IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER we discussed the ways in which the society comedies have been central in shaping our modern conception of what is a typically Wildean play. In this chapter we will make a similar case about the centrality of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in shaping our views of Wilde as a writer of fiction. That work tells us emphatically—should we need to be told—that Wilde was quite unlike the great Victorian novelists who preceded him. From the point of view of form and structure, he was one of the first writers to exploit the possibilities afforded by the new, short, one-volume novel. He was also happy to engage creatively with the enormous changes taking place in the late-nineteenth-century periodical trade and publish a complete novel in a single issue of a magazine (rather than the more usual practice of serializing it). Wilde was not interested in realism, nor in depth or “roundness” of characterization, nor in representing what earlier writers had called the “great web” of contemporary social life. For Wilde the outcome of all the assiduous moralizing which had underwritten the popularity of the three-decker novel was simply that “the good end happily and the bad unhappily” (as Miss Prism defines fiction in Act II of *The Importance of Being Earnest*).

The themes of *Dorian Gray*, particularly its anticipation of twentieth-century concerns like conspicuous consumption and the pleasures of city life, seem to align it with a nascent modernity. We see Dorian wining and dining, going to the theatre and to art galleries, visiting opium dens, being a member of a shooting party in the country but, in contrast to his worthy mid-Victorian fictional predecessors, never working, and never talking about work. The anxieties which animate his life could not be further from those tensions between duty and personal gratification, between money and morality, and between work and leisure, which had formed the subject matter of so many earlier novels. In fact what makes *Dorian Gray* seem so quintessentially Wildean—exactly that sort of...
novel one might expect Wilde to write—is its opposition to what we habitually take to be traditional Victorian values.

This sense of *Dorian Gray*'s “difference” is also to be found in its interpretative openness or plurality: the novel’s resistance to any single or simple reading has allowed it to be seen as a precursor to the full-blown modernist fiction of, say, Joyce, Woolf, or Ford. That resistance is also what permits us to glimpse Wilde’s apparent interest in male-male desire, a subject which is constantly suggested in the novel, but only via nuance and innuendo (as we noted in chapter two it is perfectly possible to read *Dorian Gray* as a straightforward morality tale, at the centre of which is the doomed romance between Dorian and Sybil Vane). As numbers of critics have noted, *Dorian Gray* succeeds in combining a variety of what might on the surface seem to be incompatible themes and styles. It debates complex ideas about art and its relation to life, liberally paraphrasing or directly quoting parts of Pater’s *Renaissance*. It simultaneously exploits subgenres, such as detective fiction and magic picture stories, whose popularity depended on their accessibility to a wide audience and their ability to entertain. In a similar vein, those long set-piece rehearsals of connoisseurship and taste, reminiscent of the dialogues in *Intentions*, which take up so much of the early section of the novel, are paced quite differently from the dramatic events which occupy its other chapters, such as Dorian’s macabre and sinister arrangements for the disposal of Basil’s body and his terrified flight from the avenging James Vane. The contrast between moments such as these, designed to thrill, and the studied intertextuality found in other parts of the novel—where, for example, Wilde “borrows” verbatim long passages from contemporary accounts of ancient Rome, or of fine stones and jewels, or of tapestries—is unique in late-nineteenth-century British or Irish fiction. Moreover, all of these elements have proved to be meat and drink to scholars and literary historians, who have identified a wide range of

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**Wilde’s “Sources” for *Dorian Gray***  The works upon which Wilde drew when he was writing *Dorian Gray* may be divided into four categories. First, there are those which may have inspired the basic conception of his story—his use of the *doppelgänger* motif and the idea of the changing picture. Here numerous possible influences have been suggested, including Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Oval Portrait” (1842), Wilhelm Meinhold’s *Sidonia the Sorceress* (1847–1848), Edmond de Goncourt’s *La Faustin* (1882), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and Edward Heron-Allen’s *Ashes of the Future (A Study of Mere Human Nature): The Suicide of Sylvester Gray* (1888). Second, there are *Dorian Gray*’s debts to other “aesthetic” works or novels, notably Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), as well as Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *A Rebours* (1884); this last work is assumed by most critics to be the model for the “yellow book” given to Dorian by Lord Henry—that “novel without a plot, and with only one character”—which so absorbs his attention.
analogues and sources from French, German, and English literature for many of the descriptive details in the novel.

Alongside its strong melodramatic storyline—murder, suicide, and failed love—Dorian Gray also has passages of broad and witty social satire (similar, and occasionally identical, to that found in the society comedies), and these work to undermine the reader’s ability to locate the story’s moral. The dull self-righteousness of the working-class “hero” (James Vane) is as much a target of Wilde’s wit as the carelessness of the aristocracy; similarly, the sinister, Svengali-like aspect of Lord Henry’s character is constantly undermined by his sharp verbal repartee, his habit (as Dorian puts it) of cutting “life to pieces with his epigrams” (Complete Works, III: 251). Here again scholars have found much to discuss in Wilde’s representation of the customs and manners of the upper and working classes: so the etiquette of gentlemen’s clubs, of smoking, of dressing for dinner, of social ostracism, as well as the deference expected of working-class subjects for their “betters,” and the social geography of London can all be usefully elucidated for the modern reader. So too can the details and myths surrounding opium dens and the troping of the novel’s latent Orientalism. And then there are the famous passages of purple prose typically used in moments of heightened emotional tension: they include those occasions when Basil is trying to articulate his feelings to Lord Henry, or Dorian is contemplating his own imminent social ruin. As some scholars have argued, it is possible to see in these passages a stylistic self-consciousness which once again anticipates modernism. Certainly in these passages it is difficult for a reader to know how seriously the emotions which they register are to be taken.

continued Third, there are a number of specialist studies upon which Wilde drew for certain descriptive details of the novel, volumes such as A. H. Church’s Precious Stones Considered in their Scientific and Artistic Relations (1886), William Jones’s History and Mystery of Precious Stones (1880), and Alan S. Cole’s translation of Ernest Lefébure’s Embroidery and Lace (1888) (which Wilde had reviewed for the Woman’s World). Fourth, for many of the historical elements of the novels—the accounts of classical Rome or Renaissance Italy—Wilde made use of such well-known works as Suetonius’s Life of the Caesars and some parts of John Addington Symonds’s seven-volume study The Renaissance in Italy (1875–1898). In addition to all these materials, the novel also contains numerous allusions to, and quotations from, contemporary French Decadent writing, particularly by Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire.
In its witticisms, its brevity, its interpretative openness, its themes, as well as the controversy which surrounded its first publication, Dorian Gray seems to embody everything we associate with the name of Wilde. It even has a cast of characters with whom we can readily identify the author and his social milieu. There are dandies and artists; there is the cultured older man who educates a younger ingenu; there has, though, been much debate about who, if any, from Wilde’s young male acquaintances inspired the character of Dorian—as far as we know he had not yet begun his relationship with Alfred Douglas when he wrote the novel. There are also those powerful dowager-duchesses who police the activities of attractive young men, as well as the dowdy dull daughters they are trying to marry off, and those pushy nobodies who are attempting to enter London society. (Moreover, the names of some of them, such as “Mrs. Elynne” and “Lady Gwendolen,” Lord Henry’s sister, reappear in the society comedies.) There is even a beleaguered member of the professional classes, Alan Campbell, whose skills as a chemist Dorian ruthlessly exploits to dispose of the body of Basil Hallward.

For all these reasons, the publication of Dorian Gray is often seen to mark the beginning of that exceptionally productive four-year period in which Wilde wrote all the works for which he is best remembered today—Dorian Gray, Intentions, the four society comedies, and Salome—and which culminated in 1895 in An Ideal Husband and The Importance of Being Earnest running simultaneously and to huge popular and critical acclaim in the West End. That moment of success has in turn typically been understood as one following a long period of journeyman work, and the point of transition (in the early 1890s) has been described

A Book for “Perverted Telegraph Boys”  A month before “The Picture of Dorian Gray” was published in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine (1890) Wilde had written to another publisher claiming that his work would “make a sensation” (Complete Letters, 425). This judgment proved prophetic, though not perhaps in quite the sense that Wilde had been anticipating. Some publications, like Punch, merely mocked his efforts. But others—particularly the Scots Observer, St James Gazette, and Daily Chronicle—were openly condemning, complaining about the novel’s “ordure,” and its offensiveness to all “decent persons.” Such comments in turn led W. H. Smith, the largest (and also perhaps most conservative) bookseller in the country, to remove all copies of the British edition of Lippincott’s from its shelves, on the grounds that the story had been “characterised by the press as a filthy one” (Holland, 310). So vituperative and personal were these hostile reviews that Wilde felt obliged to respond, vigorously defending his story in letters to those newspapers which had so offended him. This negative publicity proved less than helpful when Wilde tried to find a publisher for a book version of his story; the prestigious house of Macmillan, for example, noted sourly in their rejection letter that there was something “rather repelling” about it (Guy and Small, 70).
as coinciding with Wilde becoming aware of the real nature of his own sexuality. As we mentioned in chapter two, Richard Ellmann most forcefully articulated this argument by asserting that homosexuality “fired” Wilde’s creativity. This narrative, combining sexual awakening with a new artistic sophistication, has, however, a number of rarely acknowledged consequences.

The first is that *Dorian Gray* is seen principally as a starting point, the beginning of what is seen as Wilde’s mature style. This in turn has meant that the novel is usually linked—at least in terms of themes, wit, satire, and so forth—with the works which followed it, particularly the society comedies, and not those which preceded it. As we noted in chapter five, reinforcement for this view can be found in the reappearance in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* of some of the jokes and epigrams in *Dorian Gray*. Second, as we mentioned in chapter two, if we see the early 1890s marking a change in Wilde’s attitudes to his own sexuality, then biographical readings of *Dorian Gray*—in which the novel is seen as rehearsing both the pleasures and the anxieties of the more promiscuous gay life he was leading—become almost impossible to resist. As a consequence critics have looked for equally rich personal references and subtexts in the works which succeeded the novel: the idea of Wilde’s “mature style” thus comes to be defined (at least in part) by its self-disclosure. This concept of his mature style, as we argued in the previous chapter, has tended to obscure the nature of the success enjoyed by the society comedies, as well as the significance of some of the late unfinished plays, which are much more personal in the themes they explore.

A final and for us more telling consequence of this narrative is that Wilde’s novel is rarely seen in the context of his other works of fiction. If we view

continued When the book version was eventually brought out in 1891, with six new chapters and numerous other stylistic changes, by Ward, Lock & Co. (the British publisher of *Lippincott’s*), it sold slowly and relatively poorly. The first and only reprint in Wilde’s lifetime, issued in 1895, was a commercial disaster, and was remaindered within a year. Yet it is hard to know whether such failure was due to the story’s notoriety—that “decent” readers had indeed been put off—or whether the earlier and much cheaper periodical version had simply exhausted the market (in the winter of 1890 three specially bound numbers of *Lippincott’s* had been issued with material from the earlier six months’ issues: all three had “The Picture of Dorian Gray” as the lead item). Furthermore modern critics remain divided over the reasons for, and the significance of, the revisions Wilde made for the book version of his story. For some, they were an act of self-censorship, an attempt to tone down the controversial homoeroticism of the periodical text by working up the melodramatic, and more conventional, elements of the tale (the figure of James Vane, for example, does not appear in the *Lippincott’s* version). Others, however, have pointed to a pragmatic need to expand that shortish periodical text to justify republication in book form, noting that some of the new material, such as the witty account of Lady Narborough’s dinner and the shooting party, merely replaces one form of social provocation with another.
Dorian Gray as developing out of Wilde’s career as a writer of short stories, rather than the beginning of his period of success as a dramatist, we have a much more rounded sense of Wilde’s accomplishments as a writer of prose fiction as well as a firmer understanding of why the novel works as well as it does. We suggested that the unfinished plays allow us to understand that the popularity of the society comedies exists in part in their use of familiar genres and in their resistance to programmatic biographical interpretation. In a similar way, Wilde’s earlier short stories help us to appreciate those powers of synthesis which define the singular achievement of Dorian Gray. In that novel, Wilde developed a style, unique in his *œuvre*, in which revelation and concealment, transgression and conformity, self-conscious intellectualism and simple entertainment, are held in a perfect balance. Dorian Gray is simultaneously both “high” and “low” art: a popular story which entertains without any academic mediation, but one which has also provided opportunities for richly detailed scholarly commentaries.

**Intertextuality and Allusion in Wilde’s Fiction**

It is easy to overlook the fact that, in addition to his short novel, Wilde produced three other volumes of fiction: *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and Other Stories* (1891), and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). Although the last two books appeared after Dorian Gray, nearly all the stories in them had been written some years earlier—probably in the late 1880s, when most were published in magazines such as the *Court and Society Review* and the *Lady’s Pictorial*. The three volumes amount to some thirteen stories; the total reaches fourteen if we include “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” a piece which was published separately and which is also sometimes classified as criticism.

“The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”: Criticism or Fiction? Like Dorian Gray, “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” exists in two quite different versions. The first takes the form of a short “story” (to borrow the term which Wilde asked to be used in an advertisement for the piece) published in the July 1889 issue of *Blackwood’s Monthly Magazine*. The second is a manuscript reworking of that story (currently held in the Rosenbach Foundation in Philadelphia) which consists of the marked-up periodical text with much additional material on interleaved folios. This longer version expands and complicates the story’s critical elements, so it becomes less a work of prose fiction and more like the kind of writing we find in *Intentions*. However, this version was never published in Wilde’s lifetime, and we cannot therefore be certain whether it represents finished work. Nonetheless, this is the text of “Mr. W.H.” which most modern readers encounter, for since it was first published in 1921 by Mitchell Kennerley, it has provided the basis of several popular editions (including the text published in the Collins Complete Works).
Of these, however, there are probably only three or four which can lay claim to a genuine and long-lasting popularity like that of *Dorian Gray* and the society comedies. They are: the often reprinted and much anthologized “The Happy Prince” and “The Selfish Giant,” now considered classics of children’s fiction; “The Canterville Ghost,” which has been turned into an animated film; and also (perhaps) “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime.” The first two stories are probably the only works in Wilde’s entire *oeuvre* which have had a life completely independent of their author, in the sense that the majority of readers (children) will have first encountered them without any knowledge of Wilde’s controversial private life. In this respect, they stand as polar opposites to *Dorian Gray*, a work which, as we suggested in chapter two, is virtually impossible to read without Wilde’s presence looming over every page. “The Happy Prince” and “The Selfish Giant” may also seem the least relevant to the overall argument of the present book, for an appreciation of them hardly seems to require any form of academic mediation or specialized knowledge. In particular, the spare, straightforward language of “The Selfish Giant” resists any kind of intertextual or contextual framing, although an observant reader might notice how the central motif—the solitary weeping child trapped in the wintry corner of the garden—seems to be recapitulated in *De Profundis*, when Wilde observes that “wherever there was sorrow, though but of a child in some garden weeping over a fault that it had or had not committed, the whole face of creation was completely marred” (*Complete Works*, II: 107).

To say that some of Wilde’s short stories do not need academic mediation or specialist knowledge does not mean that scholars have had nothing to say about them. A modern editor of “The Happy Prince,” for example, might wish to draw the (adult) reader’s attention to a number of topical and literary allusions which it contains, as well as to the ways in which it rehearses images, phrases, and themes to be found in several of Wilde’s later works. In other words, in this early story we can see the multiplicity of interests and styles which characterize *Dorian Gray*, but worked through in a much less sophisticated manner. So that same editor might want to comment on how the comic elements of “The Hap-

**continued** Because those same readers usually come to “Mr. W.H.” after reading Wilde’s better-known works, especially *Dorian Gray*, they are also inclined to understand what Wilde called his “Willie Hughes theory” as rehearsing a similarly dangerous homoeroticism. Yet in distinction to his novel, there is little evidence to suggest that Wilde’s short story aroused any such suspicions in the minds of its original reviewers. It was in fact quite favourably received, and only a few reviews discussed the piece from the point of view of morality; most preferred to focus on the vexed question as to whether Wilde’s story was just whimsy.
py Prince,” such as the swallow’s courtship of the reed—an attachment viewed as “ridiculous” by his avian companions because the reed “has no money and far too many relations”—echo in a rather laboured way Wilde’s later satire in both Dorian Gray and the society comedies on contemporary marriage customs. She might also draw attention to the fact that the journey eastward made by the swallow’s friends makes use of imagery in Théophile Gautier’s poem “Ce que disent les hirondelles” in Emaux et camées (a volume Wilde knew well and to which he also alluded several times in Intentions, and again in chapter fourteen of the book version of Dorian Gray). Scholarly exegesis can also illuminate the significance of the reference to the “great granite throne” where “the God Memnon … watches the stars, and when the morning star shines he utters one cry of joy, and then is silent,” a sentence which anticipates the following lines in Wilde’s poem The Sphinx: “Still from his chair of porphyry gaunt Memnon strains his lidless eyes | Across the empty land, and cries each yellow morning unto Thee” (Complete Works, I: 192). Moreover the Prince’s description of the “young man in a garret” with his “lips red as pomegranate” and his “large and dreamy eyes” anticipates Wilde’s later (and often more obviously homoerotic) descriptions of male beauty which also concentrate on those facial features. Then there is the “Art Professor’s” comment on the statue of the Prince—“As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful”—the surface meaning of which is enriched by a knowledge of its contemporary reference within a complex late-Victorian debate about beauty and utility, and more particularly its connection to the writings of William Morris, a critic of Aestheticism who argued forcefully for a necessary connection between utility and beauty. Again these ideas are picked up in later works, most famously in the final aphorism in the Preface to Dorian Gray—that “All art is quite useless”—but also, of course, in Intentions.

So although “The Happy Prince” seems straightforward—it is designed, after all, to appeal to children—academic commentary of the kind we have outlined can help us to see traces of an ambition which exceeds the simple moralizing of the genre which was familiar to Victorian readers of children’s fiction. At the same time, though, it also needs to be acknowledged that when we attempt to deepen our understanding of that ambition and, say, tease out the significance of the allusions we mentioned above, we come to a curious dead end, in the sense that an appreciation of the story’s intertextual references does little to help us understand its main themes. “The Happy Prince” may contain the same mixture of styles as Dorian Gray, combining witty social satire with conventional Christian moralizing and those elaborately sensuous descriptions which we associate with Wilde’s “purple prose,” but these styles are not synthesized with anywhere near the same subtlety, sophistication, and elegance. We can better appreciate this distinction by comparing the uses Wilde makes of the same source—Gautier’s Emaux et camées—in both works.
In “The Happy Prince,” the swallow is talking to the Prince about his impatience to migrate south and east, and the terms which he uses to describe the attractions of Egypt are familiar elements in what readers have come to recognize in Wilde’s later works as a Decadent lexicon: that is, a concentration on rare and precious jewels, on unfamiliar flora and fauna, on strange peoples, and on mysterious buildings and artifacts:

“I am waited for in Egypt,” answered the Swallow. “To-morrow my friends will fly up to the Second Cataract. The river-horse couches there among the bulrushes, and on a great granite throne sits the God Memnon. All night long he watches the stars, and when the morning star shines he utters one cry of joy, and then he is silent. At noon the yellow lions come down to the water’s edge to drink. They have eyes like green beryls, and their roar is louder than the roar of the cataract.” (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 175)

And a little later:

“In Egypt the sun is warm on the green palm-trees, and the crocodiles lie in the mud and look lazily about them. My companions are building a nest in the Temple of Baalbec, and the pink and white doves are watching them, and cooing to each other. Dear Prince, I must leave you, but I will never forget you, and next spring I will bring you back two beautiful jewels in place of those you have given away. The ruby shall be redder than a red rose, and the sapphires shall be as blue as the great sea.” (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 177–78)

And finally:

He told him of the red ibises, who stand in long rows on the banks of the Nile, and catch gold fish in their beaks; of the Sphinx, who is as old as the world itself, and lives in the desert, and knows everything; of the merchants, who walk slowly by the side of their camels, and carry amber beads in their hand; of the King of the Mountains of the Moon, who is as black as ebony, and worships a large crystal; of the great green snake that sleeps in a palm-tree, and has twenty priests to feed it with honey-cakes; and of the pygmies who sail over a big lake on large flat leaves, and are always at war with the butterflies. (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 179)

At one level, these images are being used in the service of a typical, and typically unspecific, Victorian Orientalism, whose function has nothing to do with the actuality of Egypt, but merely represents a familiar Victorian “other.” In the story it stands as a colourful, sensual, and exotic alternative to the grim “ugliness” and “misery”—as the narrator puts it—of the Prince’s recognizably late-Victorian English city. But we might pertinently ask what difference it makes if we are alert to the fact that parts of that description—for example, the reference to the “Second Cataract” and “Temple of Baalbec”—originated in a poem by Gautier. What particular “point” does the allusion give to that generalized or unspecific Orientalism?
Most obviously a recognition of the allusion serves to remind the (adult) reader that the exoticism of the East also involved what the philistine “Town Councilors” in “The Happy Prince” would have considered sexual “otherness”—that is, those forms of desire that were forbidden in Victorian Britain. In French Decadent authors like Gautier the sensual appreciation of beautiful and rare objects, such as precious gems or statuary, is usually eroticized. In turn that appreciation is identified with an interest in uncommon forms of sexuality, such as hermaphroditism. That Wilde was fully aware of this quality of Gautier’s writing, that he knew it was part of Gautier’s attraction for him, and that he expected most adult readers to share that reading experience, can be seen in a somewhat supercilious letter, written a couple of years later to the *Daily Chronicle* in defence of *Dorian Gray*, in which he paired *Émaux et camées* with the “Satyricon of Petronius Arbiter,” explaining that both were “literary books … that any fairly educated reader may be supposed to be acquainted with” (*Complete Letters*, 436).

The allusion to Gautier in “The Happy Prince” might thus lead the informed (and again adult) reader to recall the role which the “foreignness” of Egypt could have played in the lives of middle-class and aristocratic Victorian homosexuals. The modern reader might also recollect the role Egypt played in the sexual life of Douglas, and how it was to provide him with a temporary escape from the constricting censure of Victorian morality. However, if we are predisposed to think of the allure of the East in these terms, then we must also acknowledge that the story (like Wilde’s society comedies) leaves little space for such hints to be developed. For the attractions of the East (whatever they are) are invoked only to be systematically dismissed. In the conclusion of the story Egypt is displaced by what is presented as an altogether more noble and permanent alternative to the hard-heartedness of Victorian London, that Christian transfiguration to be found in “the garden of Paradise.” Moreover, the Prince is only able to enter that garden when (with the swallow’s help) he has given away all his exotic worldly goods, his jewelled features, and the gold leaf that covers his body.

What Wilde appears to be doing with his French source is appropriating its Decadent images, but in so doing removing those values which gave French Decadence its suggestive power—its ability to subvert and provoke. In this respect Wilde’s use of Gautier in “The Happy Prince” has a recognizably “British” quality, familiar from contemporary British dramatists’ use of the French well-made play, or from contemporary British novelists’ use of French naturalism. Despite its criticism of Victorian materialism, Wilde’s tale—like all fairy tales—is at heart conservative; its moral is that self-denial on earth is rewarded in heaven. In contrast to what we see in *Dorian Gray*, Wilde seems not yet to have been able to integrate Decadent themes into a conventional morality while simultaneously leaving the values of both intact. This of course explains why “The Happy Prince” has a straightforward and uncomplicated appeal to
the child reader; it also explains why academics can “do” relatively little with it. Teasing out the literary allusions and explaining Wilde’s use of French Decadent imagery does not alter our sense of the story’s moral, because that imagery does not disrupt the tale’s hierarchy of discourse. To put this another way: a knowledge that the images are imported from Gautier does not change the way we view their narrative function.

This limitation—if that is the right word—becomes clear if we compare Wilde’s later use of exactly the same source in chapter fourteen of the book version of *Dorian Gray* (chapter twelve of the *Lippincott’s* text).

He sighed, and took up the volume again, and tried to forget. He read of the swallows that fly in and out of the little café at Smyrna where the Hadjis sit counting their amber beads and the turbanned merchants smoke their long tasselled pipes and talk gravely to each other; he read of the Obelisk in the Place de la Concorde that weeps tears of granite in its lonely sunless exile, and longs to be back by the hot lotus-covered Nile, where there are Sphinxes, and rose-red ibises, and white vultures with gilded claws, and crocodiles, with small beryl eyes, that crawl over the green steaming mud; he began to brood over those verses which, drawing music from kiss-stained marble, tell of that curious statue that Gautier compares to a contralto voice, the “monstre charmant” that couches in the porphyry-room of the Louvre. But after a time the book fell from his hand. He grew nervous, and a horrible fit of terror came over him. (*Complete Works*, III: 305)

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**Wilde’s Ideal Reader** When Wilde felt obliged to defend works which had been labelled immoral—that is, principally *Dorian Gray* and his second volume of fairy tales, *A House of Pomegranates*—his tactic was typically to question the intelligence of the reviewer by claiming that any “fairly educated reader” or “fairly educated person” would have no difficulty at all in understanding his work. This may seem an odd tactic, given that it was precisely the allusiveness of his writing—its intertextual quality—which gave it its suggestive power: we gain more insight into Dorian’s character from what he reads than from what he does. But Wilde’s concept of “education” meant more than simply catholic reading, ploughing through what he termed in *Intentions* “the monstrous multitudinous books that the world has produced.” Much more important was the attitude with which one read, particularly when it came to “literary” books. As Gilbert explains: “We, in our educational system, have burdened the memory with a load of unconnected facts, and laboriously striven to impart our laboriously acquired knowledge. We teach people how to remember, we never teach them how to grow. It has never occurred to us to try and develop in the mind a more subtle quality of apprehension and discernment” (Ross, ed., *Intentions*, 216). From this perspective, being “fairly educated” meant reading with an attitude appropriately receptive to the works to which Wilde alludes. In the case of literary art, this meant (as Wilde explained in a pithy but unpublished epigram) that “in the presence of a work of art the public should applaud and the journalist be silent” (*Oscar Wilde Revalued*, 131).
The passage occurs shortly after Dorian has killed Basil Hallward. While he is waiting for Alan Campbell to arrive to help him dispose of the corpse, he takes up a book as a distraction, to forget that “the dead man was still sitting there.” The nature of that reading has in turn already been indicated very precisely. In the preceding paragraphs we have been told that the particular book which Dorian has in front of him, given to him by a young male friend, Adrian Singleton, is *Emaux et camées* in “Charpentier’s Japanese-paper edition, with the Jacquemart etching.” Wilde is thus not only explicitly signposting his allusion, but he is also placing it in a very obvious context: Dorian’s reading habits are being defined in recognizably Decadent terms, as a form of connoisseurship. Decadent too is his manner of reading, a dreamy self-immersion and forgetting—he pauses, from time to time, to reflect upon certain lines with “half-closed eyes”—and this blurs the distinction between the world he is inhabiting (where he is a murderer) and the world he is imagining. The suggestive power of that reading can be seen in the fact that the selfsame edition of *Emaux et camées*, with its “eau-forte par Jacquemart,” was still available for Ezra Pound to use in his 1920 poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* as an evocation of a decadent life.

Just before trying to lose himself in the exoticism of Gautier’s East, Dorian has read aloud—and Wilde has quoted—some verses from another poem in *Emaux et camées*, “Variations sur le Carnaval de Venise.” The first stanza that Dorian reads plays upon images of water and upon the juxtaposition of red and white: “Sur une gamme chromatique, | Le sein de perles ruisselant, | Le Vénus de l’Adriatique | Sort de l’eau son corps rose et blanc” (“As though upon a chromatic scale, her pearly breast streaming, the Venus of the Adriatic emerges from the waters, her body red and white”; *Complete Works*, III: 304). The red and white images of these lines in turn call to mind Basil’s final conversation with Dorian (in the preceding chapter) before he was stabbed. Horrified by what had happened to Dorian, Basil had suggested that they should “pray” together, quoting from Isaiah 1:18: “Though your sins be scarlet, yet I will make them white as snow.” Basil’s injunction of course fails, and it is difficult not to see this failure partly as a function of rhetoric: Basil can unfortunately remember only fragments from the Bible. Alongside the verse from Isaiah, he mentions a line or two from the Lord’s Prayer—“Lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our sins”—and a phrase from the *Lavabo* prayer of the Mass—“Wash away our iniquities” (*Complete Works*, III: 299).

These spare phrases of Christian forgiveness have thus to compete for attention with the rich sensuality of Gautier’s verse which Dorian will go on to quote and paraphrase at length. In contrast to “The Happy Prince,” then, here the relationship between the values of Decadent art (Gautier) and of Victorian morality (the Bible) seems much more finely poised. And it is in this context that the reader encounters the Orientalism in the passage we quoted above from chapter
fourteen; it is part of a discourse which has been opposed to, but not superseded by, conventional Christian piety. Its attraction thus remains intact, at least until Dorian’s musings are rudely interrupted by the “horrible fit of terror” which forcefully reminds him, and the reader, of “the dead thing” upstairs.

A further difference between the use of Emaux et camées in “The Happy Prince” and Dorian Gray is that Dorian’s paraphrase of Gautier’s poems explicitly foregrounds the oscillation between an imagined Egypt and the source of that imagining—a contemporary, if Decadent, Paris (“the Obelisk in the Place de la Concorde” and the “porphyry-room of the Louvre”). In this way, the “otherness” of the East is made more tangible and less foreign, and also, therefore, more dangerous—a movement opposite to that which takes place in “The Happy Prince.” (There is, of course, a long tradition in Victorian literature of using France and French culture to represent various freedoms—artistic, political, and sexual—that were unavailable to British subjects.) As the swallow grows weaker, the possibility of his reaching Egypt recedes and in the process the power of those pleasures which it represents is diminished. However, Dorian’s self-absorbed reading brings Eastern exoticism progressively closer, locating it (in the culmination of the passage) in a statue which some of Wilde’s readers, and certainly Wilde himself, would have seen.

The “monstre charmant” in the Louvre which Gautier describes in his poem “Contralto” (also in Emaux et camées) was popularly known as the “Sleeping Hermaphrodite.” The phrase Wilde quotes occurs in the following lines which make explicit the transgressive eroticism of the Decadent imagery: “Monstre charmant, comme je t’aime | Avec ta multiple beauté!” (“Charming monster, how I love you with your multiple beauty!”). We can get a useful sense of the symbolic value of that statue in late-nineteenth-century British culture from the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. Another admirer of Emaux et camées, Swinburne had written his own poem in celebration of the statue, entitled “Hermaphroditus” and published in his 1866 collection Poems and Ballads. That volume had in turn been the subject of a series of vitriolic and highly personal attacks, with “Hermaphroditus” singled out for condemnation. In a vigorous defence of his work, published in the same year in a pamphlet entitled Notes on Poems and Reviews, Swinburne attempted, in a manner similar to Wilde’s later defence of Dorian Gray, to turn the language of his detractors against them, provocatively accusing them of harbouring a “rottenness” beneath their prudery:

There is nothing lovelier, as there is nothing more famous, in later Hellenic art, than the statue of Hermaphroditus…. [T]he delicate divinity of this work has always drawn towards it the eyes of artists and poets. A creature at once foul and dull enough to extract from a sight so lovely, from a thing so noble, the faintest, the most fleeting idea of impurity, must be, and must remain, below comprehension and below remark. It is incredible that the meanest of men should derive from it any other than the sense of high and grateful pleasure…. I am not the first who has translated into written verse this
sculptured poem: another before me, as he says, has more than once “caressed it with a sculptor’s love.” … I cannot see why this statue should not be the text for yet another poem. Treated in the grave and chaste manner as a serious “thing of beauty,” to be forever applauded and enjoyed, it can give no offence but to the purblind and the prurient…. [U]nclean and inhuman the animal which could suck from this mystical rose of ancient loveliness the foul and rancid juices of an obscene fancy. It were a scavenger’s office to descend with torch or spade into such depths of mental sewerage, to plunge or peer into subterranean sloughs of mind impossible alike to enlighten or to cleanse.6

At this point we might note that Wilde uses exactly the same allusion to Gautier’s poem in “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” when he describes the personality of another murderer, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright: “like Gautier, he [Wainewright] was fascinated by that ‘sweet marble monster’ of both sexes that we can still see at Florence and in the Louvre” (Ross, ed., Intentions, 68).7

In both “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” and Dorian Gray a character’s tastes in art are presented as identical with a fascination with crime; yet they are simultaneously also a justification, or mitigation, for that criminality. It is precisely Dorian’s and Wainewright’s “superior” aesthetic sensibility which prevents them from being seen just as murderers (as simple stage villains from a melodrama), and this in turn maintains our interest in them as characters. Moreover, the reader needs to know something about the sort of writer Gautier was, and his reputation among late-nineteenth-century British readers, in order to understand the nature of the connection between the values which his writing celebrated and the characters of Dorian and Wainewright. (After all, Dorian could hardly have escaped the horrors of his situation in the same way by reading a three-decker novel.) At the same time, however, this does not mean that the reader who knows nothing about Gautier, or who is insensitive to (or repelled by) the verses which Dorian quotes, necessarily misunderstands this particular episode in the novel: that sort of reader will simply come to a different and more melodramatic conclusion about Dorian’s actions. Probably he or she will be appalled that he can even think of reading poetry—any poetry—with a dead man upstairs. The skill of Wilde’s writing is that it allows for both sorts of readings, and both sorts of responses to Decadent art, to be simultaneously available to readers.

In comparing “The Happy Prince” to Dorian Gray we can see how in the latter work Wilde is able to exploit the subversive potential of Decadence through a more sophisticated manipulation of its allusive and intertextual nature. This in turn helps to explain why such a popular and entertaining novel can also repay the dense scholarly commentary that it has attracted: the deeper one investigates the literary allusions, the more morally ambiguous, and thus more “modern,” the work becomes. By contrast, teasing out the allusions in “The Happy Prince” only reinforces its conservatism. The full nature of Wilde’s achievement can be better appreciated by a comparison with another of Wilde’s short stories, “The Fisherman and His Soul,” in which he seems to be striving for the
same effect he was to achieve in *Dorian Gray*—that is, for a similar kind of moral ambiguity in which the distinction between sinfulness and goodness is collapsed into a concept of beauty. This story, however, has proved to be much less popular than “The Happy Prince.”

**Experimenting with Decadence**

“The Fisherman and His Soul” is Wilde’s longest, most complex, and most ambitious short story. It was first published in 1891 in his second volume of fairy tales, *A House of Pomegranates*, a book which sold poorly, and which received lukewarm reviews. The tale had had its origins some years earlier: significantly, it seems to have begun life as a possible contribution to the Philadelphia-based journal, *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*. Wilde had been commissioned around August 1889 to write a story for that publication by the managing editor, James Stoddart, who was in Britain attempting to find material by promising young British and Irish authors. At the end of September, Stoddart wrote to Wilde to chase up his commission. Wilde, complaining of illness, equivocated; he later wrote that he was “unable to finish” the story he had begun and was “not satisfied with it as far as it goes.” A letter dated 17 December reveals the identity of this first piece: Wilde now claimed that he had “invented a new story, which is better than ‘The Fisherman and his Soul’” (*Complete Letters*, 414, 416). That new story was, of course, “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” which Stoddart went on to publish in the summer of 1890. The problematic unfinished story, “The Fisherman and His Soul,” was almost certainly set aside for some months, and unlike most of Wilde’s other short stories, it was not published in a periodical form.

That *Dorian Gray* developed out of Wilde’s work on “The Fisherman and His Soul” goes some way to explaining the thematic and stylistic similarities between the two works, particularly that interest in presenting sinfulness and goodness as just two sides of the same coin—or, as Wilde would later call them, different modes of life to be realized. (We have already seen the same pattern emerging in the unfinished *The Cardinal of Avignon* and *La Sainte Courtisane.* In both novel and story the narrative invites us to identify and sympathize with the feelings of the main protagonists, both of whom are beautiful young men (the fisherman, like Dorian, is described as a “pretty boy”); in addition both are tempted to part with their souls in order that they might follow desires which their society judges to be transgressive. For Dorian this means pursuing the “new Hedonism” proselytized by Lord Henry, and for the fisherman it means pursuing his love for one of the “Sea-folk.” Dorian’s liberation comes about via the magical properties of Basil’s portrait of him. The fisherman, in a reversal of the Hans Christian Andersen tale it draws upon, is able to cut away his soul from his body with a magic knife given to him by a witch. Both young men find that in some senses they have made a pact with the Devil, and both are haunted by the consciences they have tried to leave behind. Dorian has the
changing picture in his attic, which he is unable to ignore; the fisherman is three times confronted by his soul, which finally succeeds in returning (unwanted) to the fisherman’s body. Both characters also find that the self which continues to haunt them is frighteningly cruel: the picture, for Dorian, becomes increasingly “loathsome” (Complete Works, III: 356); the fisherman’s soul, without a heart, is transformed into “an evil Soul” (Ross, ed., A House of Pomegranates, 118). At the end of both stories body and soul are reunited, although on both occasions the price of that union is the death of the main character. When attempting to free himself from the picture’s influence, Dorian unwittingly stabs and kills himself; the fisherman, in a final show of defiance towards his soul, refuses to flee from the encroaching waves and is drowned while kissing “with mad lips the cold lips of the mermaid” (Ross, ed., A House of Pomegranates, 126).

In both stories the richly enticing sensual world “of the body” (as it is termed in “The Fisherman and His Soul”) is opposed by a judgmental Christianity represented, respectively, by Basil and the priest. In both fables the young male protagonists consistently ignore the advice and remonstrations of that older male authority, and although they both die for their transgressions, neither fully regrets the choice they have made. The moral agency of those figures of authority is thus significantly diminished: Basil dies virtually inarticulate and unnoticed by society; the priest finds himself “troubled” by the spectres of the dead fisherman and his mermaid lover, and is not able afterwards to preach “of the wrath of God,” but only “of the God whose name is Love” (Ross, ed., A House of Pomegranates, 128). In this sense, then, the death of the transgressive figure does not represent a straightforward triumph of good over evil. Rather—and in a manner which anticipates Wilde’s account of Christ’s attitude to sin in De Profundis—the values of a transgressive life remain intact, even in disgrace or death.

A further similarity between the novel and story lies in the way in which Wilde registers the realm of the body, for desire takes two distinct forms in both works. There is the all-consuming and self-annihilating yearning for an unattainable other—or simply “Love,” as it is termed in both novel and story. Examples of this kind of devotion are to be found in Sybil’s idolization of Dorian and in the fisherman’s adoration of the mermaid. We can also note here that, despite the thematic importance of this idealized and idealizing form of (hetero)sexual love, Wilde—as in the unfinished plays which we discussed in chapter five—seems relatively uninterested in exploring its specificity. In Dorian Gray most of the narrative, particularly in the Lippincott’s version, focuses on Dorian’s relationships with Lord Henry and Basil (rather than with Sybil). In the same way, in “The Fisherman and His Soul,” the fisherman’s transactions with the priest and his soul are recounted in considerable detail, but his emotional relationship with the mermaid is a complete blank—when he plunges into the waves to join the “Sea-folk” he simply disappears from the reader’s view. It is thus the drama of
a young man’s confrontation with forms of male authority that (again as in the unfinished plays) provides the dynamic of both novel and story.

Alongside “Love,” novel and story also describe a more generalized kind of desire, a longing for sensual gratification which typically takes the form of a covetousness, whether of art objects, of “curiosities” (a favourite Wildean term which appears in both works), or of increasingly rarefied experiences. Moreover, this form of desire is also explicitly empowering, an aspiration to dominate others which stands in obvious opposition to the sense of “wonder” and unworthiness that accompanies “Love.” As Sybil explains to her mother: “why does he [Dorian] love me so much?… [W]hat does he see in me? I am not worthy of him” (Complete Works, III: 222); and as the fisherman says to the mermaid: “I will be thy bridegroom … and all that thou desirest I shall do” (Ross, ed., A House of Pomegranates, 72). We see this second kind of desire in Dorian’s frenetic pursuit of “sensations that would be at once new and delightful, and possess the element of strangeness that is essential to romance” (Complete Works, III: 280), as well as in the exotic “marvels” with which the soul tries to tempt the fisherman. In both story and novel Wilde seems interested in setting these two forms of desire—one static and selfless, and the other dynamic and selfish—against each other, but the effect achieved is different in each case, and it is this difference which in turn helps us to understand both why Dorian Gray is the more successful work, and why Wilde may have been unsatisfied with “The Fisherman and His Soul.”

In the novel the language of “Love” is also the language of melodrama; this language brings with it melodrama’s fixed concepts of good and evil. However, melodrama, as we noted earlier, is not a particularly sophisticated subgenre, and for this reason the values it embodies, though conventionally “worthy,” are not necessarily to be taken too seriously. So Sybil’s death may be tragic, but the reader’s ability to respond to her as a victim is consistently undermined by the novel’s social satire, and more particularly by the flippant way in which Lord Henry treats Dorian’s emotional entanglement. He comments to Dorian at one point: “I was afraid I would find you plunged in remorse, and tearing that nice curly hair of yours” (Complete Works, III: 251). In a similar manner, Dorian’s impassioned description of his romance with Sybil, of her “little flower-like face … small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petal of a rose,” is met by Lord Henry’s withering (and Wilde’s famous) paradox: “When one is in love, one always begins by deceiving one’s self, and one always ends by deceiving others. That is what the world calls romance” (Complete Works, III: 213–14). By contrast, the language of personal gratification is conspicuously Decadent: sophisticated and allusive, as well as verbally extravagant, it is in itself a form of seduction, both sensual and intellectual. And this in turn is why it is difficult to dismiss the vari-
ous temptations to which Dorian falls prey, even as we recognize their devastating effects on his character. So, for example, the *tour de force* that is chapter eleven (chapter nine in the *Lippincott’s* version) of *Dorian Gray*, in which Dorian’s pursuit of the “new Hedonism” is so richly laid out for the reader, is much more eloquently suggestive than the few words that Sybil can muster to describe her self-denying love, even though we recognize the moral rightness of her assertion that “love is more than money” (*Complete Works*, III: 221). Another way of putting this is to say that much of the richness of reading *Dorian Gray*, that plurality to which we referred earlier, derives from the way in which Wilde’s use of different styles, with their different rhetorical effects, disturbs our ability to make judgments about the various kinds of desire he is portraying.

“The Fisherman and His Soul,” by contrast, does not have this stylistic complexity or, indeed, any stylistic variation: all the ways of describing desire—the fisherman’s love for the mermaid as well as the soul’s search for a rival to that love—employ the same Decadent language. Moreover, as in “The Happy Prince,” that language is straightforwardly aligned with the narrative voice: it is the descriptive technique which is employed throughout the whole story. Furthermore, none of the images is mediated via clearly signposted allusions. So even though it is clear (from the comparisons with *Dorian Gray*) that Wilde’s descriptions of the soul’s exotic journeys to the East were influenced by his reading of Gautier and of works such as J.-K. Huysmans’s *A Rebours*, these are not debts which he wished to acknowledge. We are not, in other words, explicitly invited to understand the exotic worlds and experiences which the story invokes as possessing the ambiguous values of Decadence, even though they are described in recognizably Decadent terms. And this results in a moral confusion, one quite different from the moral pluralism of *Dorian Gray*. For example, the fisherman falls in love with the mermaid chiefly because of her great beauty; and the manner in which that beauty is described, in the cadence of the phrasing, its repetitions, and the choice of modifiers, would not be out of place in *Salome*:

> Her hair was as a wet fleece of gold, and each separate hair as a thread of fine gold in a cup of glass. Her body was as white as ivory, and her tail was of silver and pearl. Silver and pearl was her tail, and the green weeds of the sea coiled round it; and like sea-shells were her ears, and her lips were like sea-coral. The cold waves dashed over her cold breasts, and the salt glistened upon her eyelids. (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 68)

Similarly the underwater world which the mermaid inhabits, and of which she sings to the fisherman, is described in terms of familiar Decadent exotica—that is, of rare stones, of remote and precious flora and fauna:

> [S]he sang of … the palace of the King which is all of amber, with a roof of clear emerald, and a pavement of bright pearl; and of the gardens of the sea where the great filigrane fans of coral wave all day long, and the fish dart about like silver birds, and the
anemones cling to the rocks, and the pinks burgeon in the ribbed yellow sand. (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 70–71)

Confusingly, however, the various other “worlds” which the story invokes are described using exactly the same type of language. So the description of the Devil who appears at the witches’ Sabbath is not very different from that of the mysterious “Sea-folk” whom the priest must learn to bless (and not different either from the descriptions of male beauty that we find elsewhere in Wilde’s oeuvre):

> His [the Devil’s] face was strangely pale, but his lips were like a proud red flower.… On the grass beside him lay a plumed hat, and a pair of riding-gloves gauntleted with gilt lace, and sewn with seed-pearls wrought into a curious device. A short cloak lined with sables hung from his shoulder, and his delicate white hands were gemmed with rings. (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 83–84)

Similar again are the sensual delights of those faraway places with which the soul tempts the fisherman to win him back from the mermaid. For example, when the soul travels to the East he comes across a garden where

> The priests in their yellow robes moved silently through the green trees, and on a pavement of black marble stood the rose-red house in which the god had his dwelling. Its doors were of powdered lacquer, and bulls and peacocks were wrought on them in raised and polished gold. The tiled roof was of sea green porcelain, and the jutting eaves were festooned with little bells. When the white doves flew past, they struck the bells with their wings and made them tinkle. (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 95)

Inside this house he is shown an “idol standing on a lotus of jade hung with great emeralds. It was carved out of ivory.… On its forehead was a chrysolite, and its breasts were smeared with myrrh and cinnamon. In one hand it held a crooked sceptre of jade, and in the other a round crystal. It ware buskins of brass, and its thick neck was circled with a circle of selenites” (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 97). The long descriptions of the soul’s three journeys, where Wilde heaps up image upon exotic image, can seem self-indulgent, diversions from the main narrative.

One senses that Wilde enjoyed writing virtuoso passages of this sort; they have an element of exhibitionism in them and (like the draft of *La Sainte Courtisane*) a freestanding quality, which would enable them to be easily transferred to other works. One can, for example, see obvious similarities between the descriptions of the soul’s journeys and the list of “treasures” which Dorian collects in chapter eleven of *Dorian Gray*—that is, those “jewels” and “stories about jewels,” embroideries, and tapestries. The problem, however, with such stylized writing in “The Fisherman and His Soul” is that the soul’s accounts of its travels do not provide a sufficient contrast with what has gone before: it is indistinguishable in style from the descriptions of the world inhabited by the mermaid and fisherman, and this makes it difficult for the reader to appreciate the nobility
of the fisherman’s love. Although we understand that such love is “better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men,” how can the reader not be struck by the fact that in wanting to be constant to his mermaid, with her enticing “mauve-amethyst eyes” and her enchanting undersea life, the fisherman has chosen a “valley of pleasure” which is little different from the temptations offered him by his soul. In the story’s terms, the world of selfless love and the world of sensual gratification are too similar: both seem equally exotic, equally foreign to that everyday world where, as the priest puts it, “love of the body is vile.” Or, to adapt again Wilde’s biblical language from De Profundis, the fruits of the trees in all parts of the garden seem to taste alarmingly the same.

This blurring of categories is further reinforced when, at the end of the story, the priest is so overcome by the “strange” and “curious” beauty of the white flowers that have come from the unhallowed ground where the mermaid and fisherman are buried, that he feels compelled to bless “the sea, and all the wild things that are in it” (Ross, ed., A House of Pomegranates, 127, 129). “Strange” and “curious,” we should remember, are also terms used to describe the Devil. The reader is thus left unsure about what sort of wildness exactly—what sort of bodily desire—the priest’s blessing is actually endorsing, diabolic or romantic. (“Wild” things also remind us of the author’s own name, and his own kind of Wilde-ness.) It needs to be reiterated that this uncertainty is different from the moral relativism of Dorian Gray. In the novel we see clearly that there is a difference between Sybil’s “Love” and Dorian’s self-gratification; our difficulty (and our reading pleasure) resides in trying to decipher which form, if any, of desire the novel is actually endorsing. And this is why it has proved possible to make sense of Dorian Gray both as a conventional morality tale and as its opposite, a celebration of an amoral hedonism.

The problem in “The Fisherman and His Soul” is knowing what exactly is meant by the kind of love which fills “the people with joy and wonder”: we are not so much choosing between alternative moral codes (the priest, we should remember, has been converted from his rigid Christianity), as trying to work out what constitutes this “strange” morality of “the heart” (Ross, ed., A House of Pomegranates, 129). The story appears to suggest that it is the quality of an individual’s love—that it can be defined by constancy and fidelity—which is paramount, and that the experience of loving is thus much more important than the worth of the loved object. Such a conclusion can of course be affiliated to a humane Christianity, one which emphasizes (as the priest learns to do, and Wilde later did in De Profundis) the inclusive forgiveness and suffering of Christ: “All the things in God’s world he blessed” (including “wild(e) things”). But, as the Decadent imagery so insistently reminds those readers who recognize its origins, that same view of love can also be used to legitimate same-sex
desire, or indeed any form of desire that is maintained with intensity and loyalty—or, in terms with which the 1890s would have been familiar, maintained with that Paterian “hard gem-like flame.” In this way what is conventionally considered sinful can quickly become its “other,” something beautiful and good. Thus sinfulness and goodness, as in La Sainte Courtisane, become interchangeable terms. Here we might recall how this same idea is briefly rehearsed in the closing chapter of Dorian Gray when Dorian nostalgically remembers Lord Henry’s description of the “unstained purity of his boyhood” as “rose-white” (Complete Works, III: 354). That oxymoronic image recalls the Decadent “rose et blanc” body of Venus in Gautier’s poem. But just as insistently it also reminds us of the Christian imagery which runs through the novel, in which white and red exist as opposites—of how “scarlet sins” can be made “white as snow,” but only through a transfiguring act of repentance and through God’s grace.

Although we can understand why Wilde might have been interested in exploring such an idea—this combining of sin with its opposite—it is possible that he realized that the way in which the idea is presented in his story was just too “strong” (to use Macmillan’s term) for nineteenth-century readers’ tastes, particularly for a family magazine like Lippincott’s. We do not know how much of his story he had completed when he wrote to Stoddart claiming that he was “not satisfied with it as far as it goes.” Nor do we know exactly what about it displeased him. But it is tempting to speculate that he was beginning to realize the artistic limitations of Decadence, certainly for commercial writing addressed to ordinary readers, or to what Wilde disparagingly termed at about this time “public opinion.” When used as the sole mode of narrative description, it was too suggestive. A contemporary reviewer glimpsed this when he knowingly complained that the “pretty poetic and imaginative flights” of the stories in A House of Pomegranates “wandered off too often into something between a ‘Sinburnian’ ecstasy and the catalogue of a high art furniture dealer.”

To make his exploration of sin and beauty acceptable to a wider reading public—a public which either did not know, or if it did know did not approve of, the “Sinburnian” quality of Decadent writing—Wilde needed to find a narrative foil for it. Here it may be worth recalling the difficulties he experienced over his other “fully” Decadent works: Salome was never performed on the English stage in his lifetime, La Sainte Courtisane and The Cardinal of Avignon were never finished, and The Sphinx took years to complete, and when published sold only in very small numbers. Of course Wilde found that foil in Dorian Gray; his method there was to combine Decadence with social satire and the more straightforward moralizing of melodrama: taken together, these last two styles, as we have shown, allowed for a conservative and morally “safe” reading of the novel. Yet they did so without wholly obliterating the subversive implications of its Decadent origins. Interestingly we seem to see Wilde “rehearsing” or experiment-
ing with such a stylistic synthesis in the other stories in *A House of Pomegranates*, particularly in “The Young King” and “The Birthday of the Infanta.” It is worth examining them in detail, as they shed further light on the full nature of Wilde’s achievement in *Dorian Gray.*

**The Development of Wilde’s Mature Style**

Both “The Young King” and “The Birthday of the Infanta” had their first publication in magazines, in the *Lady’s Pictorial* in 1888 and *Paris Illustre* in 1889, and were thus almost certainly written before “The Fisherman and his Soul,” and probably just a little after “The Happy Prince.” These details serve to remind us just how compelling Wilde was beginning to find Decadent imagery and themes, and how often he attempted to find an appropriate place for them in his own writing.

“‘The Young King’ has elements familiar from both *Dorian Gray* and “The Happy Prince.” So we learn that “curious” stories are told about the protagonist; he is in turn described in ways that suggest a prototype for Dorian Gray. He is discovered “gazing, as one in a trance, at a Greek gem carved with the figure of Adonis,” and on another occasion “pressing his lips to the marble brow of an antique statue … inscribed with the name of the Bithynian slave of Hadrian” (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 7). That slave, as any of the story’s classically educated adult readers would have recognized, is Antinoüs, the beautiful page boy of the Roman emperor Hadrian, who, according to legend, drowned in the Nile in order to save Hadrian’s life. (Wilde, or his publishers, wavered between the forms “Antinoüs” and “Antinous”. Both are correct.) The page was a favourite subject of sculptors and appeared—as a select few of Wilde’s adult readers would also have known—in a number of works by late-nineteenth-century gay writers, for example, in John Addington Symonds’s “The Lotus-Garland of Antinoüs” in *Many Moods: A Volume of Verses* (1878). Wilde himself had earlier described Antinoüs’s beauty in much more obviously homoerotic terms in his poem “The Burden of Itys”: “And through the vale with sad voluptuous smile / Antinous had wandered, the red lotus of the Nile / Down leaning from his black and clustering hair, / To shade those slumberous eyes’ caverned bliss” (*Complete Works*, I: 65). Reading these lines might prompt us to recall that the Orientalism imagined by Dorian also involved a longing to be back by the “hot lotus-covered Nile.” Later in *The Sphinx* Wilde would write of how the Sphinx “heard from Adrian’s gilded barge the laughter of Antinous … and watched with hot and hungry stare / The ivory mouth of that rare young slave with his pomegranate mouth!” (*Complete Works*, I: 183). And Antinoüs represents one of Basil Hallward’s artistic ideals when he comments that “what the invention of oil-painting was to the Venetians, the face of Antinoüs was to late Greek sculpture” (*Complete Works*, III: 176).
The Young King’s Decadent credentials are strengthened by the fact that he is also intensely preoccupied with “all rare and costly materials,” particularly his coronation robe “of tissued gold, and the ruby-studded crown, and sceptre with its rows and rings of pearls.” As in so many of Wilde’s descriptions of young male beauty, the King has a feral quality; he has “boyish lips” and “dark woodland eyes,” and he is surrounded by the familiar array of beautiful and striking objects, including “a large press, inlaid with agate and lapis-lazuli,” “a curiously wrought cabinet with lacquer panels of powderered and mosaiced gold, and a cup of dark-veined onyx,” a “laughing Narcissus in green bronze,” and “a flat bowl of amethyst” (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 9). Narcissus, too, was one of Wilde’s favourite classical images of male beauty; he often called Alfred Douglas Narcissus, and—as we might by now expect—in *Dorian Gray* Lord Henry describes Dorian to Basil as “a Narcissus.” Then, in a manner similar to “The Happy Prince,” this conspicuous and “strange” luxury is juxtaposed with a series of images (presented to the King in three dreams) of the poverty and degradation of those who produce the goods he so carelessly enjoys. These images, some conveyed in quasi-biblical language, lead the King to renounce his riches and to clothe himself—Christlike, and (as we might again anticipate) against the advice of his bishop, that familiar older figure of male authority—in the garments of a humble goatherd. This humility is rewarded by a Christian apotheosis: the final image of him is of a man with “the face of an angel” upon whom no one dares look.

“Sinburnianism” In calling Wilde’s writing “Sinburnian” reviewers were punning on the reputation of an earlier and equally controversial writer, Algernon Charles Swinburne, once called “the libidinous laureate” by John Morley, himself an eminent, if radical, Victorian. The label “Sinburnian” had been applied to Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* (1866), a volume whose publication had met with unusually hostile reviews, with its author being accused of paganism, blasphemy, sensuality, and immorality. Swinburne’s second volume of poetry, *Songs before Sunrise* (which appeared in 1871), met with similar condemnation, and was one of the targets of a vituperative attack on what its author, Robert Buchanan, famously termed the “fleshy school of poetry.” Swinburne (or “Swine-born,” as *Punch* preferred to call him) reacted to these criticisms with spirited defiance, publishing two pamphlets in defence of poems which had been described as “loathsome and abominable” and full of “unspeakable foulness.” These pamphlets were *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (1866) and *Under the Microscope* (1872). Ironically, at the time when Wilde was being accused of writing in a similarly immoral and scurrilous vein, Swinburne himself had become a more conservative and much less controversial figure, and his quarrels with his critics were by then nearly two decades in the past. Nevertheless, his earlier reputation lived on and his name continued to resonate as a byword for Decadent dissipation.
For the child reader, the moral of this story needs little explication—it seems to be as straightforward as that of “The Happy Prince.” Yet for the adult reader who recognizes the allusions, it is oddly disconcerting. The structure seems designed not so much to exemplify an overt Christian message, but to provide Wilde with opportunities to exercise his taste for exotic description, for that “Sinburnianism” identified by contemporary reviewers. So although, as in “The Happy Prince,” the plot ostensibly works to displace Decadent themes by a conventionally moralizing ending, those themes somehow refuse to disappear. Most strikingly they seem to be reasserted in the final image of the King at a point where Wilde describes his divinity using his favourite oppositions of red and white and of jewels and flowers. We might remember here that in order for the Happy Prince to enter the “garden of Paradise” it was necessary for him to divest himself of his jewels—the “great ruby” in his sword hilt, the “rare sapphires” of his eyes, and the “leaf” after “leaf” of “fine gold” that covered his body. By contrast the last image of the Young King seems to marry the Decadent to the Christian:

The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies. Whiter than fine pearls were the lilies, and their stems were of bright silver. redder than male rubies were the roses, and their leaves were of beaten gold. (Ross, ed., A House of Pomegranates, 95)

Does that marriage work, however? Academic explication might put the general reader in a better position to make such a judgment. The first sentence contains an allusion to the Tannhäuser legend, which had become popular in late-nineteenth-century Britain, in large measure because of Wagner’s opera, first performed there in 1876. Its libretto was based on a sixteenth-century German ballad which tells how a poet becomes enamoured of a beautiful woman who beckons him into the grotto of Venus where he spends the next seven years in a life of sensual pleasure. He subsequently meets Elizabeth, daughter of a local count, and wishing to marry her, travels to Rome to ask for absolution from the Pope; but he is told that it is as impossible as it is for the Pope’s dry staff to blossom. Three days after (that Christian symbol again) the staff does indeed break into flower and the Pope calls for the poet’s return. However, it is too late—on returning to the grotto of Venus the poet has discovered (like the Cardinal of Avignon) that Elizabeth has died and Tannhäuser subsequently falls dead on her funeral bier.

Scholarship Again

Contemporary literary treatments of the Tannhäuser legend, about which Wilde and many of his adult readers would have known, had included Swinburne’s controversial “Laus Veneris” (another one of those pieces in Poems and Ballads deemed to be “Sinburnian” by reviewers), William Morris’s “The Hill of Venus”
(1870), as well as Pater’s retelling of the tale in “Two Early French Stories” in The Renaissance. The Tannhäuser motif could therefore be enlisted into the service of both Decadent and conventionally Christian interpretations. Pater, for example, had typically blurred the distinction between such readings when he compared the fate of the “erring knight” to that of the Christian Abelard. In Pater’s account both knight and monk (as Abelard later became) are seen as a prefiguring of “the character of the Renaissance, that movement in which, in various ways, the human mind wins for itself a new kingdom of feeling and sensation and thought, not opposed to but only beyond and independent of the spiritual system then actually realised.” Interestingly in Dorian Gray Wilde was also to use Tannhäuser, but as an explicitly Decadent motif, attributing Dorian’s continued fascination with the opera, when he had “wearied” of so many other art forms, to the fact that he saw “in the prelude to that great work of art a presentation of the tragedy of his own soul” (Complete Works, III: 282). What exactly, then, does the loaded reference symbolize in the context of “The Young King”?

For some readers, certainly for children, the allusion will go unnoticed, just like the origins of the Orientalism in “The Happy Prince.” For them it will work as a straightforwardly moral tale. For those who recognize only the Christian elements in the allusion, and who fail to grasp the significance of the Decadent troping of the Prince’s taste, the tale will also be straightforward. But for others aware of the literary tradition in which Wilde was working, the Tannhäuser allusion is almost certainly more subversive; it might have been seen as slyly endorsing those “curious” (that is, homoerotic) elements of the Young King’s character which the story’s denouement so conspicuously fails to banish. And at this point knowledge of another scholarly detail may be helpful: the erotic potential of the tale was exploited a few years later by Aubrey Beardsley, who provided the illustrations for the English edition of Salome of 1893. Beardsley’s The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser concentrated on the knight’s sexual adventures with Venus, rehearsed in a manner which parodied contemporary pornography. The piece was first published in 1896 in a heavily expurgated version, entitled “Under the Hill,” in the Savoy magazine.

Teasing out the implications of the Tannhäuser motif in order to gain a sense of what the allusion could imply requires quite a detailed knowledge of late-nineteenth-century literary culture, and this, as we argued earlier, is exactly the sort of information which an academic can supply for the modern reader. The example of Wilde’s use of the Tannhäuser motif also reminds us that Decadence seems to work best for Wilde when he is able to exploit elements of its intertextuality, to use allusion to gesture toward the more subversive implications of its exotic language. So at this point we can see in “The Young King” some evidence of Wilde developing those techniques he would later use in Dorian Gray. In the story, as in the novel, it is as if he is searching for a way to preserve the
values of Decadence, even though the function of the plot (like that of “The Happy Prince”) is ostensibly to dismiss them.

The Limitations of the Decadent Trope

“The Birthday of the Infanta” represents a rather different use of Decadence, although it is one which also resonates with Dorian Gray. We encounter Wilde’s familiar lists of Decadent objects in his descriptions of the Infanta’s birthday entertainments, most of which, we might note in passing, involve beautiful young men—a toned-down version, as it were, of Myrrhina’s parade of male entertainers in La Sainte Courtisane. There are the “noble boys” who play at being toreadors, the African juggler and the “charming” “dancing boys” from the Church of Nuestra Senora Del Pilar, as well as the “troop of handsome Egyptians” with their dancing bear and monkeys. Familiar, too, are the lengthy descriptions of the luxuriously fitted-out royal apartments: the throne room with its black velvet canopy “studded with silver tulips and elaborately fringed with silver and pearls.” The walls of the apartment are covered in “pink-flow- ered Lucca damask”—that selfsame damask, perhaps, with its “roses | So cunningly wrought that they lack perfume merely” with which Simone tempts Guido in A Florentine Tragedy. In the royal rooms there are “screens brodered with parrots and peacocks” and a floor of “sea-green onyx” (Ross, ed., A House of Pomegranates, 41–42, 59–60). In this tale the contrast to such conspicuous consumption is, predictably enough, simply “love,” as it is exemplified in the Dwarf’s devotion to the Infanta. Yet his dedication to pleasing her, far from transfiguring him—as it does to characters like the swallow in “the happy prince” or the fisherman in “the Fisherman and His Soul”—merely forces him to confront his own ugliness, that he is “misshapen and hunchbacked, foul to look at and grotesque” (Ross, ed., A House of Pomegranates, 62). In this instance the integrity of the lover’s feelings is no compensation for their inappropriateness, and so the Dwarf remains at best an object of pathos. Moreover in the resolution of the story the final word is given to the Infanta, who dismissively comments, “for the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts” (Ross, ed., A House of Pomegranates, 64).

If we are looking for parallels with Dorian Gray, it is hard not to be struck by the similarity between the fates of the Dwarf and Sybil Vane: the devotion of both is bought at the cost of self-delusion, and although both die for their love, their self-sacrifices arouse relatively little sympathy in the reader. Neither of them is able to inhabit (or appreciate) the Decadent world to which the objects of their desires belong. Sybil never meets Dorian in his elaborately decorated rooms in which Lord Henry is so at ease, and the Dwarf is uncomfortable in the Infanta’s palace, caring “nothing” for its “magnificence.” That Sybil is female and the Dwarf a male but ugly “monster” might lead us to conclude that the Decadent world which seems to fascinate Wilde, and on which his narratives dwell
so insistently, is one in which only beautiful young men—be they princes, kings, or mere fishermen—can live. Here too it is worth recalling the marginal roles given to Bianca and the Cardinal’s ward in *A Florentine Tragedy* and the scenario for *The Cardinal of Avignon*. By contrast, Salome and Myrrhina can be fully part of a Decadent world because they are participants in, rather than banished from, the homoeroticism of *Salome* and *La Sainte Courtisane* respectively—that is, Salome’s desire for Iokannan can be seen as inflaming that of Herod, just as Myrrhina courts the hermit with images of male, not female, beauty.

Second and more importantly, the values of the non-Decadent worlds where Sybil and the Dwarf do feel at home are constantly the targets of Wilde’s satire. In *Dorian Gray*, as we have noted, the melodramatic aspects of working-class life to which Sybil belongs are the butt of Lord Henry’s withering wit; in “The Birthday of the Infanta” Lord Henry’s counterparts are the garden flowers. Their comments are an anticipation of the snobbery of the dowager duchesses we later encounter in the society comedies. The flowers’ observations undercut the simple bucolic attraction of forest life: they note of the birds, the creatures with which the Dwarf has most affinity: “what a vulgarising effect this incessant rushing and flying about has. Well-bred people always stay in exactly the same place…. [B]irds have no sense of repose, and indeed birds do not even have a permanent address” (Ross, ed., *A House of Pomegranates*, 51). (The chatter of the water-rat, duck, and linnet in “The Devoted Friend,” another of Wilde’s tales which takes self-denial as its theme, performs the same sort of role, and in the process the moralizing function of the fairy-tale subgenre is ironized.)

What distinguishes “The Birthday of the Infanta” from *Dorian Gray* is of course the absence of any plot mechanism by which the dangerous—and in this story explicitly cruel—values of Decadence can be safely banished for the reader: there is no nemesis for the Infanta or her courtiers for their spitefulness. And this is probably why those reviewers who were looking for a Victorian moral found only “Sinburnianism,” and why, too, *A House of Pomegranates* succeeded in appealing only to a small group of readers. 10

Decadent Traces

In terms of their themes and styles, the pieces which Wilde collected in another volume of short stories, *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and Other Stories*, seem to have few links with *Dorian Gray*. With the possible exception of “The Sphinx without a Secret,” none has a Decadent setting, and none explores Decadent themes. This effect may be explained in part by Wilde’s need to appeal to the interests of the readers of the magazines in which the stories were first published. All of them appeared in the late spring and early summer of 1887; three were in various issues of *The Court and Society Review* and one in the *World*. The light-hearted plots all centre on contemporary domestic events, on life in the drawing rooms, country houses, and gentlemen’s clubs that later figure so strongly
in the society comedies, the works to which they are nearest in tone and subject matter. The stories gently mock a variety of topical upper-middle-class enthusiasms—chieromancy, psychic phenomena, and philanthropy. In addition they rehearse many of what will soon become a veritable litany of jokes about marriage and courtship rituals, American vulgarity, and German dullness. Even some of the names are familiar: those of Lady Windermere and Gerald both reappear in later works. For the alert reader, though, amid this witty social satire there are also occasional (and surprising) suggestions of those “other” sorts of lives and experiences that were more provocatively hinted at in Dorian Gray and the other two volumes of short fiction.

For example, the framing device of “The Sphinx without a Secret” is a conversation between two men which takes place in a restaurant located in Paris near the “Bois”—that is, the Bois de Boulogne, a wooded park which at the time had a reputation as a haunt of prostitutes, renters, and their clients. Then there is the “wonderfully good-looking” Hughie Erskine in “The Model Millionaire,” with his “crisp brown hair.” Dorian Gray also has “crisp” hair, but this time “golden” (Complete Works, III: 181). Interestingly Hughie is “as popular with men as he was with women.” We know this popularity can have nothing to do with conventional manly virtues, for we have also been informed that Hughie (like, we suspect, the later character Gerald Arbuthnot in A Woman of No Importance) is neither intelligent nor good at making money: his highest recommendation is simply that he is “a delightful, ineffectual young man with a perfect profile and no profession” (Ross, ed., Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime, 136). Lord Arthur Savile, too, is hardly the usual sort of Victorian hero: young and handsome with “finely-chiselled lips,” he, like so many of Wilde’s boyishly beautiful young men, has “lived a delicate and luxurious life,…a life exquisite in its freedom from sordid care, its boyish insouciance” (Ross, ed., Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime, 16, 18). Arthur also possesses a “very finely-wrought” nature via which he can be “dominated” by the “exquisite physical conditions of the moment” (Ross, ed., Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime, 26). And it is this heightened sensuality which seems to explain his rhapsodic reaction, not to his wife-to-be (to whom he is only conventionally attracted) but rather to some “white-smocked carters, with their pleasant sunburnt faces and coarse curly hair” and a “chubby boy” with a “bunch of primroses in his battered hat” whom he encounters at dawn on their way to Covent Garden market. That reaction in turn betrays a nascent yet discernible Decadent sensibility:

[T]he great piles of vegetables looked like masses of jade against the morning sky, the masses of green jade against the pink petals of some marvellous rose. Lord Arthur felt curiously affected, he could not tell why. There was something in the dawn’s delicate loveliness that seemed to him inexpressibly pathetic, and he thought of all the days that break in beauty, and that set in storm. The rustics, too, with their rough, good-humoured voices, and their nonchalant ways, what a strange London they saw….
wondered what they thought of it, and whether they knew anything of its splendour and its shame, of its fierce, fiery-coloured joys, and its horrible hunger, or all it makes and mars from morn to eve.... It gave him pleasure to watch them as they went by. Rude as they were, with their heavy, hob-nailed shoes, and their awkward gait, they brought a little of Arcady with them. (Ross, ed., *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime*, 23–24)

By now we should recognize the all-too-familiar list of Decadent objects: beautiful flowers, precious stones, things both “curious” and “strange.” “Fiery-coloured” was yet another of Wilde’s favourite epithets. He used it in many of his reviews as well as in a number of his poems where it typically describes a moment of sensual or spiritual ecstasy—as in, for example, the “One fiery-coloured moment: one great love” in “Panthea” or the “One fiery-coloured moment of great life!” in “Sen Artysty” (*Complete Works*, I: 113, 147). In chapter two of *Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry’s transforming influence over Dorian is also described in these terms: “Yes; there had been things in his boyhood that he had not understood. He understood them now. Life suddenly became fiery-coloured to him. It seemed to him that he had been walking on fire. Why had he not known it?” (*Complete Works*, III: 184). The implications of Arthur’s reverie in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” are perhaps better appreciated by comparing its description with a passage from *Dorian Gray*:

As the dawn was just breaking he [Dorian] found himself close to Covent Garden. The darkness lifted, and, flushed with faint fires, the sky hollowed itself into a perfect pearl. Huge carts filled with nodding lilies rumbled slowly down the polished empty street. The air was heavy with the perfume of the flowers, and their beauty seemed to bring him an anodyne for his pain. He followed into the market, and watched the men unloading their wagons. A white-smocked carter offered him some cherries. He thanked him, wondered why he refused to accept any money for them, and began to eat them listlessly. They had been plucked at midnight, and the coldness of the moon had entered them. A long line of boys carrying crates of striped tulips, and of yellow and red roses, defiled in front him, threading their way through the huge jade-green piles of vegetables. (*Complete Works*, III: 244)

Here we have a much more explicitly homoerotic description of what is basically the same encounter. Similar too are the tantalizing questions which the passages provoke: why is Arthur so “curiously affected” by the carter he gazes at? Why does the carter whom Dorian encounters refuse to accept money for the cherries he offers? In neither case does the “knowing” reader have to think very hard to supply the answer. The perfumed air and jade-coloured vegetables give all the clues that are needed: the market in Covent Garden promises to become a garden of (forbidden) sensual fruits. Of course nothing much is made of these hints in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”: the plot (like that of “The Model Millionaire”) is resolved by a conventional, and conventionally happy, marriage. That such hints are there at all, though, is interesting: a style of writing that would become so complex, so assured, and so winning in *Dorian Gray*—that
synthesis of satire and purple prose—is here, in these early stories, in an embryonic and incomplete way, being simultaneously formed and tested.

**Conclusion**

Reviewing Wilde’s entire body of fictional work, particularly comparing the short stories with *Dorian Gray*, helps us to appreciate just how a novel that some have argued was “‘designed,’ ‘intended’ and ‘understood’ by its readers to be a book about sodomy and those men who practised sodomy” could nevertheless—as Wilde’s counsel Charles Clark reminds us—remain for “five years … upon the bookstalls and at bookshops and in libraries” without provoking any form of official complaint. Today we have become so habituated to reading *Dorian Gray* biographically through the lens of the trials that we can easily overlook the complexity and subtlety of Wilde’s achievement—that is, the nature of those stylistic clues which take us back to the biography in the first instance. *Dorian Gray*, like some parts of the short stories, derives its suggestive power not from any simple expressive transparency, but rather its opposite—a highly contrived and self-consciously “literary” style which alternately suggests and insinuates by allusion. Moreover, that style requires of its readers a fairly sophisticated literary education in order that they recognize and follow the chains of association which the allusions simultaneously set in motion and allow to be understood. The subversive values of Decadence only become fully visible once we are alert to the literary tradition with which Wilde was aligning himself. It follows that the most fruitful way of unlocking the novel’s subversive secrets for the modern reader is not by means of that relentless pursuit (made by McKenna and others) of the supposed parallels with Wilde’s own life—the search, that is, for the “real” analogues to Dorian and Lord Henry. Rather, traditional forms of academic scholarship may be more useful: by patiently explaining Wilde’s allusions, and spelling out the values which they encode, modern critics and editors of Wilde’s fiction can enable modern readers to understand why the novel can still be “dangerous” without any knowledge of Wilde’s personal life. And, equally pertinently, why a knowledge of who Wilde was does not debar one from reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a straightforward and entertaining morality tale.

**Notes**

1. Unless specified to the contrary, all quotations from *Dorian Gray* are from the 1891 version, as it appears in the text established by Joseph Bristow in *Complete Works*, III.

2. One might be tempted to think that an attention to social details, such as an East-End opium den, indicates some interest in realism. However Wilde seemed very concerned to dispel any such literalism, by leaking to the contemporary trade journal *The Bookman* that “the opium den scene (which occurs only in the revised-volume form) is, for all its fidelity of detail, a purely
imaginary description, as Mr Wilde recently said that he had never set foot in an opium den in his life.” *The Bookman*, I (1892), 88.

3. There are relatively few differences between these passages in the periodical and book versions of *Dorian Gray*, and this suggests that Dorian’s reading of Gautier was crucial to Wilde’s conception of his character (see also note 5 below).

4. Dorian’s description of Egypt borrows images from two poems in *Emaux et camées*. From “Ce que disent les hirondelles” (“J’ai ma petite chambre | A Smyrne, au plafond d’un café. | Les Hadjis comptent leur grains d’ambre | Sur le seuil, d’un rayon chauffé”); and from “Nostalgies d’obélisques” (“Sur cette place je m’ennuie, | Obélisque dépareillé: | Neige, givre brunie et pluie | Glacent mon flanc déjà rouillé”).

5. In the text of the periodical version of *Dorian Gray* Wilde had been slightly more circumspect, so there is no mention of Dorian brooding, nor of the marble statue being “kiss-stained”: he just “reads … of that curious statue that Gautier compares to a contralto voice, the ‘monstre charmant’ that couches in the porphyry-room of the Louvre” (*Complete Works*, III: 144). The more overt homoeroticism of the book version is a useful reminder that not all of Wilde’s revisions to his story can be seen as an attempt to tone it down.


7. There is a further allusion in this quotation: the “sweet marble monster” appears in Shelley’s “Studies for Epipsychidion”: “And others swear you’re a Hermaphrodite; | Like that sweet marble monster of both sexes, | Which looks so sweet and gentle that it vexes | The very soul that the soul is gone | Which lifted from her limits the veil of stone” (57–61).


10. The reasons for the critical and commercial failure of *A House of Pomegranates* are in fact complex. The volume was also very expensive, and it may have been the price, as much as the contents, which deterred contemporary readers.

**Works Cited & Consulted**


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