



The research of Angela Kingston (in Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction (2009)) suggests that one reason for Wilde's enduring popularity may be that both his life and works provided rich materials for other writers. Write an essay exploring an aspect of Wilde's influence; you may focus your answer on the inspiration he has provided for just one work by another author.

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The London *Echo*, in April 1895, suggested that 'The best thing for everybody now is to forget all about Oscar Wilde'.¹ Despite the *Echo*'s advice, Wilde's presence has continued into the literary and cultural consciousness of the twenty-first century, as exemplified by Will Self's adaptation of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002). This essay will explore Self's adoption of Wilde's narrative voice in *Dorian*, with a particular emphasis on Wotton's use of witticism and epigram. The argument will develop to analyse the signature of Wilde's homosexual voice in Self's novel through the correspondences between both writers' characterisations of Dorian Gray. The essay will then explore the difficulties associated with rendering a twenty-first century adaptation of Wilde's original narrative voice through an evaluation of Self's frame epilogue. The ways in which Self's narrative voice detaches itself from that of Wilde will be discussed alongside an analysis of *Dorian*'s explicit interest in drug use, and its filling of narrative 'silences' in *Dorian Gray*.

The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012) defines 'narrative voice' as 'the embodiment of the author's expression [...] Voice is the vehicle through which private vision is translated to the world'.² This section of the essay will explore Self's adoption of Wilde's mode of expression in *Dorian*, and the ways in which he expresses his 'private vision' 'to the world' through the use of witticism and epigram. As Helen Davies (2011) submits, Self 'retains some Wildean phrases in the form of a selection from [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*]'.³ Lord Henry's quip in Chapter VI of Wilde's text: 'When we are happy we are always good, but when we are good we are not always happy' appears verbatim on page 59 of Self's novel.⁴ Self adopts other Wildean aphorisms, albeit reworked, throughout his text. In Chapter IV Wotton muses on the hedonism of drug use: 'Fixing coke is the perfect modern pleasure, because even as you do it you want to do it again'.⁵ Wotton's dialogue represents a repositioning of Lord Henry's in Wilde's text: 'A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied'.⁶ In a 2002 interview, Self explained that Wilde's comment concerning 'Hallward [being] as he really was' represented

¹ Jonathan Goodman, *The Oscar Wilde File* (London: W.H. Allen, 1988), p. 79.

² Fabian Gudas and Michael Davidson, 'Voice', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 1366.

³ Helen Davies, 'Neo-Victorian Versions of Oscar Wilde's "Voice"', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 4.1 (2011): 11.

⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1891] (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), p. 67.

⁵ Will Self, *Dorian: An Imitation* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2002), p. 58.

⁶ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 68.

a 'vaguely effete cipher'.⁷ He argued instead that 'Wotton is, of course, Wilde' and thus, in transposing the conversational aphorism of Wilde's Lord Henry onto his own Wotton, Self identifies with the original witticism of Wilde's narrative voice.⁸ As a result, and in the words of Peter Dickinson (2005), 'one is tempted to read Oscar's reauthorized/reauthorizing hand at work in Self's novel'.⁹

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) defines homosexual narrative voice as 'a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence'.¹⁰ Paul Burston (2008) refers to Self as 'the only gay writer in Britain who's a practising heterosexual'.¹¹ In light of Burston and Sedgwick's conjectures, this section of the essay will explore the ways in which Self, as a heterosexual, ventriloquises the 'silences' of Wilde's homosexual narrative voice, writing as a twenty-first century embodiment of his predecessor. The character of Dorian Gray in both texts is homosexual, as exemplified in the original novel by Wilde's forbearance of the 'secret' of Hallward's words to Dorian in Chapter XII: 'I think it right that you should know that the most dreadful things are being said against you in London'.¹² These 'dreadful things' are left to readerly speculation, and were used by Edward Carson to prove Wilde guilty during his trial for sodomy in 1895: 'Do you think that [...] what they were taking about was a charge of sodomy?'¹³ Hallward's words in this passage, in the eyes of Carson, allude to Dorian's implicit homosexuality, and represent an example of the textual silences of Wilde's gay narrative voice. Wilde's 'reauthorized' voice is apparent in Self's overtly queer re-imagining of Dorian Gray and his exploration of gay conventions in terms of aesthetic appearance: 'it was strange the way he [...] adopted the typical clone costume of bike jacket, white T-shirt, and jeans'.¹⁴ Self's Dorian adopts the manifestly masculine dress of the heterosexual at the end of the twentieth century, and, as Baz states, 'even made it his own'.¹⁵ Dorian's homosexual 'cloning' of heterosexual aesthetic custom represents an example of Self's adoption of Wilde's 'gay' narrative voice.

Dorian's aesthetic 'cloning' also introduces Self's discourse concerning the problems associated with the supposed 'generative' nature of an original text. In the words of Monique Wittig (1992), sexuality 'is only a sophisticated and mythic construction [...] which reinterprets physical features [...] through the network of relationships in which they are perceived'.¹⁶ To extend Wittig's argument, the heterosexual male's adoption of conventionally 'straight' dress represents an attempt to mimic the image of heterosexuality as held in the cultural consciousness of the twentieth century. In this sense, the culturally established appearance of the heterosexual is, in itself, imitative. In the words of Judith Butler (1990): 'The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original', which represents 'nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural'.¹⁷ In light of Butler's argument, the homosexual adoption of conventional heterosexual dress, as in the case of Dorian, is 'a copy of a copy of a copy'.¹⁸ Dorian's aligning his appearance with that of an overtly straight male represents a comment by Self concerning the difficulties of transposing Wilde's voice over

⁷ Robert McCrum, 'Self-Analysis', *The Observer Online* (September 2002). [16 May 2014]

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/29/fiction.willself>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Peter Dickinson, 'Oscar Wilde: Reading the Life After the Life', *Biography* 28.3 (2005): 430.

¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (California: University of California Press, 1990), p. 3.

¹¹ Paul Burston, 'Dichotomy of the Self', *Time Out Online* (July 2008). [18 May 2014]

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/29/fiction.willself>

¹² Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 126.

¹³ Merlin Holland, *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), p. 102.

¹⁴ Self, *Dorian*, p. 92.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Monique Wittig, 'One Is Not Born a Woman', in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 11-12.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 43.

¹⁸ Davies, 'Oscar Wilde's "Voice"', p. 13.

the milieu of the twenty-first century. As Davies argues, ‘via his embodiment of Wilde’s voice, Self is Wilde’s copy, but this is positioned against the backdrop of a novel where the queer clone will expose the absence of origins’.¹⁹ Walter Ong (1982) explores the concept of voice always being imitative after its first utterance: ‘Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent’.²⁰ To extend Ong’s submission, Wilde’s voice in *Dorian Gray* is a reconstruction, the text representing the culmination of the authorial creative process. The only authoritative ‘voice’ in relation to *Dorian Gray* is embodied by Wilde’s initial ideas concerning the narrative structure of his work, which are adapted during the writing process, and thus become imitative in relation to their original conception. The signature of Wilde’s narrative voice in *Dorian* is a copy of an already derivative mode of expression. The only original version of Wilde’s voice, as expressed by his initial ideas concerning the narrative structure of *Dorian Gray*, are, in Ong’s words, ‘evanescent’, having lost their originality as soon as Wilde put pen to paper. Jean Baudrillard (1994) mourns the loss of the original ‘voice’ in postmodern culture: ‘When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is [...] a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared’.²¹ To counter Baudrillard’s argument, the original notion of textual ‘voice’ has no ‘substance’ in the first place, as the process of writing always represents an adaptation, and therefore imitation, of initial creative ideas.

Self’s anxieties concerning the loss of the original Wildean ‘voice’ in *Dorian* are explored in his epilogue. Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* ends with the death of its eponymous character: ‘Lying on the floor was a dead man [...] with a knife in his heart [...] It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was’.²² Self’s novel adapts the Wildean conception of Dorian’s death in Chapter XVIII: ‘They took another week to find him, and by then, decomposition had begun’.²³ However, Self’s Dorian dies a second death, as recounted in the epilogue to his novel: ‘the beautiful new tie Ginger had just given him with his knife was a warm, sticky, fluid thing, and hardly likely to remain fashionable for very long at all’.²⁴ Through the epilogue, Self’s reader is made aware of the metafictional status of the preceding narrative, which represents a manuscript written by Wotton: ‘He picked up the pile of A4 and let it fall with a thud on to the tabletop’ and takes, as Dorian exclaims, ‘colossal liberties with the truth!’²⁵ This version of Dorian is entrepreneurial, and has, as we learn in the epilogue, ‘started up the Gray Organisation in a room at the back of a friend’s café’.²⁶ In the words of Davies, this Dorian ‘is deeply offended by Henry’s inauthentic — and defamatory — depiction of his character’.²⁷ Wotton’s meta-textual manuscript symbolises Self’s twenty-first century repositioning of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the epilogue Self’s highly self-conscious comment concerning the derivative and ‘defamatory’ nature of his own novel in comparison to Wilde’s original. Self’s epilogue reflects the futility of attempting to accurately reproduce the narrative voice of an original text. Moreover, Dorian’s aesthetic ‘cloning’ symbolises the imitative nature of the original work itself, whose textual construction derives from Wilde’s blueprinted creative ideas.

Davies submits that the ‘epilogue permanently suspends our ability to distinguish the original from its imitation or vice versa’.²⁸ Self, in contrast to Davies postulation, recognises

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

²⁰ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982), p. 32.

²¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), p. 12.

²² Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 184.

²³ Self, *Dorian*, p. 252.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 278.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 258-59.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 262.

²⁷ Davies, ‘Oscar Wilde’s “Voice”’, p. 14.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

the inability of Wilde's novel, as written during a Victorian period of conservatism, to accurately reflect the proclivities of late twentieth century Britain. Self's text detaches itself from the Wildean original due to the ways in which it fills the absences of Wilde's narrative voice in *Dorian Gray*. Through filling the silences of Wilde's narrative voice, Self aims to recreate the shock caused upon the publication of Wilde's novel in the late nineteenth century. The *Daily Chronicle* reviewed *Dorian Gray* in 1890, and referred to the novel as 'a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction'.²⁹ To a twenty-first century reader, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in the words of Peter Widdowson (2006), 'represents an innocence no longer available'.³⁰ Self cannot engender the same level of critical outrage and indignation amongst a readership that has been liberated from the shackles of Victorian conservatism. The Baudrillardian loss of 'substance' in postmodern culture, relates, in this case, to the loss of the Victorian potential to evoke profound reactions of abhorrence. In order to circumvent this difficulty, Self updates the moral 'putrefaction' of the novel through his replacement of 'substance' with illicit 'substances'. Wilde's characters limit themselves to the consumption of cigarettes: 'thin blue wreaths of smoke [...] curled up in such fanciful whorls from his [...] cigarette' and opium, 'Inside was a green paste waxy in lustre, the odour curiously heavy and persistent'.³¹ In the words of Neil Bartlett (2002), 'Self supplements these primitive pleasures with a pharmacopeia of class A drugs'.³² *Dorian's* patent interest in pharmaceutical hedonism represents Self's attempt to evoke the same sense of shock amongst a modern readership in relation to that generated by Wilde's novel in the 1890s: 'There's some methylenedioxyamphetamine [...] Then there's some ketamine [...] Then there's just good ol' diamorph'.³³

Harold Bloom (1973), submits that 'Poetic influence — when it involves two strong, authentic poets, — always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation'.³⁴ Self's novel represents a modern 'misreading' of Wilde's original which fills the silences of its predecessor's narrative voice and thus detaches itself from its source text. Basil Hallward confronts Dorian in Chapter XII of Wilde's novel with the gossip concerning his hedonistic lifestyle: "[Lord Gloucester] showed me a letter that his wife had written to him when she was dying alone [...] Your name was implicated in the most terrible confession I have ever read".³⁵ Wilde refrains from elaborating upon the 'terrible confession', and due both to the atmosphere of Victorian conservatism, and in order to ensure publication, Wilde's occasional 'silences' are necessary. Self, on the other hand, recounts the 'secret' of the letter in grisly detail: 'as Dorian did things at the other end of her, Octavia's face became contorted with awareness [of] the most earthy of violations'.³⁶ Dorian's confession occurs four chapters later, during a passage of dialogue with Hallward: 'That girl you spoke of, Octavia, [...] She maunders about being bugged by me when she was tripping ... and it's all true'.³⁷ Self, in *Dorian*, aims to "speak" the unspeakable of the pre-text.³⁸ As a result of this, Self represents, using the terminology of Bloom, the 'ephebe' whose poetic 'achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the

²⁹ 'Review', *Daily Chronicle*, in Michael Patrick Gillespie, ed., *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1891] (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), p. 368.

³⁰ Peter Widdowson, "'Writing Back': Contemporary Re-visionary Fiction", *Textual Practice* 20:3 (2006): 505.

³¹ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, pp. 6, 153.

³² Neil Bartlett, 'Picture of Ill-Health', *The Guardian Online* (September 2002). [16 May 2014] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/21/shopping.fiction>

³³ Self, *Dorian*, p. 67.

³⁴ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: OUP, 1975), p. 35.

³⁵ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 128.

³⁶ Self, *Dorian*, p. 105.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³⁸ Widdowson, 'Writing Back', p. 504.

precursor's characteristic work'.³⁹ In light of Bloom's argument, Self's *Dorian* strays from the influence of Wilde's narrative voice in *Dorian Gray*, and as a result, 'misreads' its source text in order to shock a twenty-first century readership.

To conclude, Thomas Mallon (2003) argues that 'the modernised *Dorian* creates a world in which Wilde's existence cannot be allowed to have occurred [...] Wilde's banishment amid the continuation of all else is a curious homage, a reverse index of immortal stature'.⁴⁰ To argue against Mallon's submission, Self, rather than 'banishing' his influence, identifies with Wilde's authorship by rejuvenating many of his original witticisms and epigrams in order to appeal to a modern readership. Self acknowledges Baudrillard's concept of the loss of Wilde's original 'voice' in postmodern culture through his epilogue and allusion to the Butlerian notion of the performative homosexual and heterosexual 'copying' of aesthetic appearance. Self fills the 'silences' left in Wilde's text through a presentation of illicit drug use and sexual debauchery in an attempt to replicate the outrage *Dorian Gray* caused amongst the literate in Victorian society. As the 'ephebe', Self represents a 're-visionary' writer, whose novel, in the words of Widdowson, "'write[s] back to'" Wilde's canonical text'.⁴¹ Self's *Dorian* updates its Wildean source text in order to force 'us to see what a novel like Wilde's would have been like if written at the beginning of the twenty-first century'.⁴² The re-visionary status of his text aligns itself with Self's words concerning '*The Picture of Dorian Gray* [being] the prophecy and *Dorian* [...] the fulfilment'.⁴³

³⁹ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Thomas Mallon. 'From Ingénu to Omnivore'. *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 2003). [17 May 2014] <https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2003/03/otherreviews.htm>

⁴¹ Widdowson, 'Writing Back': 491.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 505.

⁴³ McCrum, 'Self-Analysis'.

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