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of individualism that is the

fascination of sin, and smiling, with secret pleasure, at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his” (117). Dorian’s surreptitious delight at seeing the ugliness of the portrait subverts a moralistic reading of the text and allows Wilde to explore the complexity of sinful impulses. In “The Imp of the Perverse” Poe describes a similar confusion at the tendency of man to commit unfathomable crimes:

Examine these and similar actions as we will, we shall find them resulting solely from the spirit of the *Perverse*. We perpetrate them merely because we feel that we should not. Beyond or behind this there is no principle that men, in their fleshly nature, can understand; and were it not occasionally known to operate in furtherance of good, we might deem the anomalous feeling a direct instigation of the Arch-fiend. (640)

Musing on the man’s impulse towards evil, Dorian wonders,

There are moments, the psychologists tell us, when the passion for sin, or for what the world calls sin, so dominates a nature, that every fibre of the body, as every cell of the brain, seems to be instinct with fearful impulses. Men and women at such moments lose the freedom of their will. They move to their terrible end as automatons move. (158)

It is difficult not to notice the similar language and subject matter of Dorian’s speech when compared to the narrator’s ruminations in “Imp” on subject of perversity. Both authors explore the confusion that comes when contemplating why humans commit acts that ultimately lead to self-destruction. Poe’s narrator finds an excuse in the definition of perversity in that it is futile to resist, and Wilde’s Dorian Gray certainly

feels that at some level, those who give into temptation gain, if not enlightenment, then perspective. In a passage, written in a fashion so Poe-esque it must be included in its entirety, Dorian meditates on the ability of some people to gain understanding through suffering:

There are a few of us who have sometimes wakened before dawn, either after one of those dreamless nights that make us almost enamoured at death, or one of those nights of horror and misshapen joy, when through the chambers of the brain sweep phantoms more terrible than reality itself, and instinct with that vivid life that lurks in all gestures, and that lends to Gothic art its enduring vitality, this art being, one might fancy, especially the art of those whose minds have been troubled with a malady of reverie. (108-109)

From this reverie, Dorian continues, a new way to view the world emerges that “in no conscious form of obligation or regret, the remembrance even of joy having its bitterness, and the memories of pleasure and their pain.”

Perversity also plays a role in other works of Poe that have their parallels in *Dorian Gray*. Scenes from Poe’s “The Black Cat” are echoed in *Dorian Gray*, for example: both works struggle with the psychosis of self-destruction. In an act of perversity, the narrator of “The Black Cat” hangs his beloved cat: “hung it *because* I knew it loved me and *because* I felt it had given me no offense” (Poe 478). Dorian Gray’s murder of Basil Hallward is similar when we view it through the prism of perversity. Upon seeing the mutated image on the canvas that he had so passionately painted of Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward urges Dorian to pray for forgiveness for both

of them: “I worshipped you too much. I am punished for it” (132). And, Basil is right: his punishment comes only moments later when Dorian, “an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward” having suddenly come over him, grabs a knife and stabs Basil to death. The motives for both killings are strikingly similar as the murderers find reasons only in the notion that they were loved by their victims.

What’s more, because Dorian’s painting will reveal the murder of Basil Hallward in its grimaces, the narrator of “The Black Cat” must also contemplate his crime through a mysterious picture. After a fire burns the narrator’s house down, he notices “as if graven in *bas-relief* upon a white surface, the figure of a gigantic *cat*. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvelous. There was a rope about the animal’s neck” (*Poe* 479).

Finally, Poe’s “William Wilson” is often cited as a possible source for *Dorian Gray*, especially in the way that both authors make use of the double motif. In “William Wilson” Poe writes the story of a young man unable to escape a double of himself that acts both as a conscience for and a rival of Wilson. Wilson’s character is comparable to Dorian Gray’s in that they are burdened with a genetic propensity for passion and impulsivity that together can produce both greatness and monstrosity. Wilson states, “I am a descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable” (*Poe* 278). Dorian imagines himself to be a “complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead” (119). Moreover, each character is predestined for a life of rebellion that leads to their eventual self-destruction. Wilson remembers that as he matured his

“family character [...] was more strongly developed; becoming, for many reasons, a cause of serious disquietude to my friends, and of positive injury to myself. I grew self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions” (*Poe* 278). Later in life, Wilson becomes exceedingly decadent, using money from his parents to “indulge at will in the luxury already so dear to my heart – to vie in profuseness of expenditure with the haughtiest heirs of the wealthiest earldoms in Great Britain” (286). At moments like these, Wilson recalls having “out-Heroded Herod” in his vices and nurtured a life completely devoted to sins and sensations. An important difference between the two characters lies in the fact that Wilson II embodies everything that is, was, or could be good in Wilson I, while Dorian’s portrait represents all that is corrupt in himself. In this difference we can observe Wilde adapting Poe’s use of the double in an almost reverse fashion, but still utilizing the thematic framework that the picture serves as a constant reminder of a sinful past.

In developing William Wilson’s double, Poe uses an interesting analogy that might have drawn Wilde’s attention in forming Dorian’s double into a portrait. Poe writes, “How greatly this most exquisite portraiture harassed me, (for it could not justly be termed a caricature), I will not now venture to describe” (*Poe* 283). Poe again uses the concept of a portrait when he explores the inner confusions of Wilson’s mind, when he is utterly baffled that the school administration did not detect Wilson II imitating him:

Perhaps the *gradation* of his copy rendered it not so readily perceptible; or, more possibly, I owed my security to the masterly air

of the copyist, who, disdainful of the letter (which in a painting is all the obtuse can see), gave but the full spirit of his original for my individual contemplation and chagrin. (*Poe* 283)

Also, a similar device is employed in “William Wilson” and *Dorian Gray* in that both doubles whisper into the ears of their victims. Just as Wilson I is about to make good on his pursuit of “the young, the gay, the beautiful wife of the aged and doting Di Broglio” (*Poe* 291) whom he has been courting at a grand party, he hears the “low, damnable *whisper* within my ear” of Wilson II. Dorian Gray finds himself in a state of panic at being constantly haunted by his past:

What sort of life would his be, if day and night, shadows of his crime were to peer at him from silent corners, to mock him from secret places, to whisper in his ear as he sat at the feast, to wake him with icy fingers as he lay asleep. (166)

By conjuring up a scenario of being exposed while at a feast, it seems that Dorian is attempting to avoid the mishaps of Wilson I at his own party. Moreover, Dorian, just before he kills Basil Hallward, can hear a suggestion “whispered into his ear” by the “grinning lips” of the portrait (132). In addition to these surface resemblances, we can observe clear analogies between the endings of both works when Wilson I and Dorian attempt to destroy their doubles and in doing so ironically kill themselves either figuratively or literally. Both characters wield knives, stab into their double, and thus slay alter egos, acts implying suicide. In “William Wilson” the suicide is more figurative than literal because the narrator is obviously left alive to tell the story,

while in *Dorian Gray* the suicide is quite literal: Dorian is dead and the portrait has returned to its original form.

Despite this difference, however, we can observe in the endings of both works an ambiguity emerge in that neither proposes a satisfying resolution. The double in “William Wilson” is repressed, not literally dead, thus leaving open the possibility of further interaction between Wilson I and Wilson II. And this ambiguity almost anticipates the paradoxical ending in *Dorian Gray* when read with a preface, since it would seem logical to assume that through Dorian’s stabbing/suicide a moral could be elicited. But the preface warns explicitly against one. Thus, without a clean finish, both authors leave their readers bereft: neither text resolves the questions that they introduce about the interactions between art, life, and morality.

Analyzing *Dorian Gray* alongside stories of Poe, makes it clear that Wilde was using Poe’s Gothic themes and motifs to construct his narrative. In Poe’s “Metzengerstein,” “The Assigination,” and “The Oval Portrait,” Wilde found a model for his own meditations on the tension between art, life, and death. From “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse,” Wilde used the trope of a perverse impulse that necessarily exists in the minds of people and that leads to their downfall. Lastly, “William Wilson” gave Wilde a model for the development of doubles, both in form and in the mind.

Conclusion

As I have endeavored to prove, a reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through the writings of Poe reveals strong thematic and aesthetic similarities between the two authors. For my purposes in this study such a reading of *Dorian Gray* satisfies two objectives: first, it fills the gap in scholarship that was left open by previous critics who didn't think the connection important enough to warrant further study, and second, it highlights the fact that both Poe and Wilde were interested in exploring the shaky gulf between art and reality. Initiated by Baudelaire's intense enthusiasm for Poe, Wilde inherited important tools of expression from Poe's writings that allowed him to craft a work of art that broke away from the conventions of his day. In Poe's implementation of the long-established Gothic picture motif in "Metzengerstein," "The Assigination," and "The Oval Portrait," Wilde found a trope that he could use to explore his own theories on art's influence on reality. Through Poe's meditations on the concept of perversity in humans in "The Imp of Perverse" and "The Black Cat," Wilde was able to enhance the character of Dorian Gray by allowing a complexity to enter into Dorian's cruel and monstrous actions. Finally, Poe's doubling motif in "William Wilson" gave Wilde a model for his own exploration of the duality – the pleasure and the pain – of leading a double life.

In relation to the works explored in this thesis, another question comes in terms of what Poe and Wilde seem to be suggesting about the relationship between art and morality. Of course, both authors were accused of writing immoral works and both stood fast to their aesthetic principle that art is in a realm removed from morality. In some ways, an argument could even be made that both authors sacrificed

everything, mind and body, for their resistance to the conventions of their time: Wilde was disgraced, imprisoned, and shortly after died; and Poe never emerged from poverty before his own untimely death. In “The Gothic Wilde,” Donald Lawler argues that the “foundation” of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was

dependent upon Wilde’s decision to use the gothic as the most effective means for resolving artistically competing claims of the aesthetic, tragic, and the supernatural aspects representing portions of his own inner life. (261-262)

When we consider Lawler’s conclusion through the lens of Poe, his point is particularly apt: Wilde found in Poe someone attempting to resolve key problems through artistic expression. That both authors were accused of immorality then is no surprise, because both attempted to explore through their art a realm outside the reaches of reality and very much inside their own minds. As a result, artistic expression becomes a way of transcending morality by allowing resolution through paradox, truth through irony. And in this sense, Poe and Wilde do emerge as morally strict adherences to their own aesthetic stance: both authors deal with corruption and immorality, yet strive for truth through beauty.

Moreover, this notion suggests why we still find writers like Poe and Wilde, who dare to mock the conventions and even the very moral norms of their day, still appealing and rewarding. In their playful approach to ambiguity and controversy, Poe and Wilde concentrated on a studied effort at undermining the conventions that threatened to imprison the mind. In this way, it is as if Poe and Wilde belong more to our time than to theirs because we accept so readily the notions of expression free

from censorship, of morality removed from prejudice. Perhaps we find in the works that survived Poe and Wilde's lives the same paradoxes and contradictions that occur in our lives as in theirs.

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