The essay on the next page by scholar Michael Buma analyzes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* alongside events in author Oscar Wilde’s life. In it, Buma indicates that in one of his letters, Wilde claimed that the moral of the novel is that “All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment.” Wilde was in fact surprised that critics did not understand this moral. Buma himself implies that the moral is more Christian than Wilde initially suggested.

In a 2-4 page essay of your own, analyze *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in order to prove its main argument, moral, or lesson. While your essay should primarily be an analysis or evaluation of the novel, you are required to refer to Buma’s essay at least once throughout the body (NOT in your introduction!).

**Basic Requirements:**
- 2-4 pages (5% penalty for an essay that does not reach the full second page)
- MLA format, including a Works Cited page
- Respond to Buma’s essay at least once throughout the body (Use the page numbers of this document for citation purposes)
- The literary essay rubric on Homework Central will be used to grade this essay
- Use present tense when referencing Wilde’s novel and Buma’s essay
- No contractions
- Use third person only
"What's Iago's motive? Was he just sinful?" They thought they knew but waited for a hint. He raised his hands and wept, "Evil, fucking Evil." And he meant it. And he knew what he meant.

--B.H. Fairchild "On the Passing of Jesus Freaks from the College Classroom"

Oscar Wilde is one of those rare authors perhaps equally famous for his life as for his works. When Wilde was a student at Oxford he enthralled his colleagues by decorating his room with blue vases full of lilies (the known symbol of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood), and is reported to have caused a stir by showing up to gallery openings in a coat made to resemble a cello. The son of a woman who had reinvented herself by claiming her maiden name, Elgee, was a corruption of the surname of the great Italian poet Dante Aligheri, Wilde inherited his mother's sense of flare and daring. With his ubiquitous green carnation, flamboyantly feminized dress and clever epigrammatic sayings, Wilde cultivated the dandyish persona of "the aesthete in the marketplace" (Sloan 9) when he was through at Oxford, soon winning tame on both sides of the Atlantic for his easy wit and effulgent flamboyance. Wilde was highly adept at networking and self-promotion, essentially managing to turn himself into a walking advertisement for his plays, prose, poetry, and aesthetic philosophies. When the artistic freedom and experimentation of the "New Hedonism" surfaced in the 1880s and 90s, Wilde became the "presiding spirit of this emerging new culture" (Sloan 19).

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in July 1890. It met, for the most part, with criticisms of immorality. "It is not made sufficiently clear," complained the *Scots Observer*, "that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity" (*Critical Heritage* 75). *The Daily Chronicle* took a similar tone, alleging that "Mr. Wilde's book has no real use if it be not to inculcate the 'moral' that when you feel yourself becoming too angelic you cannot do better than rush out and make a beast of yourself" (*Critical Heritage* 72). These allegations were entirely unexpected by Wilde, who thought that he had written an obsequiously moral book. "I cannot understand how they can treat *Dorian Gray* as immoral," Wilde wrote to Arthur Conan Doyle in April 1891: "my difficulty was to keep the inherent moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect" (*Letters* 478). Wilde made several public attempts to address his critics on this point. In a rebuttal letter to the *Daily Chronicle* dated 30 June 1890, he wrote that "what I want to say, so far from wishing to emphasize any moral in my story, the real trouble I experienced in writing the story was that of keeping the extremely obvious moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect" (*Letters* 435). A letter to the *St. James' Gazette* (26 June 1890) again asserts the self-evidence of a moral in *Dorian Gray*:

They will find that [*Dorian Gray*] is a story with a moral, and the moral is this; All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment ... Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray*--a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. Is this an artistic error? I fear it is. It is the only error in the book. (*Letters* 430-1)
These letters demonstrate Wilde's initial strategy for the public defense of *Dorian Gray*: to address his critics and detractors head-on by contending that indeed there is a moral. Wilde's publication of the famous "Preface" in the *Fortnightly Review* (March 1891) marked an abrupt change of strategy. Rather than arguing that Dorian Gray does have a moral, Wilde was now alleging that "there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book" (3). What the "Preface" does, in effect, is to articulate Wilde's version of the "art for art's sake" credo, distancing the work itself from the standards of what Dorian, parroting Lord Henry, calls "middle class virtue" (106).

Wilde's main purpose in the "Preface" (which was included in the 1891 book edition of *Dorian Gray*) was the obfuscation of what he considered to be an excessively apparent moral conclusion. When Wilde wrote to the *St. James' Gazette* on 26 June 1890, he began a long series of evasive maneuvers that would continue until his eventual imprisonment. Aside from being ambiguous, Wilde's suggestion in the *St. James' Gazette* letter that the "moral" of *Dorian Gray* -- "all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment" -- is a massive understatement of the novel's essentially orthodox morality. *Dorian Gray* is far more overtly Christian than Wilde's generically ethical statement seems to indicate. It conveys an orthodox rendering of the objective world, and reinforces this orthodoxy by maintaining the hierarchy of the Christian cosmological schema in its end. It can be inferred from the great efforts Wilde took to cultivate an outlandish persona that the last thing he wanted to appear was orthodox. Wilde's changes for the 1891 version of *Dorian Gray*, as well as much of his subsequent public commentary on the novel, are designed to obscure the fact that he had written a book with an ostensibly Christian moral. Wilde seems to have truly believed his own dictum about the apparentness of the moral being the novel's "only flaw," and its Christian sensibility must have been that much more shaming for the "presiding spirit of [the] emerging new culture" of the "New Hedonism."

Given Wilde's blatant public pronouncements that *Dorian Gray* had an overt moral, the claim of the preface that "there is no such thing as an immoral book" cannot be taken at face value. It should be evident by this point that "moral" is a problematic term when talking about *Dorian Gray*. Wilde's use of "moral" in the preface seems to imply the classical signification of the word as a broad collection of teachings or philosophies (OED). This points to morality as a comprehensive (and presumably internally coherent) system, precisely the kind of metanarrative that Jean-Francois Lyotard avowed his postmodern incredulity for. Wilde was unable to think of himself as entirely outside the assumptions of his age, but the "Preface" does allow for the loose senses of "moral" as the "teaching or practical lesson of a fiction or fable" (OED) and as a vehicle for "import, meaning, and signification" (OED). In the distance between these senses of "moral," Wilde is both anticipating some important notions of postmodern narrative theory and creating a novel whose somewhat scripted trajectory towards the "teaching or practical lesson" manages to lead to a plurality of viable access points. My "window into Wilde," as it were, is what I'll call the "subtle/evil" interplay.

One of Wilde's less obtrusive edits for the 1891 version occurs in a description of the book that Dorian receives from Lord Henry. In the 1890 version the book is said to contain "metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as evil in colour" [emphasis mine] (Planet .PDF 155). For the 1891 version, Wilde deleted the word evil and in its place wrote subtle. Another such linkage occurs in the passage where Dorian is contemplating the sins of his forbearers. The 1890 version reads: "he felt that he had known them all, those strange terrible figures that had passed across the stage of the world and made sin so marvellous, and evil so full of wonder" (Planet .PDF 186). In his edits for the 1891 edition, Wilde substituted subtlety for wonder. The result is that evil becomes "so full of subtlety" (138); again, subtleness and evilness are directly linked.
Wilde's first generation critics seem to have been reacting against the presence of sin in *Dorian Gray* more than the presence of evil. The difference is important. "Evil" refers to "the antithesis of good in all its principal senses"--in Old English, the word is "the most comprehensive adjectival expression of disapproval, dislike, or disparagement," but is seldom used in modern colloquial English (OED). Evil is remarkably unobtrusive in *Dorian Gray*. It is "crafty, treacherously or wickedly cunning, insidiously sly, [and] wily" (one of the OED definitions of "subtle"). "Sin," on the other hand, refers to "an act which is regarded as a transgression of the divine law or an offence against God; a violation (especially willful or deliberate) of some religious or moral principle" (OED). And while evil is subtle in *Dorian Gray*, sin is anything but.

As a novel that plumbs the depths of evil, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* needs a solid conception of "good" as its backdrop. Given Wilde's cultural context and his own religious upbringing, that conception of the good could be supplied by little other than a Christian understanding of the world. The cosmology of *Dorian Gray*, then, is consistently Christian; the drama of the plot is enacted on a stage of Christian doctrine with set-pieces of Christian values. *Dorian Gray* presents a universe in which God exists and offers humans some capacity to know good and evil, as well as the "free will" to choose whichever course of moral or immoral action they see fit. The critics who reacted against Wilde's "immorality" either failed to recognize this or simply took for granted a fixedly Christian rendering of the objective universe. They focused instead on the fact that the characters exercise their God-given free will to operate, for the most part, as moral agents indifferent or oblivious to the consequences of their cosmological circumstances. Charges of immorality against *Dorian Gray* also take for granted Wilde's indebtedness to the Christian account of human nature. The Genesis story finds Adam and Eve in an unspoiled world. They are morally righteous, and have been given only one directive from God to sustain this condition: Don't eat the forbidden fruit. In Genesis, evil enters the Garden as an external entity in the character of the serpent. The serpent tempts Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree; they do, and their action is a sin. After committing their "original sin," Adam and Eve are condemned to leave the Garden and to contend with all manner of hardship and difficulty. Furthermore, their moral condition has been permanently altered: having sinned they have allowed evil into their souls, and it will continue to dwell inside them and influence their spiritual status on a permanent basis. One of the central questions of Christian theology is the tension between humanity's post-lapsarian proclivity for evil and the doctrine of "free will," the idea that we have been given the capacity to choose good. The apparent problem is that emphasis on the freedom of humanity seems to detract from the glory of God, while emphasis on absolute divine predetermination seems to detract from human agency in making moral decisions. A large part of the moral complexity of Wilde's novel is in his fidelity to this schema--no theologian has been able to devise an entirely satisfying response to these seemingly contrary strains of Christian thought, and Wilde makes no attempt to do so either. Free will and predestination are both viable factors in determining human action in Dorian Gray, and neither can be said to trump the other. Dorian's downward slide is a result of bad moral decisions, in which he conversely recognizes his own agency and a sort of fatalistic inevitability (I will return to this point throughout). Both of these concepts relate to the problem of evil, which Christian tradition has tended to present as an active spiritual entity that fights to steer humanity away from "good" (i. e. God). In the New Testament this "evil" is personified by the devil (Satan), a real, if immaterial, personage. In the Christian cosmology, then, good and evil are both external forces and internal spiritual conditions, and their motivators are seldom clearly distinguishable (i.
e. is someone good because he exercises free will to be so or because God has empowered his goodness?). Because of Adam and Eve's colossal gaffe in the Garden of Eden, humanity is permanently predisposed toward evil; however, at the same time we remain imbued with some capacity to choose the good. As Dorian tells Basil, "each of us has Heaven and Hell in him" (150).

In *Dorian Gray* Lord Henry functions as loosely equivalent to the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Like the serpent tempting Adam and Eve, Lord Henry enthralls Dorian with the false prospect of having sin without evil. Lord Henry is constantly associated with "sin": it is his stock word for any forbidden pleasure or social transgression that purports to pepper the dullness of life. Part of his subtlety is the casual charm with which he belittles right conduct. In the Christian schema the eternal consequences of Lord Henry's positions are dire, but his charm and social grace sneak them in under the moral radar of his listeners. "You are really quite comforting," (41) the Duchess of Harley tells him at Lady Agatha's dinner party, because he has helped her to feel comfortably absolved of her own moral responsibilities. But while Lord Henry is constantly associated with the word "sin," he is never once referenced as being "evil." This is another gesture on Wilde's part toward the subtlety of evil; Lord Henry's "evil" influence is always packaged in the guise of wit, insight, and charm. He is manipulative, "crafty, wickedly cunning, insidiously sly, and wily" (to again suggest one of the OED definitions of subtle). He delights in "charm[ing] his listeners out of themselves" (42).

In the 1995 film *The Usual Suspects*, Kevin Spacey's character gives an interesting insight into the subtlety of evil: "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was making the world believe he didn't exist." This is exactly what Lord Henry does in *Dorian Gray*. He poses as a detached observer, toying with Dorian out of indifference rather than malevolence. "It was no matter how it all ended, or was destined to end" (57), Lord Henry muses about his project of subverting Dorian. But this detachment is affected as a guise to conceal the depth of his evil and the extremity of his moral position. Rather than a charming socialite or harmless epicurean decadent, Lord Henry is a Nietzschean ubermensch who believes himself to have thrown off the constraints of externally imposed morality. His teleological purpose is to "be in harmony with one's self" (76). Lord Henry's mistake here is the cosmological equivalent of Satan's great error in *Paradise Lost*: "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (44). Both responses are forms of hubris: they fail to recognize their proper place in the divine hierarchy.

Lord Henry's moral position in *Dorian Gray* is akin to that of the devil; he is the initial serpent in the Garden, and continues to coax Dorian to evil throughout the novel. The Garden of Eden typology of the initial temptation scene is reinforced through "the great cool lilac-blossoms" (23) and "stained trumpet of ... Tyrian convolvulus" (25). From the moment they are alone in the Garden, Lord Henry goes to work enthralling Dorian with his theories. He begins by sharing with Dorian one of the "great secrets of life"--"to cure the senses by means of the soul and the soul by means of the senses" (23). Lord Henry continues by exhorting Dorian to "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be nothing.... A new Hedonism--that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do" (25). The temptation to throw off the expectations of morality in pursuing a "new Hedonism" is compounded by the ever-declining prospect of Dorian's youth: "We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!" (25). Lord Henry's temptation is twofold: he lays before Dorian the prospect of realizing the desires of his soul and simultaneously goads him into
sacrosanct belief in the supremacy of his fleeting youth and beauty. Before leaving Basil's studio
to walk together in the garden, Dorian tells Lord Henry that "there is some answer to you, but I
cannot find it" (21). The answer is, of course, something akin to Sir Thomas's pronouncement on
Lord Henry at Lady Agatha's: "A dangerous theory!" (42). But Dorian cannot find this answer,
and is beguiled by Lord Henry into the emotional state that gives rise to his tantrum upon
returning to Basil's studio.

In the fit of anger and frustration prompted by Lord Henry's tempting, Dorian unwittingly
completes the Faustian deal: he calls for his youth to be maintained and the effects of his aging to
be reflected in the countenance of the portrait. But Dorian has not yet sinned, and does not yet
realize that the deal is in effect. For a time it is uncertain whether he will fall into sin at all, or, to
use the language of Lord Henry, whether he will find the courage to rise above "middle class
virtue." "You will always be fond of me," Lord Henry tells Dorian, because "I represent to you
all the sins you have never had the courage to commit" (77).

The Picture of Dorian Gray can be read partly as a stichomythic struggle for the soul of
its eponymous protagonist. This struggle occurs between Lord Henry and Sybil Vane. It is a
classic battle of influence: angel on one shoulder and devil on the other. After Dorian tells his
friend about Sybil, Lord Henry muses to himself about the incompleteness of his influence: "the
lad was premature. He was gathering his harvest while it was yet spring. The pulse and passion
of youth were in him, but he was becoming self-conscious" (57). That Dorian sees Sybil as a
counter-influence to Lord Henry is clear: "Her trust makes me faithful, her belief makes me
good. When I am with her, I regret all that you have taught me. I become different from what
you have known me to be. I am changed, and the mere touch of Sibyl Vane's hand makes me
forget you and all your wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories!" (75). Dorian's
decision to marry Sibyl is a de facto resolution to embrace the goodness she represents. But the
trouble with Sibyl is that, theologically, she represents an ideal that can never be fully realized.
Her goodness is literally too good to be true; in the Christian context, even the regenerate sinner
remains tainted by the effects of the original fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. Sibyl's name
"Vane" hints at the "vainness" of pursuing the ideal she represents—there is a sense of
predetermination to Dorian's fall that is never really resolved against his "free will" to choose
right action. Dorian's pursuit of earthly perfection (which is the ultimate end of goodness) is
dispelled in the same way that Sibyl's poor performance has shown her "the hollowness, the
sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played" (84). It is the shattering
of this ideal of goodness that leads Dorian to his own "original sin": the rejection of Sibyl.
Following the pattern of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, evil's first appearance has been
external to Dorian through the character of Lord Henry. But the choice to sin is Dorian's own,
and he does, permanently inviting evil into his heart and ushering him into a post-lapsarian state.
As Dorian leaves Sibyl, the consequences of this "original sin" are evident immediately in the
surrounding world:

Where he went he hardly knew. He remembered wandering through dimly-lit streets,
past gaunt black-shadowed archways and evil-looking houses. Women with hoarse
voices and harsh laughter had called after him. Drunkards had reeled by cursing, and
chattering to themselves like monstrous apes. He had seen grotesque children huddled
upon doorsteps, and heard shrieks and oaths from gloomy courts. (86)
This sinister cityscape foreshadows the inner descent that Dorian has set in motion by his treatment of Sybil Vane. It is finally when he realizes the significance of the change in the painting: "touch of cruelty in the mouth" (87) that the word sin is associated with him for the first time in the novel: "He had uttered a mad wish ... that ... the lace on the canvas bear the burden of his passions and his sins" (88). Terrified by the ugliness of his sin, Dorian makes his second resolution to be good:

One thing, however, he felt that [the painting] had done for him. It had made him conscious how unjust, how cruel, he had been to Sibyl Vane. It was not too late to make reparation for that. She could still be his wife. His unreal and selfish love would yield to some higher influence, would be transformed by some nobler passion, and the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him would be a guide to him through life, would be to him what holiness is to some, and conscience to others and the fear of God to us all ... here was a visible symbol of the degradation of sin. Here was an ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls. (93)

Dorian's appeal to "some higher influence" again raises the question of free will versus divine predetermination. The moment calls to mind the Christian doctrine of sanctification, in which the regenerate sinner, having turned to God for deliverance from evil, is aided by the work of the Holy Spirit to more fully manifest the character of God while still on earth. For Dorian it is not too late: through the work of God's "higher influence" and "nobler passion" he will be able to make things right with Sybil and atone for his sin. His statement here recognizes the flaw of seeking goodness through purely human means (i.e. through the "ideal," of Sibyl). However, Dorian's pledge to be "transformed by some nobler passion" also seems to recognize his own strong complicity in the arrangement. In this sense, free will is never far from the moral action in Dorian Gray, and the "ruin men brought upon their souls" is seen both as self-imposed and as a predetermined consequence of human susceptibility to sin.

The first testing ground for Dorian's renewed conviction to "be good" is the suicide of Sybil Vane. No one recognizes this fact more than Lord Henry, whose first action is to write to ask that Dorian not see anyone before he comes (95). Picking up the stichomythic line of analysis, one can conceive that Dorian may have stuck to his commitment to "be transformed by some nobler passion" if Lord Henry hadn't got to him first. It even appears for a time as if he will, having refused to open a letter on the grounds that Lord Henry "cut[s] life to pieces with his epigrams" (95). As it happens though, Lord Henry is the first to break the news to Dorian that Sybil Vane has committed suicide. Realizing the importance of the situation, Lord Henry leaves no holds barred in tempting Dorian back to evil (he goes so far as to offer his own sister as bait, and it becomes apparent later that Dorian has taken this bait [see pages 96 and 145]). But it is ultimately Dorian's own cold indifference to Sybil's death that leads him back down Lord Henry's path:

"So I have murdered Sybil Vane," said Dorian Gray, half to himself--"murdered her as surely as if I had cut her little throat with a knife. Yet the roses are not less lovely for all that. The birds sing just as happily in my garden. And to-night I am to dine with you, and then go to the Opera, and sup somewhere, I suppose...." (96)
There is very little between this realization and Dorian's final decision to embrace sin once and for all:

He felt the time had come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him--life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins--he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all. (102)

Dorian's statement here is an inverted approximation of Martin Luther's famous "here I stand I can do no other." While Luther could do nothing but to affirm his beliefs in the certainty of God's truth because that was the way things are, Dorian finds himself unable to resist the recognition of his own depravity for the same reason. Dorian's decision is not a manifesto or a declaration, but a querulous moment of acceptance. Lord Henry had tempted him with the false belief that he could be the master of his own sins; in reality, the reverse turns out to be true. Evil has made Dorian its subject here, and the statement above is Dorian's recognition that he will be ruled by it acceptingly. All of this occurs with remarkable subtlety: Dorian conveys the sense that the choice has effectively been made for him, and signs the papers of his servitude to sin with his fatalistic "that was all." While this moment seems to represent the triumph of predetermination over free will, Dorian is still faced with the responsibility of acting on his freedom and accepting the consequences for his actions. In the Christian schema, Dorian is never beyond the reaches of God's grace: all he needs to do is repent of his sins and ask for it.

When Basil comes to visit Dorian the morning after this affirmation of evil, he has one last chance to pick up Sibyl's mantle as stichomythic angel. Basil isn't up to the task, however, and doesn't even attempt to steer Dorian back toward goodness. Dorian tells Basil circumspectly of his decision to live beyond "middle class virtue" (106), and Basil decides that "he could not bear the idea of reproaching [Dorian] any more ... after all, his indifference was probably a mere mood that would pass away (107)." Then, in the throes of his newly embraced evil, Dorian plays the devil's subtle/evil trick on Basil. Rather than managing to discover the secret of Dorian's hesitance to display the painting, Basil ends up confessing the "secret of his own soul" (9), his "curious artistic idolatry" (14) for Dorian. It isn't until years later that Basil works up the resolve to confront Dorian, and it is this decision that leads to his death:

"Good God, Dorian, what a lesson! What an awful lesson!" There was no answer, but he could hear the young man sobbing at the window. "Pray, Dorian, pray," he murmured. "What is it that one was taught to say in one's boyhood? 'Lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our sins. Wash away our iniquities.' Let us say that together. The prayer of your pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered also. I worshipped you too much. I am punished for it. You worshipped yourself too much. We are both punished."

Dorian Gray turned slowly around, and looked at him with tear-dimmed eyes. "It is too late, Basil," he faltered. "It is never too late, Dorian. Let us kneel down and try if we cannot remember a prayer. Isn't there a verse somewhere, "Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them as white as snow?"

"Those words mean nothing to me now." (151)
Basil re-emphasizes the possibility for Dorian to be redeemed by his own free choice, assuring Dorian that his "prayer of repentance" will be answered in the stone way as his "prayer of pride." That "it is never too late" underscores the continued viability of free will in the redemptive schema--Dorian can yet choose to change, and his prayer will be answered. Dorian, however, believes he has fallen too far into an evil he sees as inevitable: he tells Basil that the possibility for true penitence means "nothing to me now." But while he reasserts the viability of free will for Dorian, Basil himself is something of an "elect" character. "I couldn't be happy if I didn't see [Dorian] every day," Basil tells Lord Henry in the opening chapter: "he is absolutely necessary to me!" (12). Lord Henry is shocked by Basil's admission: "How extraordinary! I thought you would never care for anything but your art" (12). Basil responds that "[Dorian] is all my art to me now!" (13). When Lord Henry asks to meet Dorian, Basil pleads with him not to "take away the one person who gives my art whatever charm it possesses" (16). This "curious artistic idolatry" for Dorian is the essence of Wilde's reworking of the doctrine of election in the preface: "they are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty" (3). Basil is incapable of seeing past Dorian's beauty to discern his true moral character; he derides those who "treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography" (14), yet has revealed the secret of his own soul in the picture rather than that of Dorian. Basil is unable to see into his friends' souls. He is consistently unwilling to assume the worst of Lord Henry: "I don't agree with a single word that you have said, and, what is more, Harry, I feel sure you don't either!" (12). This inability to look below the surface of things is tantamount to being "elect" in the sense of the preface: to Basil, "beautiful things mean only Beauty." But this naivete is writ largest in the context of Basil's "artistic idolatry" for Dorian. In the scene that leads to his murder, Basil tells Dorian that

sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even. (143)

Basil goes on to specifically address Dorian: "you ... with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvellous untroubled youth--I can't believe anything against you" (143). With his seeming ability to gaze directly into Dorian's soul, Lord Henry stands in stark contrast to Basil. "I should have to see your soul," Basil tells Dorian upon finally realizing his mistake, "but only God can do that" (146). But Basil's assessment is only half-complete: presumably the devil can gaze into the human soul as well. When Basil is finally afforded the glimpse into Dorian's soul that Lord Henry has been privy to all along, the moment is terrifying: "the rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful" (150). It is through this fear that Basil's "election" carries over to the Christian schema. His terror at the prospect of sin leads him eventually to a penitence something like that of Proverbs 9 v. 10: "the tear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (NIV). Following Jesus's logic in Mark 9 v. 40 ("whoever is not against us is for us"), the "fear" of the Lord is largely the same thing as Basil's "fear" of sin. This "elect" tear of sin first asserts itself during Basil's initial meeting with Dorian. The painter tells Lord Henry that "I had a strange feeling that Fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. I grew afraid, and turned to quit the room. It was not conscience that made me do so: it was a sort of cowardice" (10). Part of Basil's election, then, in the Christian sense, is that he fears the sins that he knows Dorian will cause him to commit. Yet it is seemingly by predestination that Basil becomes acquainted with Dorian in
the first place: after, having these fearful premonitions he tries to "escape" (10) the meeting, only to be forced back into it by the host of the party, Lady Brandon. As such, the novel's only overtly "elect" character is not beyond the responsibility of making moral choices out of his own free will. Basil sins in his "artistic idolatry" for Dorian, and realizes he is punished for it: "I feel ... that I have given away my whole soul to some one who treats it as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity, an ornament for a summer's day" (14). In the end though, Basil's soul departs from the novel with an upward spiritual trajectory; free will and election are equally at play in Basil's penitence, and the tension between the two is again left unresolved.

In one of his rebuttal letters to the *Scots Observer*, dated 13 August 1890, Wilde described Dorian Gray as having an "ethical beauty" (*Letters* 446). To recognize this "ethical beauty" is to recognize that Dorian must either be punished for his sins or must seek God's forgiveness. Wilde was acutely aware that a novel about a suicide and two grisly murders, among other assorted sins, cannot be a thing of beauty unless it culminates in some form of moral comeuppance. He sets this pattern in motion with the opening salvo of the preface: "the artist is the creator of beautiful things" (3). In the words of Neil Sammells, Dorian Gray "is ethically beautiful and beautifully ethical: it invokes the satisfactions of design" (54). The moral, then, is delivered as a moment in the plot, but is enforced more thoroughly in the general structure of the novel. The fact that the actual occurrence of the "moral" takes up less than half a page is irrelevant: it has been inevitable from the very first sentence. However, despite the structural inevitability of a "moral" ending *Dorian Gray* does lead readers through some alarming moments of moral uncertainty. The most devastating of these is the death of James Vane.

Sybil's brother had pledged to his sister that "as sure as there is a God in heaven" (79) he would avenge any wrong that Dorian caused her. James's reappearance in the plot falsely signifies the long anticipated moment of moral comeuppance for Dorian. It brings the sense that the "ethical beauty" will soon take effect, that Dorian will soon pay for his sins in a moment of poetic justice. When James is accidentally shot by Sir Geoffrey it is the most morally ambiguous moment in the plot, but is enforced more thoroughly in the general structure of the novel. The fact that the actual occurrence of the "moral" takes up less than half a page is irrelevant: it has been inevitable from the very first sentence. However, despite the structural inevitability of a "moral" ending *Dorian Gray* does lead readers through some alarming moments of moral uncertainty. The most devastating of these is the death of James Vane.

To this point in nay analysis, Dorian has tailed at two major attempts to "be good": the first is his failed love for Sybil Vane, and the second is his cold indifference to her death. The number of Dorian's failed resolutions resonates with several important biblical threes. Three is, of course, the number of members in the divine Trinity, but it is also the number of times Jesus was tempted in the desert, the number of days before he rose from the dead, and the number of times Peter denies Jesus. In *Dorian Gray*, Basil's arms convulse three times when Dorian is stabbing him: "three times the outstretched arms shot up convulsively, waving grotesque stiff-fingered hands in the air" (152). Basil's arms, then, loosely form the shape of a cross three times before his death one for each of Dorian's failed resolutions to be good. Another noteworthy "three" occurs when Dorian goes into hiding upon the return of James Vane: "it was not until the third day that [Dorian] ventured to go out" (192). Christ was tempted three times in the desert
and overcame each temptation: Dorian fails in his three successive resolutions to be good. Christ remained entombed three days before rising from the dead to conquer the sins of the world; Dorian's rise from a three day "entombment" (his hiding from James Vane) marks the penultimate moment to the structural and moral crisis of James Vane's death. Dorian, then, is loosely configured as a reverse-Christ figure. He fails to overcome the temptations of evil and works as a destructive force in the lives of others (rather than as an agent of redemption). "You have a wonderful influence," Basil tells Dorian, "let it be for good, not for evil" (145).

Dorian's third and final resolution to be good has to do with his relationship to Hetty, "simply a girl in a village" (201) whom he has fallen in love with. Dorian recounts to Lord Henry the story of their relationship, and how he has decided to "leave her as flower-like I had found her" (201) because "I have done too many dreadful things in my life ... [and] am not going to do any more" (200). Lord Henry replies by asking Dorian "do you think this girl will ever really be contented now with any of her own rank? I suppose she will be married some day to a rough carter or a grinning ploughman. Well, the fact of having met you, and loved you, will teach her to despise her husband, and she will be wretched. From a moral point of view, I cannot say that I think much of your great renunciation. Even as a beginning it is poor. Besides, how do you know that Hetty isn't floating at the present moment in some star-lit mill-pond, with lovely water-lilies around her, like Ophelia?" (201)

After this painful allusion to the suicide of Sybil Vane (who had played Ophelia), Lord Henry goes on to paint an Ophelia-like image of Basil's death: "I see him lying now on his back under those dull-green waters with the heavy barges floating over him, and long weeds catching in his hair" (204). Lord Henry's subtle/evil is at its cruelest here: having already short-circuited Dorian's attempt to confess the murder of Basil Hallward (203), Lord Henry casts Ophelia as an emblematic reminder of Dorian's composite sins against Sibyl, Hetty, and Basil. As if this isn't enough, Lord Henry brings up another terribly sensitive issue for Dorian: the painting. Dorian accordingly looks to Hamlet to explain his hatred for the thing: "Like the painting of a sorrow / A face without a heart" (204). Wilde's technique here is cleverly understated. As the answer to "Ophelia" is presumably found in Hamlet, it is by confronting his sins that Dorian stands a chance of being freed from them. Lord Henry continues his baiting though, and one of the cruellest moments in the novel ensues: "by the way, Dorian,' [Lord Henry] said, after a pause, 'what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose--how does the quotation run?--his own soul?" (205). Lord Henry's subtle/evil is again at its subtlest here, as he pretends to remember the quotation imperfectly. The words are those of Jesus from Matthew 16 v. 26, making the eternal ramifications of Dorian's evil abundantly clear: he profits absolutely nothing, because his soul has succumbed to evil. At this point, however, readers still don't know for certain if Dorian's third resolution to be good has been successful. Dorian doesn't either, and decides to check the portrait in his attic to see if it has altered in accordance with his "goodness" to Hetty. Much to his dismay, Dorian finds the picture "more loathsome ... than before--in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite" (211). At this, his lowest point, Dorian looks upward: "there was a God in heaven who called upon men to tell their sins to earth as well as to heaven ... nothing that he could do would cleanse him till he had told his own sin" (212). Confession is the only answer, but Dorian cannot manage to feel the remorse from which confession comes. Rather than admitting his sins to God and begging for
forgiveness, Dorian decides to destroy the painting. He takes the same knife he had used to stab Basil, and plunges it into the canvas. In doing so he restores the natural relation between portrait and subject. Dorian is found dead on the floor, "withered, wrinkled, and, loathsome of visage" (213), while the painting is returned to resemble Dorian's pre-lapsarian state of moral beauty. He has recognized the error of being mastered by evil while thinking himself master, but it has been too late: Dorian has been unable to find the remorse that leads to confession. As such, the "moral" of Dorian Gray (i.e. the "teaching or lesson") is far more overtly Christian than Wilde suggested to the St. James' Gazette: Dorian Gray is a thorough demonstration that the post-lapsarian soul is utterly susceptible to both external and internal evil, and that the proper response to this condition is penitence and confession. The moral complexity of the novel exists in Wilde's fidelity to the complexity of the Christian cosmological schema. The confusion isn't about how humanity should respond to the power of evil, but about what motivates and directs evil as a force. In keeping with the unresolved tension between human tree will and divine predetermination, human beings are found to be both complicit in the evil they perpetrate and the victims of a spiritual imperative they are inadequate to fulfill.

The effectiveness of Wilde's tactic in the preface can be assessed in two arenas: that of the novel, and that of his famous trial. In terms of getting the moral complexity of Dorian Gray recognized, Wilde's changes have worked remarkably well. If there can be said to be a critical consensus on Dorian Gray it is that the "moral" is notoriously difficult to pin down. In terms of obfuscating the obvious orthodoxy of the novel's "moral" conclusion, Wilde has been equally successful: the reading I have presented here is, as far as I understand it, somewhat idiosyncratic. But Wilde's attempt to argue the views of the preface as a real-life defense in his trial met with considerably less success. Neil Sammells has argued that The Picture of Dorian Gray challenges the conventional assumption that a novel could be read with the "direct simplicity" (55) of cracking open a nut to access the kernel within. During Wilde's trial, prosecutor Edward Carson tried to "crack the nut" of Dorian Gray to show the moral degeneracy of its author. Throughout the trial Wilde clung to the line of defense he had first asserted in the preface: that art has no influence on action. In Dorian Gray Lord Henry feeds Dorian the exact same line: "art has no influence upon action ... it annihilates the desire to act" (208). When asked during the trial if literature can have a moral or immoral effect, Wilde replied that: "I do not believe that any book or work of art ever produced any effect upon conduct at all" (Goodman 53), "The aim is not to do good or evil," Wilde continued later, "but trying to make a thing that will have some quality of form or beauty, wit, emotion, and so on" (Goodman 53). The trial transcripts contain pages and pages of examples where Wilde is, almost verbatim, repeating the claim of the preface that "there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book." In the end the author whose main character had been "poisoned by a book" (208) couldn't get away with denying that "art ever produced any effect upon conduct at all." The penalty was undeniably disproportionate to the crime: Wilde was sentenced to two years in jail, and finished his life in exile as a broken man.

It is finally here that I turn to this paper's epigraph from B.H. Fairchild's "On the Passing of Jesus Freaks from the College Classroom." Judging from his "posing" in the preface and during the trial, the Christian moral of Dorian Gray didn't resonate very powerfully with Wilde. It wasn't until his imprisonment that Wilde seems to have felt the brokenness of being complicit in evil. Fairchild describes the depth of this in the lines

He raised his hands and wept, "Evil, fucking Evil." And he meant it. And he knew what he meant.
What may be seen as a corresponding moment of brokenness occurs for Wilde in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (published in 1898):

Ah! Happy they whose hearts can break
And peace of pardon win!
How else may man make straight his plan
And cleanse his soul from Sin?
How else but through a broken heart
May Lord Christ enter in?

Wilde was released from prison in 1897 an utterly broken man; he fled to the continent, where he lived under the name "Sebastian Melmouth" (martyr and wanderer) until his death in 1900. Shortly before his death, Wilde was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. Given the depth of the brokenness in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," it is reasonable to conclude that this conviction was genuine. Perhaps the latently Christian moral of Dorian Gray had finally begun to resonate with its author. As such, the symbolic action of setting his spirit on the path to penitence through baptism may be seen as Wilde's last-minute attempt to avoid the fatal mistake of his best-known protagonist.

A note on quotations from The Picture of Dorian Gray: I used two copies of the text: the 1890 serialized version that appeared in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine (available in e-book form from Planet .PDF) and an edited version of the 1891 book edition (edited by Robert Mighall). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Dorian Gray are taken from Mighall's edited 1891 version. Please see below for citation information.

Works Cited