Volume 2: 2009-2010 ISSN: 2041-6776

INNERVATE
Leading Undergraduate Work in English Studies

The University of Nottingham
School of English Studies

Will Self's Dorian had been described as 'a homage, a parody and a critical commentary'. How precisely does the work engage with Wilde's original?

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Will Self wrote *Dorian: An Imitation* due to the correlations that he saw between London and New York in the late twentieth century and Wilde's *fin de siècle* society. It is evident that what interests Self about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the way that it interprets its contemporary epoch in a manner analogous to Self's interpretation of the late twentieth century and the decadence and self- indulgence that he believes formed the *zeitgeist.* It was perhaps this viewpoint that led Self to declare that '*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the prophecy and *Dorian* is the fulfilment', as both cultural movements faced a form of retribution, as Wilde was tried and incarcerated, and in the late twentieth century AIDS entered the public consciousness.[1] Therefore, what Self appears to mean by 'prophecy' is that Wilde foresaw the fate of himself and others who indulged in a debauched, narcissistic lifestyle and thus, by transposing the novel by a century, Self can make this element of self-prophecy explicit through the decimation of many of the characters in the novel as a result of AIDS. However, whether Self fulfils prophecies made in Wilde, or warps Wilde's original until it means something quite different, is highly debatable.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the novels is that in Wilde's original Lord Henry's influence foreshadows the entire novel, as his poisonous rhetoric precipitates Dorian's descent into a life of sin. Henry adopts Dorian as a sort of experiment and observes in a state of fascination the trials and tribulations of his young charge. 'One's own soul, and the passions of one's friends- those were the fascinating things in life.'[2] However the wafting, aromatic influences that permeate Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, (and make it simple to understand how Dorian falls prey to such enticing and debauched views) are wholly absent from Self's imitation. In *Dorian: An Imitation* Dorian is portrayed as being in thrall to Henry despite a dearth of textual evidence for the older man's supposed hypnotic eloquence. Henry's status as a 'brilliant talker' (Self, 20) seems largely derived from his vulgarised refashioning of aphorisms and witticisms aired in Wilde. For example, Wilde informs the reader that Henry is always late, as he believes 'punctuality is the thief of time.' (Wilde, 81) In *Dorian: An Imitation,* Wotton declares that 'Punctuality is the fucking thief of time, burgling precious seconds, which we could've spent getting higher.' (Self, 55) While there are vague echoes in Self's novel of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s seducing Paterean beauty that hypnotises the young protagonist, the meeting between Henry and Dorian does not justify the subsequent suggestions that Dorian was led astray by the older man.

Everything that occurs in Self's version of the fateful meeting in Baz's studio between Henry and Dorian is anticlimactic when viewed in conjunction with Wilde's original. This is

[1] Robert McCrum, 'Self- Analysis'- Interview with Will Self, *Observer Review*, (29 September, p.15)
[2] Oscar Wilde, *The Major Works*, ed. by Isobel Murray, (Oxford University Press, 2008), p.58. All subsequent quotes from Wilde will be from this edition.

due to the fact that the novel is meant to be a fulfilment of Wilde's prophecy of a decadent age, which will eventually have its comeuppance and therefore, the world that Self depicts must be the narcissistic, indulgent manifestation of Wilde's predictions. Consequently, Dorian is already a sexually promiscuous drug- user when he meets Henry, as the seed of decadence had already flowered by the era in which Self places his novel and as such, Henry's influence would be superfluous.

Another reason for Henry's diminished influence in Self's novel is that the infectious theories that he airs in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are refashioned to become the literal eroding poison of viral and venereal disease in Self's imitation. This juxtaposition of Wilde's infectious modes of thought and Self's emphasis on contagious diseases, is captured by Henry when he remarks to Bluejay '…you cannot be so credulous as to believe that I'll infect you with my touch or…my breath?' (Self, 106) In this instance, rather than making explicit what was implicit in Wilde, Self is warping the original meaning of *Dorian Gray*.

Akin to his mentor, Wilde's Dorian is accused of perverting many of his young acolytes, yet this does not mean that Wilde was using these events as metaphors for the spreading of venereal disease. It is a somewhat tenuous link to relate Dorian's influence on Henry Ashton and the Duke of Perth in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to Dorian's calculated and deliberate infection of others with AIDS. '…he could assay the situation still better and decide how best to infect Helen. Performing in excess of a thousand thousand HIV impregnations...' (Self, 231) Rather than disease, the examples of corrupting influences in Wilde's novel generally concern the sense of fascination that Paterean aestheticism and theories on decadence engender in impressionable young men. It is also rather odd that Self should appear to be so insensitive to the influence of language, considering his apparent obsession with style throughout his own fictional *oeuvre*. Therefore, while Self's apocalyptic AIDS- ridden world is a potential consequence of such a lifestyle, it is grossly exaggerated.

Furthermore, Self eagerly grasps remarks from Wilde's novel, such as 'Why is your friendship so fatal to young men?', (Wilde, 159) and imagines them to be prophecies of a world of homosexual promiscuity and widespread disease. Self clearly believes Basil's remark to mean: why has Dorian infected so many young men with syphilis? This is conveyed by Self's assertion that '…in the original, the metaphor-that-wasn't-really-a-metaphor was syphilis…'[3] Richard Ellmann's belief that Wilde contracted syphilis while at Oxford is the result of speculation and consequently, is far from categorical proof that the slow decay of Dorian's portrait is a metaphor for syphilis, despite what Self would have us believe.[4] This is exactly the kind of reductive attitude that Wilde rebelled against during his trial, where *Dorian Gray* is discussed at length, as the prosecution clearly felt that in order to write about a subject, an artist must draw upon personal experience and emotions. 'Then, you have never had that feeling that you depict there?' '..may I take it that you yourself have never experienced the sensation which you described there as being the sensation of this artist towards Dorian Gray?'[5]

Therefore, rather than making implicit statements explicit or fulfilling prophecies made in Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, Self is being deliberately provocative in order to produce a similar sense of outrage to Wilde's original. This, due to our modern sensibility being more immune to immorality than that of Wilde's contemporary society, is difficult to accomplish but Self achieves it through depicting AIDS and homosexual activity in a flippant and offensive manner.

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[3] Don Anderson, 'Dorian: An Imitation; Feeding Frenzy' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 January, 2003.
[4] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), p.88.
[5] Holland, Merlin, *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, Foreword by Sir John Mortimer, (London: Fourth Estate), p.92-3.

Another point of departure from Wilde's original is that due to his role as author and narrative voice, Henry is the protagonist in Self's novel and thus, much of the focus is removed from Dorian. The pivotal moments of Wilde's original are Dorian and Henry's first encounter in Basil's studio, and Dorian's murder of Basil, both of which have the detailed conveyance of Dorian's innermost thoughts as the fulcrum of the poignancy and the unlikely sense of verisimilitude that envelops them.

For instance, the effects Henry's beliefs have on Dorian during their initial meeting are depicted both mentally and physically in Wilde's novel, and as such Dorian's transformation from an innocent boy to a narcissistic, hedonistic man is enacted and detailed for our assessment. 'The life that was to make his soul would mar his body…As he thought of it, a sharp pang of pain struck though him like a knife…His eyes deepened into amethyst, and across them came a mist of tears. He felt as if a hand of ice had been laid upon his heart.' (Wilde, 67) This focus on Dorian and his innermost emotions serves to explain the uttering of his fateful wish that he would give his soul for the painting to bear the marks of age in his stead.

In the corresponding scene in Self's *Dorian,* the wish that defines the remainder of Dorian's existence is uttered almost indifferently. 'I wish it was the other way round.' (Self, 22) It is not foreshadowed by any fervent emotions or epiphanies on Dorian's part and thus seems rather anticlimactic. The miraculous nature of the painting, or in this case the tapes, becoming infused with Dorian's soul is eminently more believable when viewed in conjunction with the earnest, anguished plea of Wilde's Dorian and his offering of his soul as a form of bargain. Consequently, the fact that Dorian's feelings and emotions are overlooked in Self's novel creates a sense of bathos if one is familiar with Wilde's original.

Similarly, Basil's murder, which binds Dorian irrevocably to a life of sin is explained in Wilde's novel through Dorian glancing at the portrait and being filled with a sudden aversion and murderous hatred for its maker. '…suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips.' (Wilde, 165) When the horror of the tarnished and corrupted portrait is revealed, Basil attempts to reconcile Dorian with God and encourage repentance. ''Pray, Dorian, pray,…Lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our sins. Wash away our iniquities. The prayer of your pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered also.' (Wilde, 165) Dorian, despite briefly being moved by Basil's entreaties and pious interjections, weeps at the unholy, vice- ridden life he has led and declares that 'it is too late.' (Wilde, 165) These emotive pleas from Basil for Dorian's befouled soul and the eternal damnation that he believes will await his erstwhile muse, create a sense of pathos that renders the murder all the more affecting.

This poignancy is lamentably absent from Self's version of the murder, where Baz is 'too wasted' (Self, 161) to fully take in the horror of the scene. Yet again, the lack of any detailed description of Dorian's feelings means that the murder has no prior warning and consequently seems somewhat gratuitous. This sense is ameliorated by the tendency of the novel to glory in pornographic scenes, and therefore, the unavoidable result of depicting explicit subjects without the contextualisation of the characters' emotions is that the text feels like an immature attempt to shock and thus, the poignancy of the novel is dissipated.

Further expounding this theme of diminished emotiveness is Self's insistence on plumbing the depths of impropriety in order to provoke a similar reaction to Wilde's original. 'Of course this being the twentieth century and not the nineteenth century *fin de siecle*, and Self being the writer that he is, he ups both the body count and the sexual explicitness'.[6] Self revels in prurience and vice to the point that the novel ceases to resemble Wilde's. For

[6] Neil Bartlett, 'Picture of Ill- Health' *Guardian*, (September 2002), p.26.

example, the narrative voice declares that after savagely murdering Baz, Dorian, 'lapped at the splatter,' (Self, 164) and punches 'the mush that was Baz's face and, taking his knuckles to his mouth, licked the red stuff.' (Self, 172) In embracing gratuitousness to the extent that *Dorian* does, Self is relinquishing the opportunity to recreate any semblance of the affecting and impassioned beauty of Wilde's original.

However, one must recognise that Self's novel is, as Ruth Scurr asserts, 'designed to unnerve.'[7] Outrage and disgust on the part of the reader would gratify Self, due to his aforementioned desire to reproduce the furore that surrounded Wilde's novel. Self utilises various other techniques in order to achieve this mimicking of Wilde. For example, the ending of Self's novel is clearly an attempt to replicate Wilde's obdurate refusal to offer the reader a straightforward resolution. While Dorian commits unintentional suicide in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his corrupting mentor Lord Henry faces no judgement or condemnation. The miraculous and transcendent nature of Dorian's relationship with the painting is never resolved with any logical or scientific explanation and the immorality and sins of the book remain largely unpunished. Self cannot match Wilde's moral ambivalence in the novel and still shock and provoke. Therefore, Self attempts to produce a similar effect through his epilogue, which while threatening to remove any ambiguity, in fact, heightens the veil of mystery that shrouds the novel. The epilogue informs us of the metafictional nature of the novel, as the text is Henry's manuscript, yet just as one believes that the novel has divulged its secrets Dorian begins to hear Henry's narrative voice in his head and suffers from what appears to be schizophrenia.

Moreover, aspects of Henry's novel that Dorian has derided during the epilogue as fabrications appear to be true after all, such as Alan Campbell's friend Peter attempting to blackmail Dorian, thus suggesting that perhaps Dorian did murder Baz, as Alan visited Peter after disposing of Baz's body. The confusion surrounding the ending of the novel reaches its climax as Dorian is dragged into a public urinal and murdered by what appears to be Henry but is actually Ginger. Lucretia Stewart has accused Self of losing his 'nerve,' at the end of the novel, as '…Dorian gets his comeuppance, just as he does in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but while Wilde's ending is perfectly crafted, Self's is messy, drawn-out and…self-indulgent.'[8] However the deliberately misleading ending is vital, as Self employs it in order to leave the reader dissatisfied through the double ending that dislocates the reader's sense of what they believe has occurred.

Another strand of the complex tapestry that Self weaves in his epilogue is the reference to Wilde's *De Profundis*. This accusatory letter written while in prison to Lord Alfred Douglas, in which Wilde blames and reproaches his lover whilst shouldering very little of the burden himself, serves as a reminder from Self that Henry's manuscript is an objective account. Therefore, this sheds further light on Henry's reduced influence over Dorian, due to the fact that Henry, as author of a not entirely impartial text, might wish to conceal his corruption of an innocent young man. Another significant aspect of the reference to *De Profundis* is that in Self's novel, Dorian commits a host of abhorrent crimes and is depicted as a malevolent 'AIDS Mary', (Self, 112) while Henry represents his own life as less debauched. However, due to his death occurring before Dorian's murder, Henry believes that while he suffers the consequences of his actions, Dorian does not. This is highly evocative of Wilde and Lord Douglas' life as portrayed in *De Profundis*, as Wilde evidently resented that Lord Douglas, despite living what Wilde portrays as the more selfish and depraved lifestyle, suffered little compared to himself. Therefore, Self refers to *De Profundis*

[7] Ruth Scurr, 'A Selfish Dorian', *The Times,* 16 October 2002.
[8] Lucretia Stewart, *LA Times*, 9 February 2003.

in order to link Henry's suffering and feelings of resentment towards his former lover in his own novel, to that of Wilde towards Bosie in reality.

In conclusion, Self adopts a wilfully ambiguous ending, as well as gratuitous depictions of sex and violence, as a means through which to recreate the emotions that Wilde's original engendered. Yet in scaling these heights of pornography, Self is unable to recapture any of the beauty of Wilde's original, as any evocative moments are buried amidst the offensive depravity. Moreover, Self discards Henry's influencing of Dorian due to the fact that the novel's premise of fulfilling Wilde's prophecies requires Dorian to be a sexually promiscuous drug- user when he meets Henry, otherwise the novel would merely be re-exploring *fin de siecle* aestheticism. However, while Self believes that his novel is the fulfilment of Wilde's prophecies, in various instances Wilde's original is warped and misread until it becomes almost unrecognisable.

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