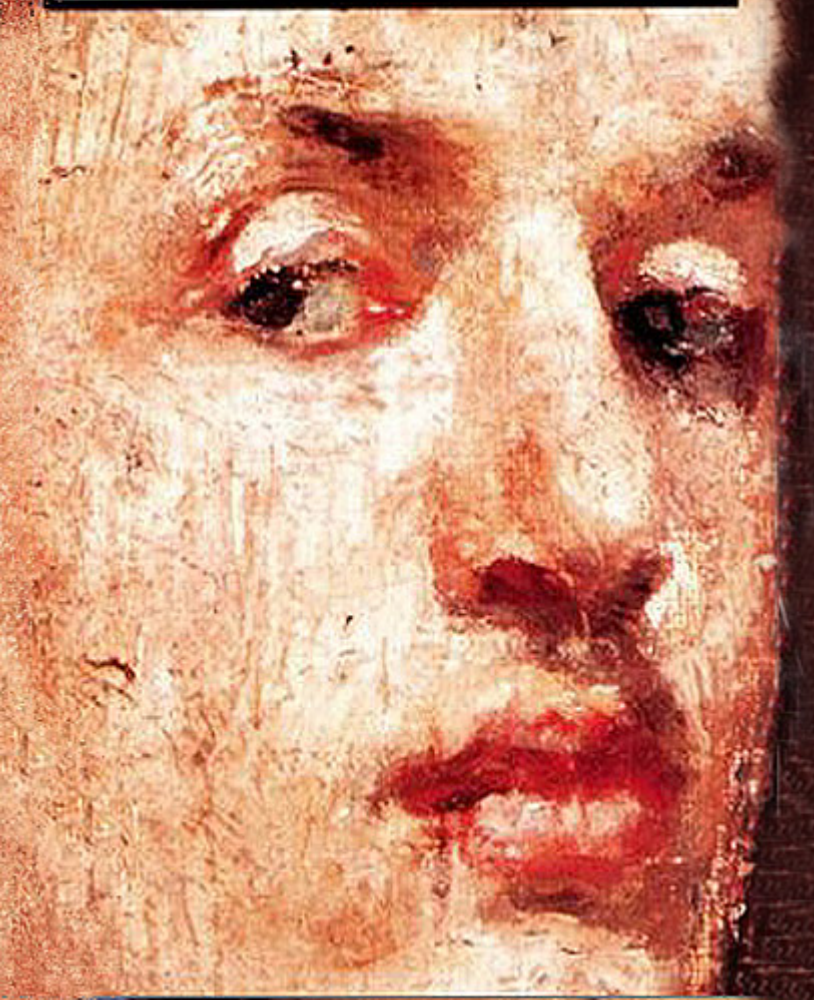


PENGUIN  CLASSICS

OSCAR WILDE  

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**THE PICTURE OF  
DORIAN GRAY**



## THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

OSCAR FINGAL O'FLAHERTIE WILLS WILDE was born in Dublin in 1854, the son of an eminent eye-surgeon and a nationalist poetess who wrote under the pseudonym of 'Speranza'. He went to Trinity College, Dublin, and then to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he began to propagandize the new Aesthetic (or 'Art for Art's Sake') Movement. Despite gaining a first and winning the Newdigate Prize for Poetry, Wilde failed to obtain an Oxford scholarship, and was forced to earn a living by lecturing and writing for periodicals. He published a largely unsuccessful volume of poems in 1881 and in the next year undertook a lecture tour of the United States in order to promote the D'Oyly Carte production of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera, *Patience*. After his marriage to Constance Lloyd in 1884, he tried to establish himself as a writer, but with little initial success. However, his three volumes of short fiction, *The Happy Prince* (1888), *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* (1891) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), together with his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), gradually won him a reputation confirmed and enhanced by the phenomenal success of his society comedies – *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, all performed on the West End stage between 1892 and 1895.

Success, however, was short-lived. In 1891 Wilde had met and fallen extravagantly in love with Lord Alfred Douglas. In 1895, when his success as a dramatist was at its height, Wilde brought an unsuccessful libel action against Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry. Wilde lost the case and two trials later was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for acts of gross indecency. As a result of this experience he wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. He was released from prison in 1897 and went into an immediate self-imposed exile on the Continent. He died in Paris in ignominy in 1900.

ROBERT MIGHALL completed a Ph.D. on Gothic fiction and Victorian medico-legal science at the University of Wales, and then spent three years as a post-doctoral fellow at Merton College, University of Oxford. In 1997 he became the editor of Penguin Classics; he now works as a freelance writer, journalist and editor. His publications include an

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OSCAR WILDE

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

*Edited with an Introduction and Notes by*

ROBERT MIGHALL

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# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
INTRODUCTION	ix
CHRONOLOGY	xxxv
FURTHER READING	xxxviii
A NOTE ON THE TEXT	xliii
 <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i>	 i
APPENDIX 1 <i>Selected Contemporary Reviews</i> of <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i>	214
APPENDIX 2 <i>Introduction to the First</i> <i>Penguin Classics Edition, by Peter Ackroyd</i>	224
NOTES	231



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## INTRODUCTION

On 20 June 1890 the Philadelphian *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* published Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as the lead story for its July number. Wilde revised and enlarged this, his first and only novel, for appearance in book form the following April. Hitherto the thirty-five-year-old author had published a book of poems (1881; largely ignored or ridiculed), had had one play produced (unsuccessfully, in New York in 1883), published a book of fairy tales (1888; on the whole well received), and had published some essays and stories in literary journals.<sup>1</sup> Wilde had reviewed many novels, and discoursed on the art of the novelist in 'The Decay of Lying'; now was his chance to practise what he had been preaching, and to fulfil the great potential his profile had promised when he graduated from Oxford and set about promoting himself in London's literary society. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in the first year of the decade that would see him fêted as the most successful society playwright of his day, and then pilloried as the most infamous sexual outlaw of the time, was his first significant and successful major work of art.

Characteristically, this was a *succès de scandale*. His novel provoked, at least in Britain, an outraged response from many reviewers, providing a foretaste of the treatment he would receive five years later when what some believed they had found represented in *Dorian Gray* (outlawed passions and 'unspeakable' acts) were revealed to be part of its author's life. Indeed, Wilde's novel, or at least the more 'candid' first version, was used by opposing counsel in the first two of his three trials in an attempt to prove that he was guilty of 'a certain tendency' believed to be represented in *Dorian Gray*. In 1890 W. E. Henley's *Scots Observer* thundered:

The story – which deals with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing *in camera* – is discreditable alike to author and editor. Mr Wilde has brains, and art, and style; but if he can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys, the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his own reputation and the public morals. (5 July 1890)

The remark about noblemen and telegraph-boys refers to a recent scandal (last mentioned in the press only two months earlier) involving a homosexual brothel in London's Cleveland Street, and was therefore a fairly direct suggestion that Wilde's text was unambiguous in what it described.<sup>2</sup> Questions of the role of art and its relation to morality, and to the author's life dominated debate about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* at the time of publication, in Wilde's response to the reviewers, and in a number of critical works published shortly afterwards, and again at the time of his trials.<sup>3</sup> They dominate it still, for it is difficult to discuss the novel outside of this framework or without an awareness of subsequent events. But this is understandable. To a great extent Wilde's text encourages such debate, with its central conceit of a work of art that somehow 'confesses' to its creator's desire, and bears testimony to a life of 'immorality' or crime. Some of these issues – of art and morality, of censorship and interpretation, of deception and revelation – will be discussed in this introduction to a work that is very much a product of its times, but which still fascinates readers over a hundred years after its first publication.

#### DOUBLE LIVES AND SECRET VICES

'... there are certain temperaments that marriage makes more complex ... They are forced to have more than one life.' (Lord Henry, in Chapter VI)

Oscar Wilde, artist, Irishman, dandiacal mocker of the standards of his society, was also a 'gentleman', and was acutely aware of what this meant, and defensive of his right to this title. His father was an eminent surgeon who was knighted for his services to science, his mother (despite her radical Irish nationalism) a celebrated society hostess.

Oscar was educated at Portora, a famous Irish public school, and attended both Trinity College, Dublin and Oxford University (Ireland's and England's oldest universities). At the latter he took an excellent double first and came close to being awarded a university fellowship, thus very nearly becoming a member of the English academic establishment. By 1890 he had been married for six years and was devoted to his two sons, lived in the fashionable district of Chelsea and at various times belonged to a number of gentlemen's clubs (which, with their systems of election and blackballings, were exclusive bastions of the metropolitan gentlemanly idea at the time). When Wilde came to revise *Dorian Gray* for book publication he made a last-minute change, substituting the name 'Hubbard' for the original 'Ashton' for the picture-framer who visits Dorian. Why? Because 'Ashton is a gentleman's name', whereas 'Hubbard particularly smells of the tradesman'.<sup>4</sup> More seriously, when Wilde engaged his counsel for his first trial, and was asked by Edward Clarke if he would give his word 'as an English gentleman' that the allegations were not true, Wilde assented.<sup>5</sup> Wilde would therefore have agreed with the words he gave to Basil Hallward in his tale when the latter asserted that 'every gentleman is interested in his good name'; and yet, like Dorian, Wilde had for some time been indulging in activities that were illegal and vilified by 'respectable' society, and which therefore forced him to live a double life. As one biographer puts it, 'After 1886 he was able to think of himself as a criminal, moving guiltily among the innocent',<sup>6</sup> being initiated into homosexual acts by his friend Robert Ross in that year. While in 1890 he had not quite abandoned himself to the reckless behaviour he would later term 'feasting with panthers' (*De Profundis*), he had had a number of homosexual encounters and identified himself as a member of a clandestine sub-culture.

The theme of a double life of outward respectability, or at least of caring about one's reputation, while secretly transgressing society's moral codes is central to the plot of *Dorian Gray*. Dorian may emulate Lord Henry's dandiacal disdain for established pieties, but even his response to Basil's accusation that he has made Lord Henry's sister's name a 'by-word' – 'Take care, Basil. You go too far' (Chapter XII) – suggests that he does have some regard for his reputation or the

opinion of others. As the text states, ‘he was not really reckless, at any rate in his relations to society’ (Chapter XI). Dorian in fact relishes his ability to indulge in his immoral, illegal or just plain shady activities whilst escaping the consequences. We are told how,

Often, on returning home from one of those mysterious and prolonged absences that gave rise to such strange conjecture . . . he himself would creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door . . . and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. (Chapter XI)

And when he appears at a society gathering not twenty-four hours after committing a treacherous murder, we are told that Dorian ‘felt keenly the terrible pleasure of a double life’ (Chapter XV). The passage describing Dorian’s subsequent trip to an opium den that same evening effectively conveys his divided existence. At first the cabby refuses to take him so far from his usual beat. Bribed into making the excursion to the docks, he loses his way in the labyrinth of unpathed courts and alleys so far removed from the well-lit, police-patrolled squares of Mayfair where Dorian lives. This area by the docks to the east of London was *terra incognita* for many Londoners, where the ruined Adrian Singleton, who was believed to have left the country, could escape from society, and where Dorian could indulge his cravings for opium and obscurity.

And yet, while such passages serve to establish a socio-economic as well as a topographical distance between Mayfair and Ratcliffe, ruling class and outcast, Wilde’s novel in part suggests that such divisions are not rigid or absolute. High life and low life are often conflated in *Dorian Gray*. ‘Culture and corruption’ (Chapter XIX) are not disparate but congruent areas of experience. Dorian passes easily from an appreciation of ‘the gracious shapes of Art, the dreamy shadows of Song’ (the preserve of the rich and cultivated), to relish ‘the coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the

very vileness of thief and outcast' (Chapter XVI), suggesting a close parity between these realms. Lord Henry makes this explicit when he asserts to Dorian that 'Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. I don't blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime was to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations' (Chapter XIX). The criminal and the aesthete (combined in the figure of Dorian) stand together in Wilde's text.

However, Wilde's novel goes further in blurring the distinctions between high and low, respectable and outcast. For while this supposed affinity between art and criminality, idle hedonism and actual delinquency, would not shock or trouble a large portion of the respectable and industrious classes at the time (who suspected as much and had their suspicions confirmed in some learned quarters),<sup>7</sup> Lord Henry's rapier wit threatens to indict a much larger section of the social spectrum. The dandy's epigrams provide a glimpse of the world Wilde would soon dissect in his social comedies, where a guilty past or present is the norm, and nearly everyone indulges in some degree of 'Bunburying'.<sup>8</sup> As Dorian reminds Basil, 'we are in the native land of the hypocrite'. Therefore while Dorian constitutes an extreme combination of cultivation and corruption (the embodiment of the idea of 'Decadence'), in some respects this supreme hypocrite is, as Henry puts it, 'the type of what the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found' (Chapter XIX).

By suggesting that duplicity is an essential part of existence in late-Victorian society, and that Dorian is an extreme version of an unacknowledged norm, Wilde's novel resembles that other great fantastic tale of doubling and transformation published four years earlier: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), a work which Wilde knew and admired.<sup>9</sup> Dr Jekyll creates a potion that transforms him into the criminal and bestial Mr Hyde. This potion effectively divides his nature, giving his less 'upright twin', as he terms Hyde, release from the constraints of social conformity, and allowing Jekyll himself to still walk the path of righteousness. Hyde provides Jekyll with an alibi, indulging in violence and (unspecified) debauchery which horrifies his more respectable side. As Jekyll puts it, 'I was often plunged into a kind of wonder at my [i.e. Hyde's] vicarious

depravity.<sup>10</sup> But what is most troubling about Stevenson's tale is the suggestion that although the means of this physical division are clearly fantastical and the results extreme, the experience of Dr Jekyll is far from unique. His divided self, it is implied, was a common experience among members of his class – a world of 'ordinary secret sinners', as he terms it. Recognizing that 'Man is not truly one, but truly two', Jekyll merely contrives the means to make this division concrete. In short, the claims of 'respectability' necessitated Hyde. Long caged, he came out roaring.

We must bear in mind that, until its final pages and for its first readers, Stevenson's 'strange case' involves not one person but two. It records friends' various attempts to understand the relationship between two of the most unlikely companions: what the lawyer Utterson calls Jekyll's 'strange preference' for the grotesque thug Hyde. Utterson is determined to discover why his respectable friend is honouring Hyde's cheques, protecting him from the law, and has even made him the principal legatee in his will; perhaps most worrying of all, he has set him up in an apartment in Soho, a distinctly shady part of town. Blackmail is suspected, and blackmail was a fact of life for middle-class homosexuals at the time. Indeed, the law that eventually convicted Wilde, which was passed the year before the publication of Stevenson's tale, was known as the 'blackmailer's charter', allowing male prostitutes and domestic servants to extort money from their employers or clients. Wilde himself was subjected to a number of blackmail attempts.<sup>11</sup> However, while all speculation about the respectable physician's relationship with Hyde is brilliantly dispelled at the end in Jekyll's 'Full Statement of the Case' (when it is revealed that two people are actually one), Wilde's novel, especially the first published version, is more ambiguous. Unlike Stevenson, Wilde does not provide a 'full statement' to clear up any speculation about why Lord Henry and Dorian should take a house together in Algiers (a well-known retreat for homosexuals at the time), or why Dorian's 'friendship is so fatal to young men'. As a consequence it provoked the outraged response referred to above. Many reviewers believed they understood what Wilde was describing;<sup>12</sup> and Wilde, despite his bravura and readiness to respond to the 'prurient' reviewers

with a flat denial of any suggestion of 'immorality' in his tale, may have feared that he, like Basil, had 'put too much of himself' in his work of art. Perhaps he had.

### CODES AND REVISIONS

Wilde loved secrets and mysteries. When he joined the Freemasons at Oxford, part of the attraction was its code of absolute secrecy and the arcana of its rituals. His short story, 'The Sphinx Without a Secret', tells a tale of exactly that: a woman who surrounds herself with an aura of mystery and acts out an elaborate charade merely for the love of mystery. At the première of his play *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), Wilde is reported to have arranged for a select group of friends as well as a member of the cast to be wearing green carnations in their buttonholes, suggesting a sub-culture of conspirators.<sup>13</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray* perhaps wears a few green carnations of its own. It is certainly a 'coded' text, directing those in the know to understand its hints and suggestions. The name 'Dorian' itself is perhaps a coded reference to 'Greek love', the historical and pedagogical euphemism for the homoerotic practices that were a part of everyday life in ancient Greece, but which were glossed over or vilified by Victorian teachers of the Classics.<sup>14</sup> By calling his principal character Dorian, Wilde is perhaps hinting at the 'Greekness' of his relationship with the two older men who agree that he was 'made to be worshipped'. And when Wilde claimed that of all the characters in his novel Dorian was the one he most wished to be, but 'in other ages, perhaps',<sup>15</sup> he was perhaps wistfully alluding to the fact that he would be Dorian (Greek) in a Dorian age, an age which sanctioned what, to quote Lord Henry, his own 'monstrous age' had 'made monstrous and unlawful'. Other names have potential significance. At times the historical references with which the text is conspicuously laden amount to a roll-call of famous homosexuals. In one passage, which ostensibly catalogues Dorian's interest in jewels, there is a reference to the suit of armour which Edward II gave to his lover Piers Gaveston, and to the earrings worn by James I's 'favourites'. Indeed, as we learn later, one of these



favourites was Philip Herbert, Dorian's ancestor, who was 'caressed by the Court for his handsome face', a circumstance that makes Dorian speculate on the influence of heredity and wonder whether it was 'young Herbert's life that he sometimes led' (Chapter XI); a coded reference perhaps to the fact that he may share similar tastes to this 'favourite' of a king notorious for his homosexual lifestyle.

Indeed, one of the most telling signs that Wilde had not been sufficiently circumspect in his depiction of male relationships in his novel was the nature of many of the revisions he made when the novel appeared in book form in 1891 (significant changes are here indicated in the Notes, pp. 231–53). Wilde had already made a number of changes in the process of transferring the novel from manuscript to typescript, cutting out or modifying even more explicit material: so he may not have been entirely surprised by some of the more forthright reviews.<sup>16</sup> When he revised the book for volume form he went further. In the 1890 version there had been a much greater degree of physical intimacy between the principal male characters. In Chapter I, when Basil Hallward tells Lord Henry about his beautiful new friend, Henry lays 'his hand upon [Basil's] shoulder'. This seemingly innocent or inconsequential gesture Wilde chose to omit in 1891. Perhaps he felt he had gone too far, and could not risk being either too explicit or too ambiguous about these relationships. Thus despite defiantly asserting that 'what Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows'<sup>17</sup> in a letter responding to the *Scots Observer's* insinuations about the Cleveland Street scandal, he none the less chose to dispel some of the mystery surrounding Dorian's activities when he revised the novel the following year. In Chapter X of the first version Basil visits Dorian to implore him to deny 'the most dreadful things [that] are being said about you; – things that I could hardly repeat to you'. Basil then refers to a number of scandals in which Dorian appears to be implicated, and asks him, 'Why is your friendship so fateful to young men?' In the first version Dorian declines to answer any of these allegations, keeping his sins vague, and his responsibility for the ruin of young men a matter of readerly speculation. In 1891, however, he answers these charges, absolving himself of responsibility for the actions of others. These turn out to involve monetary fraud and misalliance, and are hardly the

‘unspeakable’ crimes some readers or reviewers might have suspected.

The most significant changes in this respect involve the role of the portrait in the relationship between the artist and his model, where the physical becomes the ideal, and the aesthetic bears the burden of (or provides a mask for) the erotic. This is most markedly exhibited when Basil explains to Dorian what his portrait revealed to its creator, and what he feared it might proclaim to the world. This is how it appeared in 1890:

‘It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow, I had never loved a woman. I suppose I never had time. . . . Well, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When I was away from you, you were still present in my art.’

In 1891 Basil’s reference to never having loved a woman, as well as his mad, extravagant and absurd devotion, is replaced by a more ‘Platonic’ interpretation of the artist’s need for his model:

‘Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you. I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When you were away from me you were still present in my art . . .’ (Chapter IX; original ellipsis)

It is now Dorian’s personality that dominates Basil’s ‘soul, brain, and power’. His adoration or ‘worship’ is transformed into a philosophical quest for a chaste and literally Platonic ideal of art.

According to Basil, this ‘aesthetic’ adoration communicates itself to the painting. In 1890, however, this process was interpreted rather differently. Then Basil explained to Lord Henry that he would not exhibit the painting because he had put into it ‘all the extraordinary romance of which, of course, I have never dared to speak to him’. In 1891 this is changed to ‘some expression of all this curious artistic

idolatry'. The portrait no longer runs the risk of revealing Basil's 'romantic' attachment to Dorian (making him believe he had put 'too much of myself in the thing', as he earlier put it); it is now merely the physical manifestation of an artistic ideal. Significantly, the unmodified versions of these passages were read out in court in 1895 in an attempt to prove that *Dorian Gray* was a 'perverted book', thus confirming Basil's lament that art is too often regarded as a mode of autobiography.

### MAGIC PAINTINGS

While the theme of a young man selling his soul in exchange for eternal youth is not new – as Wilde confesses, it is 'an idea that is old in the history of literature' (Mason, 72) – *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers an intriguing and highly original treatment of this idea, principally owing to Wilde's brilliant conceit of the portrait which masks Dorian's life. This is not to suggest that magic, animated, or somehow revealing portraits were unknown in the pages of popular literature; they had been a stock feature of fantastic fiction since its earliest days. One of the marvellous and terrifying events which takes place in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764; the first Gothic novel) is the figure of Alfonso stepping down from his portrait, a portentous sign that Manfred's days at the castle are numbered. A little-known (and decidedly extravagant) tale from 1812 entitled 'Family Portraits', by Jean Baptiste Benoît Eyries, which owes much to Walpole's novel, also anticipates aspects of Wilde's own magic portrait.<sup>18</sup> In Eyries' tale, the portrait of the evil Ditmar is imbued with moral significance as manifested in its physical appearance. It was painted by a ghost as an emblem of Ditmar's crimes, depicting his soul in all its ugliness; and, as in the denouement of Wilde's tale, it reverts to a more attractive form once expiation for these sins is accomplished. The idea of a fatal correspondence between a painting and an individual's life – the former being parasitic of the latter – had been brilliantly handled in Edgar Allan Poe's story, 'The Oval Portrait' (1845), where the artist's obsession with capturing absolute 'life-likeness' in paint eventually destroys his model, the wife worn out by the arduous sittings for her portrait.

Portraits proliferate in Victorian Gothic and sensational novels, revealing dark secrets about their subjects.<sup>19</sup> Wilde's novel follows suit, featuring not one revelatory portrait merely, but a number of earlier ones which, it is suggested, have some link to their pictorial descendant. Chapter XI of the 1891 version tells how Dorian would visit the portrait gallery of his country house and contemplate the pictures of his ancestors. Each one has a tale to tell, encouraging Dorian to speculate on the 'inheritance of sin and shame' bequeathed to him by those whose 'blood flowed in his veins'. Standing before a particular portrait he wonders whether it was 'young Herbert's life that he sometimes led? Had some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own? Was it some dim sense of that ruined grace that had made him so suddenly, and almost without cause, give utterance, in Basil Hallward's studio, to the mad prayer that had so changed his life?' This is a powerful and intriguing suggestion, providing a 'Gothic' (but also scientific) explanation for Dorian's actions. It suggests that he is haunted by his ancestral legacies rather than being entirely motivated by his own personal vanity. His portrait therefore bears not only the consequences of Dorian's own sins, but is also the culmination of an ancestral line. For as Dorian reasons, 'man' was 'a complex, multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead'.

Through such emphases Wilde gives a fantastic and supernatural twist to an idea that was a staple tenet of scientific thought at the time. Dorian is invoking the idea of hereditary 'reversion', which is explained by the eminent mental pathologist Henry Maudsley: 'Now and then a person may detect in his own face in the looking-glass a momentary flash of expression of the sort which will be found formal in the portrait of an ancestor . . . Beneath every face are the latent faces of ancestors, beneath every character their characters.'<sup>20</sup> Wilde supernaturalizes scientific belief, providing an occult dimension to the correspondence between physical appearance and character, and the transference of ancestral legacy. This scientific frame of reference is conspicuous in his novel, especially in its revised form, where heredity plays a crucial role in explaining character and motivation. Wilde added a whole