Puritanism and Modernist Novels
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CHAPTER FOUR

Reading and Hegelian Tragedy in Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray

Writing in one of his autobiographies about what he called the “tragic generation” of the 1880s and 1890s, W. B. Yeats asks: “Why are these strange souls born everywhere today, with hearts that Christianity, as shaped by history, cannot satisfy?” Yeats identifies a tendency to despair among the young artists and writers of the late nineteenth century—including Oscar Wilde—that he sees fueled by the failure of historical Christianity to meet their theological, existential yearnings. This failure of historical Christianity’s institutions, practices, and teachings to satisfy the soul is certainly a central theme of Wilde’s novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray. Yet after an era of criticism and biography that tended either to ignore or to dismiss Wilde’s longstanding interest in Christianity, religion is only now emerging as a serious concern in Wilde studies. Most recent research explores Wilde’s interest in Roman Cathol-


2. Richard Ellmann’s biography, Oscar Wilde (New York: Knopf, 1988), is most often cited as turning Wilde scholarship away from Wilde’s interests in Christianity. Ellmann called Christianity an “attractive fiction” of Wilde’s early life (297). As Jarlath Killeen suggests: “Ellmann unambiguously maintains throughout the biography that Wilde’s interest in the Church was aesthetic rather than spiritual, and that even this aesthetic interest had largely deserted him by the time he came to write his most important texts” (17). Jonathan Dollimore, in Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), sees Wilde’s interest in Christianity as incompatible with his sexuality and hence similarly dismisses Wilde’s religious interests.
icism and attempts to delineate the specific Catholic influences in his writings as well as the extent and legitimacy of his personal religious commitments. Some focus on Wilde’s biographical life, even going so far as to label Wilde an “orthodox Catholic” whose long conversion followed the via negativa. Others delineate specific cultural expressions of Catholicism that shaped Wilde’s writings. These include the Oxford Catholicism of John Henry Newman, the folk Irish Catholicism of Wilde’s Ireland in which his parents took such great interest, and perhaps most significantly, the “decadent Catholicism” of nineteenth-century French aesthetes who influenced so many of those connected to British aestheticism. Yet having been born and raised in an Irish Protestant home, Wilde was certainly shaped by Protestantism and Puritanism as well, and these influences also deserve more treatment.

This chapter examines Wilde’s engagement in The Picture of Dorian Gray with late-nineteenth-century ideas about character formation and Puritan hermeneutics. Following in the wake of Matthew Arnold, Wilde often stereotypically condemned Puritanism for causing England’s cultural stagnation. In an 1882 interview during his visit to the United States, for example, Wilde said: “And then came the Puritan movement and destroyed all the artistic impulse. We are just beginning to recover from Puritanism in England” (qtd. in Hofer 43). Yet despite his ironic aphorisms and quips about morality, Wilde understood Puritan Bible-reading and interpretation at a deep level, and he gave Puritanism much more respect than many in his day did. In Dorian Gray, Wilde pits Puritanism against aestheticist discourse through the use of Hegelian tragedy. Analyzing this conflict in light of Puritan hermeneutics and Wilde’s engagement of Hegelian tragedy provides a new reading of the text, especially

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4. Frederick Roden links Wilde to the Oxford Catholics in Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). For studies of Wilde and French decadent Catholicism, see Schuchard; O’Malley; and also Ellis Hanson, Decadence and Catholicism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997). Killeen acknowledges the influence of the Oxford Catholics but writes his book on Irish folk Catholicism.

5. For a study that argues Wilde juxtaposes Puritanism and aestheticism in his play, A Woman of No Importance, see Margaret Wright, “Wilde’s ‘Puritanism’: Hester Worsley and the American Dream,” The Wildean: Journal of the Oscar Wilde Society 35 (2009): 52-61. Wright’s argument that Wilde is not completely condemnatory of Puritanism but actually values some of its ideals while critiquing “dandyism” correlates with my own argument about The Picture of Dorian Gray.
revising interpretations of the novel’s stance on morality and religion. After first outlining some of Wilde’s ideas about reading and readers, this chapter offers a close analysis of the novel, ending with a Hegelian reading of the novel’s climactic scene.

It makes sense that both Hegelian tragedy and Puritanism influence the structure of Dorian Gray, for as Alison Hennegan outlines, the “two literary sources which did most to shape [Wilde] were the pagan writings of Ancient Greece and the Authorized Version of the Bible, the translation commanded by King James VI” (216–17). Wilde was always interested in the “apparent conflict between pagan Greek and Christian values” (Hennegan 217), as well as in the “various models of tragedy” (230). Wilde is also concerned for the effects of reading in all of his writings. A Picture of Dorian Gray is fundamentally interested in the same things as Puritan hermeneutics is: the moral formation that might occur while reading, the aesthetic (or spiritual or “ethical”) experience of reading, and the relation between the two. In fact, I believe Wilde’s only novel is in essence an exploration of Puritan hermeneutical principles. The text is centrally concerned with the legacy of Puritan “guilt culture,” its idea of an inner conscience and truth, and its theory of typological reading. It is also concerned with how, in late-nineteenth-century England, these elements of “guilt culture” have fragmented to become the shambles of a “shame culture.” In the juxtaposition of the two Dorians—the picture of Dorian and the living Dorian—the novel pits Puritanism against its aestheticist dismantling. This framework of opposing the “Puritan” to the “dandy” is one Wilde also uses in his comedic plays. In Dorian Gray, this juxtaposition allows readers to explore the proper relation of the moral to the aesthetic. Because Wilde consciously places this juxtaposition in a tragic form in the novel, he implies, as did the Hegelian theory of Greek tragedy on which he relied, that both his society and the novel were facing a moral and spiritual crisis point.

Like the majority of educated Victorians, Wilde studied the Bible early in his education. At his first boarding school, Portora Royal, an English Protestant school about one hundred miles from Dublin, students were expected to know the King James Version of the Bible “almost by

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6. To my knowledge no one has linked the novel to Hegel’s theory of tragedy.
7. See Rodney Shewan, Oscar Wilde: Art and Egoism (London: Macmillan, 1977). Shewan connects Wilde’s interest in what he vaguely calls Hegel’s “system of contraries” to such juxtapositions of the dandy and the Puritan in the plays, concluding that Wilde’s position is an “all-inclusive” pluralism. This chapter’s more detailed reading of Dorian Gray in light of Hegel’s theory of tragedy argues against a pluralist reading of the novel.
heart.” Wilde won a prize for scripture studies (Wright 47). This biblical knowledge clearly stayed with him throughout his life and informed all of his writing. As Patrick O’Malley puts it, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as with “all the genres that Wilde produced,” there is a “recurrent—and overt—obsession with the fundamental questions of theology and scriptural representation” (168). Wright concurs, reminding readers that Wilde’s writings are “saturated with stories, themes, and phrases from the King James Bible” (47). Because Wilde is fundamentally concerned for the relation between art and life in many of his writings, it seems he must have been exposed to the late-nineteenth-century Nonconformist discussions about novel-reading, Bible-reading, and moral character formation outlined in the previous chapter. Yet one can also imagine that these debates irked him at some level. Wilde was not raised with much parental concern for character formation, which was considered to be an English tendency, not an Irish one. His parents were both of the well-educated, English-speaking, Protestant Anglo-Irish elite, which meant their families had originally settled in Ireland generations earlier and had played a dominant role in Ireland ever since. Despite this, Wilde’s parents were both staunch Irish nationalists and tried to distance themselves from English culture. They studied Ireland’s native oral traditions and were fascinated by Irish folk Catholicism. Wilde’s mother even had him baptized twice, once Protestant and once Catholic. The family constantly had groups of intellectuals in their house and were not afraid to discuss ideas from the Continent, especially from France and Germany. Although he was loosely raised Protestant, Wilde was allowed to read all kinds of things as a boy, and according to Wright, was “spared the religious fare that formed the staple diet of many English children” (43). Despite this, however, Wilde was also familiar with the typical moral handbooks and stories that Puritan parents would have given their children; later on he even had some of these on his shelves for his own children as well as many “quintessentially Victorian volumes” (Wright 137).

Even though he plays with and ironizes the effects of Puritan reading, Wilde views the process of reading in much the same way Puritans did. Throughout his life, Wilde was a passionate reader of all kinds of texts, and as Wright outlines, he had almost every book imaginable in his library. Wright argues that Wilde “did not so much discover as create himself through his reading; he was a man who built himself out of books,” letting books change the type of character he was at different stages of his life (5). Wilde’s passion for problematizing and playing with the relation of life and art is at root an exploration of Puritan reading and the relation-
ship of text and reader, and it informs all of his writing. In “The Decay of Lying,” for example, Vivian argues that: “life imitates art far more than art imitates life. . . . Life holds the mirror up to art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by a painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed of in fiction” (666). In De Profundis Wilde suggests that “at every single moment of one’s life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been. Art is a symbol, because man is a symbol” (64). In this text, Wilde elevates Christ as an “artist” who can negotiate the moral and the ethical: Christ “felt that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death” (87). For Wilde, human life is a process of developing types, images, and identities that form themselves fluidly in the negotiations between readers and texts and that move and change as life moves in a narrative.

This idea of a fluid self instead of a fixed self is not contrary to Puritan reading, for the whole point of reading the Bible for the Puritans is to move and change as one draws closer to God and to imitating Christ, living in the now while at the same time aiming for the not yet. Significantly, many critics also discuss Wilde’s writings as spiritually and morally formative for readers even if they neglect to make connections to historical Bible-reading practices. For example, Frederick S. Roden says he will not apologize for “suggesting such a moral Wilde” and for seeing Wilde’s texts as having spiritual purposes for the reader. He sees De Profundis, for example, as “invit[ing] the reader to experience death and potential resurrection for her- or himself” (“Introduction” 1). Allison Pease argues that Wilde’s texts lead readers to “self-realization” and, as Wilde saw Jesus doing, helping others to develop their personalities (108). John Albert even urges readers to consider Wilde’s writings as “material for the monastic exercise of lectio that leads to meditation, prayer, and contemplation” (241).

Experimenting with Puritan hermeneutics, the spiritual and moral relation of reader to text, life to art, is foundational in Wilde’s thought. He is not afraid to question typology, however, or to test the basic ideas upon which it rests. Dorian Gray puts into tension two dominant strains of thought in Wilde’s day: Puritan social morality and reading practices, which are seen to emphasize moral character formation; and decadence or aestheticism, which stresses a sort of aesthetic experience that is

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8. Individual Bible-reading became extremely important to Wilde during his days in prison. According to Killeen, “Wilde fell back on sole consumption of the King James Bible. This dependence on sola scriptura faith led him further along the road toward liberal Protestant thought than he had ever ventured before” (162).
presumably detached from the concerns of morality. In many ways, these ideologies shape Dorian’s contradictory wills and his spiritual and moral trajectory.

Fundamentally, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* plays with the conversion plot of false to true self, type to antitype. In this plot, however, God does not create and reveal Dorian Gray’s “true self”; rather, two human creators, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton, create not one true self but two “true selves” of Dorian Gray. The novel is about Dorian’s struggle to know which is “the real Dorian” (45). Basil Hallward claims to capture the “real Dorian” in his portrait of him, and in fact, tells Dorian and Lord Henry that the painting is more real than the version of Dorian that Henry is creating (45). Henry also believes the living Dorian he creates is the “real Dorian Gray” (43).

Both Basil and Lord Henry acknowledge their roles as creators, and ironically, both see themselves infusing their own souls into Dorian. Basil retains moral concerns about this process: he will not sell or display the painting because he is worried he has revealed too much of his own soul therein, and later in the novel, he confesses to what he calls his “idolatry” of Dorian, seeking remission of sorts for his adoration of him. Henry, on the other hand, believes that to “influence” or create a person is immoral, but he does it anyway. Henry argues that “to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul” such that all of that person’s sins, passions, virtues, and thoughts become borrowed and are not his own (34). Despite this stance, Henry directs Dorian’s plot, even vowing “to dominate him” (52). He openly admits that “to a large extent the lad was his own creation” (72), and that he essentially uses him to perform an “experiment” (73). Dorian’s two true selves, then, are made in the image of his two creators.

Dorian feels Henry more than Basil identifies most powerfully his true self. His first encounter with Henry is narrated in dramatic terms of self-discovery: Dorian wonders “why it had been left to a stranger to reveal him to himself” (38), and Henry states that “the moment I met you I saw that you were quite unconscious of what you really are” (39). Aristotelian-like, Henry believes “the aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly,” so he consciously makes efforts to “influence” and guide Dorian into developing into his true self. Dorian to Henry is a

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9. The 1890 first edition of the story contained much more explicit homoerotic suggestions regarding Basil’s relationship with Dorian during the painting of the portrait. Wilde removed these for the 1891 edition. For more on the differences between the two texts, see Joseph Bristow’s introduction to third volume of the Oxford University Press’s *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (2005).
“marvelous type,” or “could be fashioned into a marvelous type, at any rate” (52). Henry’s words about youthfulness and beauty strike Dorian’s soul to the core in what is described as a dramatic conversion moment: “the full reality of the description flashed across him” (41), and “a sharp pang of pain struck through him like a knife and made each delicate fiber of his nature quiver” (42). At this point, Dorian prays his body will remain forever young and that the painting instead will show the effects of time. This prayer, which seems to come true, is much like the pact Christopher Marlowe’s Faustus makes with Mephistopheles and links the novel to the Faustian tragic tradition as well.

Both Basil and Henry refer to the “soul” and see their creation of Dorian as a new type of human being united in materiality and spirit. Basil feels Dorian has inspired in him a new modality of art, one that recovers the “harmony of soul and body” in an age where “in our madness we have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void” (28). Henry also believes the Dorian he creates will unite matter and spirit: “Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul” (37). While both use the term “soul,” Basil and Henry have different views of the “conscience.” Basil’s idea of the “soul” retains the Puritan idea of an inner truth or moral conscience, while Henry’s reunion of body and soul produces a uniform, singular entity that is not separable nor gradated by depth.

This quest to reunite matter and spirit is a common one for many late-Victorian aesthetes and early modernists, and it arises as a response to the sort of moral judgment that is seen to dominate late-nineteenth-century British culture, to separate body and soul, and is often labeled “Puritan.” This tension is narrated often in terms of “asceticism” and “aestheticism,” which are also terms Henry and Dorian use. In late-nineteenth-century discourse, both words are generalized into vague umbrella concepts. The “ascetic” is associated with the moral and with anything that restricts the body such that human fulfillment is thought to be hindered or repressed and drawn into an empty realm of abstraction. The “aesthetic” transcends both moral consequences and the consequent hindering of bodily life. However, despite the notion that the “aesthetic” transcends the “ascetic,” aesthetic experience is narrated as involving a return of the soul to the body in order that a fuller presence or immanence in the world is possible. The “aesthetic,” in other words, provides a rich spiritual experience in which one comes to embody one’s self more authentically, more freely, more naturally, and in a more unified way than the disciplinary effects of asceticism could ever allow. Wilde’s use of the terms is part of a wider
discourse in the late nineteenth century, and many across Europe speak in these same terms of the ascetic and the aesthetic. Wilde was particularly enthralled with and shaped by Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance*, perhaps the quintessential English aestheticist text, and he often publically proclaimed his allegiance to aestheticism. His novel shows, however, that aestheticism and asceticism are much more complicated than merely being two mutually exclusive options.

Both Lord Henry and Dorian tie the ascetic to Puritanism. For example, Dorian thinks of his self-development as “a new Hedonism, that was to recreate life and to save it from that harsh, uncomely Puritanism that is having . . . a curious revival” (143). He views the philosophy of “experience itself” as having nothing to do with that “asceticism” that “deadens the senses” (143). Dorian and Henry see their aestheticist theory, in contrast, as promoting a “new spirituality” for the modern age (143). Aesthetic experience in their sense, then, is “spiritual,” and being “aesthetic” is the way in which Henry and Dorian practice a “religion.”

Their use of the word “aesthetic” is akin to the term “ethical” in this book, although not equivalent entirely. I argue that the aesthetes were generally not interested in a formal theory of beauty or philosophical aesthetics, but rather in a certain type of experience. This experience of aesthetic discernment and unity was also often thought to embody a higher “ethics.” Several have argued that this is what Wilde promoted: an aestheticist higher ethics. Pease, for example, argues that even though Wilde maintains often that art and morality are distinct, in actuality ethics for Wilde are “bound up in the idea of individual becoming, a process that is dependent on aesthetic consciousness. To be aesthetically conscious, to contemplate, is to act ethically” (112). This sounds quite similar to how the New Ethical critics see the ethical. To them, the experience of interpretive difficulty, of unknowability, involves some sort of aesthetic contemplation. Unlike the New Ethical theorists, however, Lord Henry never maintains a concern for others or for the limits of his own understanding and knowledge. The aestheticist higher ethics for Henry is non-communal and solipsistic.

This novel is a good example of how the terms “aesthetic” and “ethical” might overlap in meaning and connotation. While Henry’s aestheticism has some elements of the “ethical” (in the terms of this book) in that

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10. Pericles Lewis argues in *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* that modernist novelists develop a form of spirituality he calls the “secular sacred.”

he purports to exist outside the norms of social morality, generally the “aesthetic” for Henry and Dorian is not about trying to understand or accept others or to recognize the self’s limits. As this chapter shows, Wilde judges and rejects this failure of aestheticism. Because Henry’s term “aesthetic” is not entirely equivalent to what this book calls the “ethical,” I will continue to use “aesthetic” to refer to Lord Henry’s theories and to the experiences of his “Dorian,” keeping in mind the similarities in the two formulations. The novel contrasts Henry’s aestheticized Dorian with Basil’s moral Dorian, producing a dialectic parallel to the larger novelistic narrative’s dialectic of the ethical and the moral.

In the two “true” Dorians Wilde pits a painting against a living reality, but Wilde ironically reverses the functions one might normally attribute to painting and to narrative. Paintings in the late 1800s are beginning to be discussed in terms of the “significant form” they capture, the “aesthetic emotion” they invoke in the viewer, and the sense of presence they achieve, capturing a spiritual realm in material form in a manner that is normally not accessible to the inhabitant of modernity. Paintings are still, an image not bound to the movement of time. In Wilde’s novel, however, Basil’s painting takes on a function normally attributable to the novel and to narrative; instead of capturing eternally an unchanging image of Dorian, the painting develops and changes as time passes. It does what narratives do in capturing the moral and social trajectory of a person. In this sense, the painting is like the typological reader of a novel, with the novel being Dorian’s life. Embodying the moral conscience of its creator, Basil, the painting identifies with Dorian’s “true moral self” and transforms itself accordingly. In turn, Dorian in his real life, at least for a while, becomes like a painting and does not change over time or develop. He remains the same outwardly, young and beautiful, a captured image in which others fail to detect signs of change. Dorian supposedly achieves the experience of living without any typical moral concerns and this “true aesthetic self” reflects Henry’s aestheticist stance. In this reversal, the painting, which is more like the reader of a narrative, imitates the living Dorian, who is more like a painting, and art imitates life such that it is difficult to tell which is more real. So why does Wilde reverse the normal functions associated with painting and with narrative? Why have the painting reveal a moral self that changes over time and the living Dorian a static aesthetic self?

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12. See the writings of Walter Pater, Bernard Berenson, and Roger Fry for examples of English and American art historians who develop similar ideas in this period.
What is at stake in Wilde’s pairing of the two Dorians is the epistemological, ontological, and ethical nature of the self upon which Puritan reading is based. Basil and the painting retain something like the Puritan function of art by which the self can see his own inner nature revealed in the narrative, although it reverses the positions of subject and object. Dorian’s social body, on the other hand, reflects Henry’s aesthetics, which are founded merely upon a dismantling of Puritan hermeneutics. In pitting Puritanism against that which escapes it but exchanging the functions of narrative and painting, Wilde is not just presenting a playful game, although it always does seem to be that in part. Rather, the contrasts and reversals highlight the hermeneutical concepts Wilde examines and cause the reader to engage actively and rationally with those concepts. Does art shape the reader or viewer morally and spiritually (ethically)? How? What is the efficacy of Puritan hermeneutics (Basil) and of its aestheticist dismantling (Henry)? Although the novel might seem at first to be a harsh attack on Puritanism or Christianity, in the end, neither the Puritan nor the aestheticist view is able to encompass Dorian’s “true self” on its own. Before arguing that idea, however, and looking at the climactic scenes of the novel, I first examine in more detail the nature of Dorian’s two selves—the aesthetic self and the moral self.

Dorian’s aesthetic self at first seems to embody his creator’s (Henry’s) ideas. Significantly, Henry sees England governed by two forces which he sees as hopelessly intertwined but about which he can speak separately: “the terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion” (35). To use Benedict’s terms, Henry sees England governed by a mix of “shame culture” (social morality) and “guilt culture” (religion). Unlike the Puritan ideal in which social morality and Christian spirituality are perfectly confluent, in Henry’s late-Victorian England, morality and religion are seen as influencing each other but as discursively separable from one another. Henry labels these moral and religious forces at various times “Puritan,” “modern” (29), “medieval” (35, 93), and “middle class” (123). Henry speaks often of the separability of social-moral categories from “reality,” and in fact, he does not see value in any categories. All concepts of virtue, faith, and morality are not real to him because they are merely theoretical: “It is in the brain, and in the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place” (35). In a very Nietzschean-like statement, with whom Wilde may have been familiar through his mother’s studies, the concept of sin for Henry causes humanity to become sick, for any impulse having to be “strangled” simply “broods in the mind and poisons us,” hindering humans from a fulfilled
Henry sees all classes preaching the importance of virtue but seeing no necessity for it in their own lives (30). In these statements and others, Henry reacts against the ways in which both morality and religion abstract life into an empty realm of concepts, ideas, and spirit, which then regulate the body such that its freedom is contained and its desires disciplined. Such extraction and regulation, both in religion and in social morality, are associated by Henry with Puritanism.

Henry’s views, however exaggerated or inaccurate, reflect a wider dissatisfaction present in Wilde’s era. What once seemed a coherent view of the world for early modern Puritans by the late nineteenth century seems fragmented at best, to some inefficacious, inauthentic, even dangerous. Following in the wake of Newman and Arnold, aestheticist and modernist responses in art and literature that highlight aesthetic-ethical experience over moral judgment often express deep discontent with modern social morality and its shallow typecasting practices. Wilde’s novel seems unique, however, because it is entirely self-conscious of the tension between Puritan hermeneutics and its ironic dismantling, and it presents a plot in which Dorian’s two selves embody and dramatize this tension, highlighting the idea that both modern morality and the novel are at a crisis point.

The inauthenticity and emptiness of the modern social-moral discourse that “Puritans” uphold is in part what Wilde’s character, Henry, is reacting against when he says things like: “Modern morality consists in accepting the standards of one’s age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality” (92). Through Henry, Wilde’s novel exposes the ways in which the social-moral discourse has become abstracted from the idea of a real inner moral conscience (“guilt culture”) to become merely a hypocritical social and moral typecasting (“shame culture”). Of course, Henry rejects both the ideas of Puritan guilt culture (conscience, sin, moral absolutes) and the practices of his society’s shame culture. It is important to remember that Henry’s is only one possible response (and not Wilde’s) to the state of modern morality as he rejects all things moral and religious in favor of the aesthetic.


14. Wilde is influenced by both John Ruskin and Walter Pater, and in many ways, one could trace the ideas of both teachers on Wilde’s thought.
Another way in which Henry dismantles Puritanism is in his refusal to believe in the idea of “character formation” upon which it is based. The human soul needs no refining or transformation through conversion. Life’s experiences, to Henry, “have no ethical value”:

Experience was merely the name men gave to their mistakes. Moralists, had, as a rule, regarded it as a mode of warning, had claimed for it a certain ethical efficacy in the formation of character, had praised it as something that taught us what to follow and showed us what to avoid. But there was no motive power in experience. It was as little of an active cause as conscience itself. (73)

These remnants of Puritan guilt culture that Henry links to English social morality—virtue, sin, character formation, the conscience, learning through experience and reading, and moral lessons—are also the typical concerns of the English novel tradition which Wilde consciously enters but has his character, Henry, attack almost outrageously. At several points, Henry bashes the tradition for its moral concerns, saying for example: “Of all the people of the world the English have the least sense of the beauty of literature” (58). English novels adhere to “medieval emotions” (93) as they explore concepts of virtue and vice through their “vulgar realism” (206). Reading an English novel is like going out on the town at too early an hour (70). In these statements Henry echoes many of Wilde’s thoughts about English fiction, which he felt was poorly written, too moralistic, too middle class, and an embarrassment. Yet while Henry’s life seems to be formed only by its rebellion against and supposed escape from English social morality and Puritan religion, we should not necessarily believe he reflects Wilde’s position. Henry is an extreme sovereign subject who wills his views onto others and who believes an escape from the Puritan influences in society is entirely possible.

Henry also consciously inverts the ontology and epistemology of typological moral judgment. In biblical typology, as one reads the narrative and in turn allows the reading process to read the self, surface clues reveal deep truths about the characters one is reading about as well as about the self—one’s true nature lies deep within, but the surface provides evidence as to this nature. To Henry, in contrast, people who attempt to “look deeply” are really quite “shallow,” for to him there is no mysterious inner moral and spiritual reality to be discerned (39). Instead, Henry calls for aesthetic judgment of the surface: “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not
the invisible” (39). For Henry there is no need in society for moral judgment. “One’s own life, that is the important thing. As for the lives of one’s neighbors, if one wishes to be a prig or Puritan, one can flaunt one’s moral views about them, but they are not one’s concern. Besides, individualism really has the higher aim” (92). The only judgments that should be made are of surface beauty, which reflects soul and body in unison. Any identification that assumes there is a separate deep reality or conscience that can be discerned based on surface clues automatically limits human potential because according to Henry “to define is to limit” (207).

Henry cites both “Nature” and the “Hellenic ideal” (35) as the foundation for his approach to life, reflecting the influence of Walter Pater and others involved in Victorian Hellenism. The “aesthetic self” involves a perfect union of senses and spirit, body and soul; an immanent presence in the world; a “harmony with one’s self” that is authentic (92); an individualistic fulfillment of the self without regard to one’s neighbors. This aesthetic state is for Henry and Dorian a spiritual state of human flourishing. In an argument with Basil, Henry claims that pleasure and beauty are the highest goods: “When we are happy, we are always good, but when we are good, we are not always happy” (92). Living aesthetically opens up the limits of Puritan morality in both its “guilt” and “shame” culture forms, and this opening of the categories to achieve immanence is itself seen to be a superior ethical and spiritual position because it restores man to his natural state and to his fullest possibilities. Henry strives after the same sort of experience outside categories and limits that the new ethical theorist does, but without the latter’s concern for the “Other” or for his own limitations. To Henry, the individual self is the measure of all things, the sole interpreter of self and truth, the sovereign.

To summarize so far, Henry’s “aesthetic self” emerges in the dismantling of the Puritan idea of the self. Ontologically, Henry denies that there is a deep and essential true self that struggles to emerge from false senses of self. Instead, he sees no separation of body and soul, materiality and spirituality, surface and depth. As Dorian reflects later: “those who conceive the ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence” demonstrate only a “shallow psychology” (155). Instead, following Pater, “man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, 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” (155). Historical traditions and legacies of thought bear themselves out in the flesh, shaping man and limiting his body and hence his soul in a myriad of ways. The goal for Henry is to
be free of such limitations, to recover one’s natural and essential presence in the world in which body and soul are unified, never allowing any one narrative, theory, or set of categories (limits) regarding human identity to regulate that union. Epistemologically, Puritan typology relies on physical or outer signs to identify the nature or status of the soul, to read the depths of the true self. People have “characters” that can be identified and known, at least in part, but ultimately only fully by God. Henry, in contrast, believes there is only surface, no depth, and hence only aesthetic judgment can be performed. Morally, in Puritan typology the human soul needs constant refining over time, and hence reading and experience, with God’s help and with proper self-reflection, can aid in the development of one’s character or true self. Henry, in contrast, does not believe in the ideas of “character” and “character formation” and hence simply seeks experience for itself, not for some other end.

Despite his outspokenness, Henry’s position is ironically subverted within the text. Dorian the beautiful painting who walks the streets of London himself becomes a type, and the aestheticist stance that dismantles Puritan typology and stresses the aesthetic to the detriment of the moral is revealed to be the very process that creates types and the limits Lord Henry is so desperate to escape. Dorian becomes more his “true self” through typological reading of a sacred text, the famous “yellow book,” and Henry’s aestheticizing process is depicted as itself an asceticism learned through typological identification. As Dorian reads the book and lets the book read him, as his real life gradually imitates the life of the main character in the yellow book, one could say Wilde is again merely playing around with one of his favorite themes, the fluid relation between art and life. But more than just play is going on. Wilde is showing us that the fluid relation between art and life—the experience of identification and transformation of the self that occurs in the interaction of reader and text and that in turn shapes our artistic expressions—not only is unavoidable, but also is the same relationship of text and reader involved in Puritan Bible-reading.

It is well-established that Wilde’s inspiration for the yellow book is a text by which he himself was fascinated from the French aestheticist and Catholic decadent movement: J. K. Huysmans’ 1884 À Rebours. Dorian’s reading of it begins immediately after he flings away the newspaper report of Sibyl Vane’s suicide (“how horribly real ugliness made things!” [137]). Just as Marlowe’s Faustus has the deadly sins paraded before him, Dorian

15. For more on this text see Guy and Small, and also Schuchard.
finds in the book “the sins of the world” laid out before him (138). The book is described as

a novel without a plot and with only one character, being, indeed, simply
a psychological study of a certain young Parisian who spent his life trying
to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought
that belonged to every century but his own, . . . [loving equally] those
renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those nat-
ural rebellions that wise men still call sin. (138)

The book draws Dorian into an experience of reverie, simultaneously
mystical and lurid, such that “one hardly knew at times whether one was
reading the spiritual ecstasies of some medieval saint or the morbid con-
fessions of a modern sinner” (138). It is exactly one of those novels from
which some Puritans tried to keep their youth (and it sounds a bit like
Briony Tallis’s novella in Atonement). Moral judgments are impossible to
make while reading this book because the typological limitations demar-
cating sin and mystical ecstasy, virtue and vice, are blurred. On one level,
then, Wilde presents Dorian’s experience of reading the novel as an ethical
experience he has for its own sake—authentic, outside morality and the
limits of the self, achieving immanence, restoring spirit to body, a simple
“letting be.”

Yet Dorian also seems self-consciously aware of the nature of typol-
ogy, and he reads both the yellow book and history this way intentionally,
rationally understanding his transformation into the ultimate antitype.
The narrator tells us that for years, Dorian does not free himself from the
influence of this book. He buys nine copies of the first edition in Paris and
has each bound in a different color, “so that they might suit his various
moods and changing fancies” (139). He reads the main character typo-
logically: “The hero, the wonderful Parisian in whom the romantic and
scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind
of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to
him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it”
(139). Despite Henry’s rejection of Puritanism, and later his claim that
art and books can never actually influence action, Wilde still has his hero
“develop” through typological reading. Although his outward appear-
ance does not change, Dorian reforms himself based on his identification
with the aesthete character he is reading about. This implies that Henry’s
view of the self is just as much a type as the Puritan-like types Henry cri-
tiques. Ironically, then, aestheticism is merely another form of asceticism:
the aesthetic self is formed or constructed through discourse and practices that also imply boundaries and limitations, and this self, too, although it thinks of itself as amoral, nevertheless implies a moral position. Just as Puritans felt Bible-reading was simultaneously morally and spiritually instructive, so Wilde, despite his playful claims to the contrary in the preface, portrays novel-reading as simultaneously morally and spiritually formative.

Through the influence of the book, Dorian self-consciously reads himself as the antitype or fulfillment of history, both in his own family line and in literature. He loves to walk the halls of portraits in his home, imagining the ancestors depicted there and wondering if “his own actions were merely the dreams that the dead man had not dared to realize?” (155). Dorian also feels he has ancestors in literary history, who are “nearer perhaps in type and temperament” to him than those of his own family (156). Dorian imagines that all of literary history has led to himself, that “in some mysterious way their lives had been his own” (156). The hero of the yellow book also feels this way, and Dorian reads repeatedly those chapters in which the hero identifies with ancient heroes of the past and reflects on all the seemingly “amoral” types of the Renaissance, developing a “horrible fascination” with them all (157–58). The yellow book itself, then, outlines the trajectory of the amoral aesthete as social type and historical category, and although he is aesthetically and imaginatively drawn to the character, Dorian also rationally sees himself becoming its antitype within his present English society. He relishes in maintaining his surface beauty while the painting hidden away in the attic reflects the moral self, such that many in society look to him as “the true realization of a type” of which they themselves had only dreamed (142). He sees himself becoming a model that represents a new “spirituality” for society that would find in the spiritualizing of the senses and the instinct for beauty its “highest realization” (143).

Dorian’s typological identification of self with the character in the yellow book is an aesthetic experience because the reading experience allows Dorian to rethink himself as somehow above or outside both guilt culture and shame culture—it is through reading the yellow book that Dorian is able to forget his moral failings in the Sibyl Vane case and even to forget the dead body of Basil in the attic. He becomes the sole interpreter of text and self. Surely Wilde wants his readers to react to this. However much one may be drawn to the sort of experience, freedom, and fulfillment of desire that Dorian supposedly achieves, one also has to judge his escape from morality: murder, causing and then not caring
about the suicide of the once-beloved Sibyl, surely these are reprehensible.\textsuperscript{16} The novel shows readers that Henry’s Dorian is an inefficacious theory of self because it utterly fails to take moral responsibility for its actions in the world. It believes itself to be ethically superior but fails to recognize its own inadequate moral position. In explicitly highlighting the reading process and its effects, Wilde’s story suggests that all narratives have an implied morality, no matter how much they attempt to escape it, and all reading, however aesthetic, ethical, or spiritual, implies a moral position and potentially shapes the reader.

On the other hand, Basil and the true self of Dorian in the painting retain their moral functions in Dorian’s life. Readers may respond negatively at times to their asceticizing effects on Dorian or to the lack of agency Basil and the painting exhibit, but they should also be relieved there are some forces in the novel that still judge and seek accountability for moral and social behavior. The painting performs a narrative typological function—it marks the life and time of Dorian, increasing in its horrors with the weight of events and revealing what experience does to Dorian’s moral and spiritual nature. Basil, too, although initially overcome by Dorian’s beauty, is and remains a moral agent. When Henry spouts that pleasure is the highest good, Basil raises questions about moral consequences that Henry then labels medieval: “But surely, if one lives merely for one’s self, Harry, one pays a terrible price for doing so?” (92). Basil goes on to discuss things such as remorse, suffering, and the “consciousness of degradation” which might accompany the narcissistic pursuit of pleasure (93). Unlike Henry, Basil approves of Dorian’s love interest in Sibyl Vane, and later, after she commits suicide, Basil challenges Dorian on moral grounds for his role in the affair. Basil also confesses his “idolatry” of Dorian that had occurred during the painting of the portrait. Yet in the end Basil’s Dorian is also an inefficacious theory of the self because it is unable to take action in the world: even though it retains

\textsuperscript{16} The reader perhaps notes by now the conspicuous absence of any discussion of sexuality or sexual desire in this chapter. Clearly this was one of the moral issues with which Wilde played in the novel, which generated controversy about the novel, and which has recently been a dominant topic in Wilde scholarship. Surely part of Wilde’s concern is the moral judgment made on same-sex desire by his “Puritan” society, yet at the same time, the aestheticized sexuality alluded to in the novel is bound up with Dorian’s other immoral actions, making it difficult to determine what, if anything, Wilde was implying. My intent here is not to draw a conclusion about Wilde and this topic. Those who wish for more can perhaps work further with the general conclusions drawn at the end of the essay regarding typological hermeneutics. In any case, the murder of Basil, the suicide of Sibyl, and Dorian’s general lack of care for others seem to me to be the events of the novel that Wilde sets up to evoke universal moral condemnation when judging Dorian’s “aesthetic self.”
a moral function, the painting remains passive and alone in the attic, unavailable to others for viewing, judgment, or interaction. It acts like the reader of a narrative, but it cannot escape its position as a stationary piece of art.

The climactic chapters of the novel pit the two selves of Dorian against each other over the exact issues of Puritan moral judgment and epistemology. Gradually, fears infiltrate Dorian’s existence, such that his modes of “forgetfulness” allow “the great fear that seemed to him at times almost too great to be borne” to seep in (152). When Dorian’s secret life has reached its darkest depths, Basil stops in to confront Dorian over the rumors he has heard and to express his disappointment in the course Dorian’s life has taken. At first, Basil can not believe the rumors because he does not detect anything in Dorian’s appearance: “I can’t believe them when I see you. 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” (158). Basil believes one can read people’s faces and bodies and identify clues as to a person’s inner moral and spiritual state, and that this is crucial in identifying and formulating moral judgments: “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” (158). He admits, however, that he does not know Dorian fully: “I wonder do I know you? Before I could answer that I should have to see your soul” (164). Immediately he adds, but “only God can do that” (164). When Dorian shows him the painting, Basil receives information he thought reserved for God, and his theory is shown to be true—one’s moral state is revealed in the body. Basil believes that “the foulness and horror [of the painting] had come from within” and not from the paint he had applied (170). The painting has a deep spiritual self that reveals itself in the surface, and the surface provides evidence of the inner self’s state. After this revelation, Basil judges Dorian on moral grounds, but he also offers redemption, pleading with Dorian to pray, to confess, to seek cleansing (170). Dorian, however, believes it is too late, does not believe the words of scripture, and in a fitful rage, murders Basil.

The painting, which reveals Dorian’s moral self, acts like a narrative, the genre by which Puritan hermeneutics operates. There is a narrative according to which Basil makes his moral judgments and by which they are viewed as the truth, yet this narrative allows for movement in time. In this sense of biblical narrative, one is never locked into a type for one can always convert or turn, with God’s help, from one’s previous self. Based on a communal tradition and narrative larger than the self, one can
always imagine new possibilities for one’s own story with the help of the Holy Spirit and the sacred text. Dorian thinks of himself as a type, however, and this prevents him from undergoing any change, despite Basil’s encouragement that it is possible. Henry’s aestheticism locks Dorian into one theory of how the self may be fulfilled and allows no room for alteration. In this way, the painting, which reflects the moral self that many in the nineteenth century link to the stiffening, deadening effects of Puritanism, actually retains the narrative context within which Puritan typology was ideally originally practiced, a context allowing for judgment but also for change, seeing the human subject both in the “now and the not yet.” The living Dorian is like an unchanging painting and is associated with aesthetic experience and ethical freedom. This “true self” is ironically revealed to be the product of that process which creates the types and limitations from which escape is supposedly needed. Ironically, aestheticism is a narrow vision that thinks it has the “one thing needful,” to echo Arnold, yet it fails to perceive its own limitations. It even seems to be more “Protestant” in Newman’s sense than Puritanism is.

After the murder of Basil, the struggle among Dorian’s two selves intensifies. The canvas “sweats blood” and becomes more horrifying, giving Dorian a longing to convert to what he calls his “good self” (220). Dorian challenges Henry on some of his ideological positions, and in a moment of desperation Dorian confesses to Basil’s murder. Henry, however, who has rejected all forms of Puritan ontology and epistemology, does not know how to read Dorian’s moral character at all: “I would say, dear fellow, that you were posing for a character that doesn’t suit you” (223). He does not believe that someone as beautiful as Dorian could commit a crime (224). Henry thinks Dorian has remained “the same” and continues to be the “the perfect type”: “you are the type of what the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found. I am so glad you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture, or produced anything outside yourself! Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets” (227). Dorian believes the yellow book poisoned him, and he begs Henry never to give it to anyone else, but Henry denies the power of any book to do such a thing: “Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. . . . The books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame” (228). Henry’s inability or unwillingness to participate in any moral judgment makes him culpable in evil: his influence helps lead to the deaths of three people and the demise of countless others whom Dorian has influenced. Because he fails to see how his creation of Dorian
as an aesthetic self is itself a limiting typological identity, Henry is unable to discern Dorian’s true moral and spiritual nature as murderer. The aesthetic type implies a moral stance in the world of life, whether Henry sees it or not. The aesthetic type believes it is has achieved a higher ethical freedom, but that freedom is a fiction.

Henry also seems to remain oblivious to the manner in which his dismantling of Puritan hermeneutics reinforces the very processes he reacts against. The aesthetic experience he wants Dorian to embody involves the creation of the self into the antitype of the new spirituality and is the very process that creates limits and lasting images of a person. It isn’t the Puritan moral conscience that does this; it is the moral deformation that occurs in aesthetic experience that does this, a process that is not simply an imaginative experience of letting be but also involves rational judgment. In Henry’s Dorian, the novel highlights the inseparability of the aesthetic (or ethical) from the moral and the inseparability of aesthetic experience from rational activity. In Basil’s Dorian, the novel exposes as false the perception that Puritan guilt culture is the source of all limits: Puritan morality instead works within a narrative that allows for change and openness. The aestheticist inversion of that view, ironically, is exposed as the process that creates lasting images and identities. Yet neither position alone is satisfying, for the painting retains its moral function while unable to act in the world, and the aesthetic subject experiences beauty and pleasure only at the cost of social and moral irresponsibility and criminal activity. Guilt culture is not enough. Shame culture is not enough. And Henry’s aestheticist individualism is also not enough. Wilde’s novel critiques equally Victorian aestheticism and Puritan social morality, revealing both to be limiting forms of asceticism.

These tensions reach their climax in the ending: an incredible tragic scene. Dorian stabs the painting, but the knife ends up killing his body, which turns old and decrepit, while the painting recovers his youthful beauty. The ending has generated several main lines of interpretation. Some argue the story is a “moral tale” and the dead Dorian whose body now reflects the passing of time and the moral effects of his actions is the real Dorian. Others posit that the story is predominantly aestheticist and hedonist and the young and beautiful Dorian in the painting is the real Dorian, captured eternally in art, the final fulfillment of his desire and potential. Alternatively, others have argued that both are equally

valid interpretations left juxtaposed to represent a pluralistic view. As Josephine Guy and Ian Small put it: the novel “integrates” decadent themes into a “conventional morality tale while simultaneously leaving the values of both intact” (173). As they see it, Christian piety opposes aestheticist decadence but in the end does not supersede it (176). Both responses are “simultaneously available to readers” as the novel leaves us in a “morally ambiguous” situation of “moral pluralism” (177). At one level, this line of interpretation seems right: both Doriens do remain juxtaposed in the imagination at novel’s end and afterwards. Dorian is both the dead body and the image in the portrait. He is both the static type and that which the type failed to capture, and the mind goes back and forth dialectically between the two, shaping and at the same time disrupting the memory of who he is and was. This dialectical movement to which the reader is led, however, does not leave us in the passive position of accepting or tolerating pluralism. Rather, the ending dramatizes the typological reading process, an active movement: we detect surface clues and try to make rational sense of it all by placing those clues into conceptual categories or types, but with the difficulty of doing this, we also at some level have imaginatively to let the paradox of who Dorian ultimately is, his “unknowability,” simply “be.” At this ending point of the novel, readers are forced to go back and forth between rational moral judgment that derives from what they currently know and believe, and intuitive “ethical” experience that forces them to recognize their interpretive and epistemological limits.

Examining Wilde’s use of Hegelian tragic form helps delineate this dialectical movement of the reader and to challenge Guy and Small’s idea of “interpretive plurality.” Hennegan argues that for his entire life Wilde was concerned both with Greek and Christian tragedy. We know from Wilde’s notebooks how thoroughly he engaged in reading and thinking specifically about the Greek tragic tradition, both its primary texts (e.g., Aeschylus, Sophocles) and its history of interpreters (e.g., Hegel, Schopenhauer). As Smith and Helfand have shown, the notebooks and other writings also reveal Wilde’s profound engagement with and reworking of Hegel’s thought, especially his philosophy of history and art. Hegel’s theory of tragedy, which appears scattered throughout his writings but is seen especially in The Philosophy of Fine Art, integrally informs the structure of Wilde’s novel.

18. Critics who argue for the moral pluralism and hence moral ambiguity of the novel include: Guy and Small; Gillespie (“Ethics”); and also O’Malley.
Mark Roche describes the core structure of Hegel’s tragedy as involving the “collision” of “two substantive positions, each of which is justified, yet each of which is wrong to the extent that it fails either to recognize the validity of the other position or to grant it its moment of truth” (12). In Hegel’s words, while each opposed side has its “justification,” at the same time, each “tends to carry into effect the true and positive content of their end and specific characterization merely as the negation and violation of the other equally legitimate power,” and as a consequence, both are condemned (48). In other words, “each stance is constituted through its [negative] relation to the other” (Roche 17). For Hegel, both stances have “their own validity, but a validity which is equalized. It is only the one-sidedness in their claims which justice comes forward to oppose” (325).

Certainly one can see these ideas in the two Dorians Wilde juxtaposes and collides. The Puritan moral self and its aestheticist dismantling in the novel are dialectically dependent on each other, defined against each other. Yet because both positions hold what MacIntyre calls “truth claims,” neither one can dominate. This unresolvable collision of two partially valid yet constitutionally related positions can only result in the fall of the hero. Hegel argues that when the two one-sided moral powers “divest themselves of the one-sidedness attaching to the assertion of independent validity, . . . this discarding of the one-sidedness reveals itself outwardly in the fact that the individuals who have aimed at the realization in themselves of a single separate moral power, perish” (Hegel 324–25). Dorian cannot withstand the collision and contradiction of the two one-sided truth claims in himself. Both Dorians are incomplete and thus are false selves.

Yet for Hegel, while “the human result [of tragedy] is death, . . . the absolute end is the reestablishment of ethical substance” (Roche 17). At the end of a Greek tragedy, the conflict is drawn up into the process of history, the spirit of the Absolute. As MacIntyre might put this (MacIntyre’s analysis of Sophoclean tragedy in After Virtue is essentially Hegelian), in tragedy, particular historical expressions of an objective moral order are such that epistemologically humans cannot access the full reality of that moral order. Instead, different partial narratives “appear as making rival and incompatible claims on us” (143). The only universal moral order considered in this text within which moral truth claims could make sense is the biblical narrative, but as Wilde perceives it in his particular nineteenth-century context, neither the rival claims of aestheticism nor of late-Victorian social morality completely harmonize
with or embody fully this narrative. The tragic hero cannot overcome the conflict of two partially true formative narratives to achieve wholeness in himself.

The challenge, then, is left to the reader. The pluralist argument seems like the new ethical theorist’s argument. Rather than acknowledging one’s incapacity to reconcile rival truths and deeming it impossible to find a rational way to bring the two together, opting instead to simply “let the ending be” in passive appreciation of pluralism and ethical experience, however, the tragic ending calls for the reader to work harder to engage the competing moral truths. Such a reading is consistent with how both Hegel and Wilde thought of catharsis. For Hegel, the catharsis of tragedy takes place in the “consciousness of the audience” as it “recognizes the supremacy of the whole of ethical life and sees it purged of one-sidedness” (Roche 17). Within the experience of tragic drama for Hegel there is a reconciliation in which “definite ends and individuals unite in harmonious action without mutual violation and contradiction” (Hegel 49). Through catharsis or the “annulment of contradictions,” the audience gains a sense of the greater moral order and historical process that can draw the collisions of one-sided truth claims into itself (Hegel 71). To Wilde, catharsis is a “spiritualizing” experience, an awakening of the soul to new knowledge (Smith and Helfand 72). The Hegelian tragic form Wilde uses, then, urges the reader to engage dialectically the rival moral claims, to seek reconciliation of what is rightfully authoritative in each set of claims with the guiding hope that an objective order of moral truth exists. The tragic ending thus might be seen as “lyrical” in Charles Altieri’s sense, a powerful moment in the text that evokes the will of the reader to seek reconciliation and a wider truth, to act upon its new awakening (51).

What MacIntyre calls a “Sophoclean insight” seems also to be a “Wildean insight”: “it is through conflict and sometimes only through conflict that we learn what our ends and purposes are” (164). The tragic structure of Dorian Gray suggests that in order to recover a valid morality for society, one has to have a narrative by which moral judgments are agreed upon to be true, and Wilde’s novel, as so many novels do, still regards the biblical narrative, however fragmented, as the most valid historical possibility. At the same time, the fullness and truth of that narrative and its moral and spiritual order needs to be recovered and revitalized so that it is more viable, open, living, effective, accessible, and responsible in the historical, moral world of action. The Hegelian tragic conflict of the novel reveals that while both late-Victorian Puritan social morality and its aestheticist dismantling are inadequate in and of themselves, each must
be granted its “moment of truth” in light of the other. Yet on this point, while Michael Gillespie’s claim that the novel calls for an “intellectualism based on a receptiveness to numerous systems of values” seems right, the novel does not simply promote “inclusiveness” or “pluralistic interpretive patterns” (*Poetics* 56, 48). Instead, the dialectical structure rests on the idea that a universal order of truth does exist, and for Wilde and the novel genre, whether ironized or not, this order is grounded in the biblical narrative of history. Truth is thus not endlessly deferred, but must be actively pursued, taking into account the partial truths offered in various historical narratives while pursuing the ultimate truth of the not yet.

While many have interpreted Wilde’s own life as an enactment of Dorian’s tragedy, implying that he did not achieve a sense of reconciliation in his own soul, his novel implies that the key to reconciling the moral and spiritual truth claims of these colliding views (as well as others) is that the tendency or desire to divide and then oppose the moral to the aesthetic (and to the higher ethics associated with the aesthetic), has to be overcome, for it is a tragic collision. According to this novel, in fact, moral and aesthetic discernment cannot be separated. They do not use different human faculties (both use rationality and imagination), nor do they access separable kinds of knowledge. They work together dialectically in the typological reading of novels, the self, and art, in the inescapable fluid exchanges that shape the self and its views of reality and truth.

The tragic form of Wilde’s novel suggests that true moral and spiritual knowledge is something for which humans strive from within the trappings of the historical world, and by which they seek access to a larger process or narrative of moral and spiritual order. The novel also implies that true moral and spiritual knowledge is gained only through some sort of dialectic between 1) moral judgments based upon the interpretation of surface evidence and the placement of that evidence into conceptual categories or types that are agreed upon to be true and thought to be known, and 2) the ability to step away from that process, recognizing one’s knowledge as always incomplete, merely to experience the beauty of one’s presence, face to face with others, in a world much bigger than the self. In this sense, the moral and the aesthetic/ethical, rationality and imagination, constantly need to be dialectically harmonized. To see them as separate entities or as irreconcilable—as Henry (and much of modernity) did—is very dangerous indeed. To choose one over the other is tragic, but to see the self as passively existing among the two is equally tragic. The fate of the novel and the fate of society, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* implies, both depend on the wills of readers to reconcile actively the
ethical (aesthetic) and the moral as they read, experience, and interpret
the texts that are art, the texts that are living people, the texts that are
themselves, all the while maintaining hope that there exists a moral and
spiritual order to the universe.

Wilde’s Hegelian ending brings the reader to a point of unknowability
but with a hope that a higher order exists and even more importantly,
with an imperative that unknowability does not condone passivity in the
moral, historical world. This structure is parallel to what typological
Bible-reading ideally also does as it engages a self that is both “now and
not yet.” Puritan Bible-reading was not merely a moral, rational reading
of the self, as by the late nineteenth century it was stereotypically identi-
fied, but also involved aesthetic faculties and sensibilities. One goal of
Bible-reading was intimate and personal spiritual and moral growth and
insight, a process that could not occur solely in a rational way, a pro-
cess always in process, never finished. Ideally, typological Bible-reading
involves a dialectical movement between an ethical or spiritual “letting
be” as one reads, and a rational consciousness of one’s reading experience
and self. Identifying with a character, seeing points of contact and sur-
face clues in the text and also in the self involves imagination and intel-
lect, emotional connection and rational judgment, an opening of the self
to text that may be unconscious at first but can lead to conscious trans-
formation. The self’s dialectical contradictions are repeatedly drawn up
into the truth of Christ. To reduce reading to only the moral or only the
aesthetic-ethical, especially in stereotypical and exaggerated ways, is to
limit the human soul and society’s potential. For Puritans, there is a moral
and spiritual order to the universe, and Bible-reading reminds the reader
of his proper place within this order. Wilde’s use of Hegelian tragic form
problematizes what is seen to be human knowledge regarding a univer-
sal moral and spiritual order within which the reader might place her-
self; nevertheless, it does not try to escape completely the Christian view.
Wilde seems to know that the Puritan narrative is the narrative upon
which the novel is built and against which it has always reacted. Yet his
novel suggests that the novelistic dialectic of Puritanism and its disman-

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19. Recent criticism on Wilde tends to oppose Protestantism as a whole to various
strands of Catholicism, reducing Protestantism either to a “rationalism” that opposes
Catholic decadence, imagination, and aesthetics, or to a “realism” that opposes a Catholic-
influenced sense of the fantastic, the ritualistic, the folkloric, the romantic, the Irish. Killeen,
for example, tends to overgeneralize Protestantism as emphasizing the “empirical and the
rational” in order to contrast it with Catholicism (168). Such oppositions are too narrow,
or at best reflect Protestantism’s straying in modernity from the fullest senses of Puritan
reading practices.
tling, confinement and escape, which assumes the moral and the aesthetic-ethical are mutually exclusive modes of life, is itself a limiting narrative. His novel leaves us at the point of wondering how and whether society and the novel—and even historical Christianity—might become something new.