

A Novel with Multiple Viewpoints: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Tatsuro Satsuma (薩摩竜郎)

Oscar Wilde's only full-length novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, now seems to have secured a certain status in the history of English-language literature. In most cases, however, critics praise it with some reservations. A typical criticism of it is shown in the following passage by Edouard Roditi.

As a macabre novel... *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not entirely successful. The thread of its narrative is too frequently interrupted by Wilde's esthetic preaching, by useless displays of esthetic erudition, by unnecessary descriptions of works of art and by paradoxical table-talk which have little bearing on the plot...⁽¹⁾

Despite all the weaknesses that he mentions here, he recognises it as "a great novel", saying "it manages to haunt many readers with vivid memories of its visionary descriptions." Similarly, Richard Ellmann writes as follows;

Both in its magazine form, and in its form as a separate novel, *Dorian Gray* has faults. Parts of it are wooden, padded, self-indulgent. No one could mistake it for a workmanlike job... But its continual fascination teaches us to judge it by new standards.⁽²⁾

His interpretation is that "*Dorian Gray* is the aesthetic novel *par excellence*, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers". Although almost all critics point out some faults in it, as Roditi and Ellmann do, at the same time they admit that it has a certain fascination which does not allow us to dismiss it as a mere bizarre and frivolous work of art from the age of decadence. The attitude common to these critics suggests that the evaluation of this novel is not as simple as it seems to

be, and there must be some reason for the peculiar success of this novel as a whole in the face of its apparent defects.

The most conspicuous weakness in the novel, which naturally has been mentioned by a number of critics, would be the frequent interruption of the story by the insertion of lengthy aesthetic discussions or flippant table talks which have little direct bearing on the progress of the plot. Yet the important point to note here is that if we read *Dorian Gray* in the light of Wilde's critical ideas, this 'weakness' might not necessarily be the result of Wilde's lack of skill or commitment to his work, but could be thought of as an inevitable outcome of the unusual narrative structure of the novel which he seems to have used rather consciously, creating the unique character of this novel. In other words, it could have been part of Wilde's intention to make it difficult to judge and evaluate the novel according to a simple conventional standard from a fixed viewpoint, by introducing various narrative modes and presenting pluralistic viewpoints about subjects such as morality or aestheticism. At least the novel exists as an example which shows the possibility of such a way of writing a novel; thus we truly need some sort of "new standards" for it.

Wilde's critical ideas which support this view can be found in many parts of his writings, and most prominently and typically he insisted in "The Critic as Artist" that the artist/critic should have fluid and multiple viewpoints, rather than a fixed one.

Art is a passion, and...Thought is inevitably coloured by emotion, and so is fluid rather than fixed... .

.....

The true critic will...never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought, or

stereotyped mode of looking at things. He will realise himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. (p.1144)⁽³⁾

This attitude of Wilde is sometimes discussed in the context of his Irishness,⁽⁴⁾ and interestingly enough, many of his works are written in such a way as to embody this basic belief of his, often exhibiting superficial inconsistency or elusiveness. "The Critic as Artist" itself and "The Decay of Lying" in *Intentions* are written in dialogue form, which proved extremely convenient for Wilde to freely exhibit his ideas from two viewpoints. Another essay in *Intentions*, "The Truth of Masks", was given an enigmatic passage for its closing paragraph when the original version was revised for the book. (The title of the essay itself was given by the revision.)

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. (p.1173)

By adding this shrewd passage, Wilde released himself from the ultimate responsibility that readers usually expect the author to assume.⁽⁵⁾ What is shown in the essay is, Wilde claims, nothing more than a "standpoint". This is obviously another example of his putting his own idea in "The Critic as Artist" into practice.

One of Wilde's favourite ways to attain this kind of elusiveness is to leave the ending of his work in the form of an open question, without offering any definite conclusion by the author, as in the case of 'The Portrait of Mr. W.H.' The narrator in 'Mr. W.H.', who at one stage firmly believes the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets, writes an enthusiastic letter to his friend to prove the theory, only to abandon it as a mere fancy after sending it off. At the very end of the story, however, he concedes in a mystifying manner

that he sometimes thinks "there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets". (p.350) By partly re-reversing the narrator's opinion, the author apparently reserves the ultimate conclusion. Roditi thinks that the plot of 'Mr. W.H.' exemplifies the last passage of "The Truth of Masks" and that "Graham's theory of the sonnets is both true and untrue".⁽⁶⁾ Thus, room is deliberately left for some possible interpretations from different viewpoints.

The Picture of Dorian Gray can also be read as a novel with similar characteristics: Wilde's attitudes towards morality or aestheticism in this novel have ingeniously been left ambiguous, and he has incorporated such diverse literary styles and genres into it that a conventional fixed viewpoint does not seem enough to fully appreciate the novel, which might be called a patchwork of different narrative modes. He did not write a simple aesthetic novel, partly because "[i]n 1890 it would have been old hat for Wilde to offer an unequivocal defense" of aestheticism after Pater's refurbishing of it in the late 1860s and early 1870s and the attack upon it in the 1870s and 1880s, as Ellmann points out.⁽⁷⁾ Yet this does not seem to be the sole reason for the ambiguity in his attitudes towards aestheticism, and we may say the ambiguity is rooted in his critical ideas. The purpose of this paper is to explore how he created a novel which reflects the complicated literary and social structures of the late Victorian age, thus demonstrating the possibility of multiple viewpoints in, and for, a novel, while clearly, and paradoxically, revealing his personality in it.

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Although there were some favourable responses (from Yeats and Pater, for example), the commonest reaction to this novel from the contemporary reviewers was "almost unanimously hysterical", as Isobel Murray puts it,⁽⁸⁾ and they claimed that it was vulgar, poisonous, or immoral, representing the evil atmosphere of decadence. Not surprisingly, its publication was followed by a series of harsh and acerbic disputes between Wilde and some editors chiefly over its morality.⁽⁹⁾ In the course of the dispute Wilde claims that

"there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray*", which he calls "the only error in the book", but it must be noted that his basic attitude towards the issue of morality, which is laconically manifested in the preface to the novel as "there is no moral book or immoral book", never requires his works to be moralistic. When he declares in a letter to the editor of *St. James's Gazette* (25 June 1890) that he is "quite incapable of understanding how any work of art can be criticised from a moral standpoint", he is rejecting any criticism from a naively moralistic viewpoint, and this should be regarded as the most important point he is making in the dispute, as will be made clearer when we examine the ambiguity about the morality of this novel later.

Having said that, however, it still remains to be said that Wilde deliberately provided the novel with a considerable number of 'decadent' or 'immoral' elements. He must have been well aware that they could be provocative, and even offensive, to his contemporaries who were ready to apply to it the conventional moralistic standards of the Victorian age. The novel begins with the description of Basil's studio in a decadent and aesthetic manner, followed by discussions of aesthetic art and ideas as well as the exchange of witty remarks between Basil Hallward, the painter, and Lord Henry, as if trying to establish the aspect of this novel as a piece of decadent art. In this studio and the adjacent garden the seduction and fall of Dorian take place through chapter 2. The words of seduction by Lord Henry show us quintessential examples of the decadent thought or his "new Hedonism" (p.31), in which we can hear the echoes of Walter Pater's 'Conclusion' to his *Studies into the History of the Renaissance*.

It is true, as Roditi and some other critics have pointed out, that Lord Henry's lengthy preaching and witty table-talks of this kind tend to digress too much and to interrupt the thread of the narrative in the novel, but if we realise that what is presented here by Wilde is a novel which should be read not so much in the light of the plot as in the light of the experimental mixture of narrative modes, it is possible to regard them not just as unbalanced and misplaced speeches in the novel, but as integral parts of the novel with certain meanings of their

own. There we are supposed to savour Wilde's characteristic aesthetic lectures through Lord Henry's voice as something independent of the story, though it is of course closely connected with Wilde's characterization of him, and then again we can resume following the story with their lingering reverberations in mind. This process of moving between different levels of narrative, which often happens in the course of reading this novel, unmistakably produces certain effect, sometimes making us feel that we are forced to follow the story from several different viewpoints, and convincing us that life can be seen that way.

It would be useful for us to remind ourselves of the narrative structure of 'The Portrait of Mr. W.H.', which few people would complain about just because it has in its middle a long section of philological analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnets. The nature of the narrative of that part is quite different from that of the rest of the story, and, essential part of the story as it is, it could also be appreciated somewhat separately on a different level. It must be admitted that the narrative of 'Mr. W.H.' is more consistent and harmonious as a whole than that of *Dorian Gray*, but it is still possible to see certain kinds of parallel between the narrative structures of these two prose works. Inserted sections of a different narrative form can contribute to the unique general effect that the novel as a whole produces, though, in the case of *Dorian Gray*, these are divided into smaller fragments and scattered throughout the novel, with chapter 11 inserted at the midpoint of the novel as an exceptionally conspicuous section of different nature, as we shall see later. Recurrent appearances of aesthetic or decadent sermons and frivolous or witty table-talks, combined with aesthetic descriptions in general and rather obvious suggestion of homosexuality, serve to confirm one aspect of the novel as an example of decadent and immoral art. This aspect is probably not so dominant and decisive as many of Wilde's contemporaries thought, but no one can deny that it still remains as the part of the novel's character that can never be ignored.

In chapter 4 and 5, a new phase of the story is introduced: the love romance of Dorian and Sibyl Vane which begins and ends literally in the mode of

“romance” from Dorian’s viewpoint, although Sibyl also belongs to the parodied fairy-tale mode. Dorian tells Lord Henry: “I really went in and paid for the stage-box.... if I hadn’t, I should have missed the greatest romance of my life.” (p.48) Afterwards he deserts Sibyl with cruel reproaches: “You have spoiled the romance of my life.” (p.87) Wilde emphasises that this episode is characterised as “what the world calls a romance.” (p.52) The fact that Dorian refuses to know her personal history in real life (p.51), or even to be introduced to her by the old Jew on the first occasion (p.50), would prove that he wished to have no contact with her in the real world. Wilde makes it quite clear that Dorian recognises her and his relationship with her as something belonging to the imaginary sphere, or the sphere of art, and nothing more.

‘To-night she is Imogen,’ he answered, ‘and to-morrow night she will be Juliet.’

‘When is she Sibyl Vane?’

‘Never.’ (p.51)

It is no wonder that when Sibyl loses her ability to act on the stage, to her delight, after being “taught what reality really is”, Dorian mutters, “You have killed my love”, and cruelly deserts her, saying “[w]ithout art you are nothing”. (pp.71 – 2) Sibyl is suddenly confronted with her disaster, having freed her “soul from prison” and grown “sick of shadows”(p.71). Wilde obviously alludes to “The Lady of Shalott” by Tennyson, as an example of the self-destruction of an artist getting out of the sphere of art.⁽⁶⁾ In this novel Dorian never allows her to get out of the frame of romance in the sphere of art.

In the revised version of this novel Wilde added the chapters 3, 5, 15 – 18, and divided the last chapter of the original version into the chapter 19 and 20.⁽¹¹⁾ The newly added chapter 5, along with other new chapters, largely contributes to his success in diversifying the style of narrative and in intensifying the contrast between the real world and the imaginary world in this novel by using the narrative which can be seen as a sort of parody of fairy-tale and melodrama narratives.

For Sibyl herself her relationship with Dorian is

also a romance, as Dorian sees it, but in chapter 5 she is described rather satirically as an innocent girl who belongs to a fairy-tale world, which is characteristically shown in the narrative of chapter 5 which begins with “Mother, mother, I am so happy”, and especially in her extremely fanciful prattles about her unrealistic dreams for her brother’s future. (p.58) It can not be mere coincidence that Dorian also plays “the fairy-tale role of ‘Prince Charming,’” as Rodney Shewan remarks.⁽¹²⁾

Sibyl’s mother, who is described by Wilde in a rather mocking way, often behaves “with one of those false theatrical gestures that so often become a mode of second nature to a stage-player” (p.56) “in search of an imaginary gallery.” (p.58) Her pompously theatrical behaviour suggests the silliness of confusing life and art in a vulgarised manner. This could be supposed to satirise pathetic exaggeration of common melodramas: “The exaggerated folly of the threat, the passionate gesture that accompanied it, the mad melodramatic words, made life seem more vivid to her.” (p.62)

It should be noticed that Dorian’s state of mind is also affected by a theatrical sense, or a “sense of dramatic effect”(p.81), which is more or less similar to her feelings, though it is not like a melodrama but like “a Greek tragedy”. He concedes to Lord Henry that he cannot feel the tragedy of Sibyl’s death as bitterly as he wants: “It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play.” (p.80) The contrast here is that Dorian finds himself taking the tragic reality for something unreal or something belonging to the sphere of art, while Sibyl’s mother confuses her merely melodramatic fancy as realities. Dorian’s feeling of detachment is caused by obtaining a viewpoint to see himself from outside, that is, the viewpoint of a spectator of his own life. Lord Henry clearly explains this situation to Dorian: “[W]e find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both.” (p.81) Obviously this state of mind is closely connected with the divided self motif.

In the unrealistic world of chapter 5, which is basically a parody of fairy tale and melodrama, Sibyl’s brother, James Vane (Jim), emerges as a character of somewhat incongruous nature, suggesting the strange mixture of narrative modes in this novel. Despite his

deep affection for his sister he cannot mingle properly with Sibyl and his mother, because of his realistic or naturalistic character. He has a strong aversion to his mother's melodramatic way of behaving. He loathes the stage and his mother's affectation (p.56), and before leaving for Australia he hopes to part with Sibyl when their mother is not present, because "[s]he would be sure to make a scene, and he detested scenes of every kind." (p.61) On the other hand, his mother "felt a little disappointed that he (James Vane) had not joined the group" of her imaginary play-scene. (p.56) Distinction between their natures concerning the theatrical sense is repeatedly made clear and emphasised. It is also impossible for him to make any response to Sibyl's passionate narration of her fancy on his future: "'You are not listening to a word I am saying, Jim.... Do say something.' 'What do you want me to say?'" (p.59) It is true that Wilde gives in the novel an plausible excuse for his neglecting her fancy: "He was heart-sick at leaving home. ...he had still a strong sense of the danger of Sibyl's position." But, at the same time, he is described as too naturalistic or realistic a character to assimilate into the fairy-tale world of her fancy. The description of his appearance forms a clear contrast with Sibyl, who is depicted as an ideally beautiful girl in a fairy-tale world. "He was thick-set of figure, and his hands and feet were large, and somewhat clumsy in movement. He was not so finely bred as his sister." (p.56) It might be possible to think that he represents the type of an awkward, ugly, and menacing character in a fairy-tale world, but his nature seems to be carefully and deliberately alienated from the rest of the world of chapter 5, with the difference strangely stressed. His extreme aversion to belonging to his mother's melodramatic world or Sibyl's fairy-tale world would be better interpreted as a sign of the incompatibility of their natures in the novel. Considering that he plays a more important role later in the revenge plot, we may say he appears in chapter 5 to foreshadow the crime story mode and its narrative in the latter half of the novel.

Chapters 3 and 5, the two chapters added later to the first half of the novel, have some characteristics in common. Chapter 3 provides Dorian with his familial

lineage, while chapter 5 does the same with Sibyl. Neither Dorian nor Sibyl has his or her father, which should be an appropriate background for the plot as a romance. The story of Dorian's parentage stirs Lord Henry "by its suggestion of a strange, almost modern romance". (p.39) Another point common to these chapters is that they added allegorical descriptions to this novel as a method of narration. In chapter 3 "Philosophy" becomes young, "Pleasure" dances, "Facts" flees away, and "Reality" enters the room. In chapter 5 "Wisdom" speaks. Quite small in quantity as it is, this is also one of the newly added elements in the revised version to diversify the range of narrative modes.

From chapter 6 through chapter 10 the story takes dramatic turns. As we have seen, there occurs the tragedy of Sibyl, which was provided with more convincing background as a romance by the addition of the new chapters, and then the degeneration of the picture begins. In the light of the narrative method, chapter 7 draws our attention as one of the few chapters in the original version which had already had substantial naturalistic descriptions of the scenes other than those in houses (or the adjacent garden), such as those of the theatre in the evening and those around Covent Garden at dawn,⁽¹³⁾ but more importantly, it is in this chapter that the aspect of *Dorian Gray* as a Gothic novel is finally made clear. While many possible sources of this novel have been so far mentioned by critics, Charles Maturin's masterpiece of the Gothic novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, still seems to be one of the strongest influences on the making of the novel, given its obvious Faustian theme and the crucial role of the portrait in it, as well as the biographical fact that Wilde, after being released from prison, travelled to France under the assumed name of Sebastian Melmoth.⁽¹⁴⁾ The Gothic aspect of *Dorian Gray*, which is directly related to the main plot of the novel, was obviously formed under the influence of *Melmoth*, among others, and Wilde succeeded in reviving "the obsolete genre of the "gothic" or sartorial novel" in the late Victorian age, as Roditi says,⁽¹⁵⁾ but since *Dorian Gray* is not simply a Gothic novel, it would be more appropriate to say that he succeeded in reminding the readers of the Gothic

aspect as a literary genre used in the novel.

Wilde's ironical device of concealing the symbol of sin in the abandoned play-room which Dorian used in his innocent childhood (chapter 10) is believed to be affected by Maturin's novel, in which young Melmoth is shocked by the portrait in an abandoned closet as well. The portrait he saw represents his evil ancestor of the same name of Melmoth (though still alive), while the portrait in *Dorian Gray* shows the image of Dorian himself. In this respect the latter is much more like an actual mirror than the former, but they both have the common function of reflecting latent factors of the hero of the novel.

It would also be possible to see a certain connection between the presence of an ancestral portrait in *Melmoth* and Dorian's interest in the portraits of his ancestors as soul-mirrors, which is clearly shown in chapter 11; "He loved to stroll through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins." (p.107) Dorian finds his spiritual ancestors even in literature and feels that their experiences and sins are of his own.

There were times when it appeared to Dorian Gray that the whole of history was merely the record of his own life, not as he had lived it in act and circumstance, but as his imagination had created it for him, as it had been in his brain and in his passions. ...It seemed to him that in some mysterious way their lives had been his own. (p.108)

This kind of internalisation of the lives, experiences, and thus viewpoints of others as one's own is the key idea that Wilde often expresses in his writings such as "The Critic as Artist" or *De Profundis*, with the ideal critic and Christ, respectively, as the ideal figure who attained such internalisation.⁽⁶⁾ This also gives an explanation for his liking for paradox and inconsistency, and it is no wonder Dorian thinks as follows:

He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple,

permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion... . (p.107)

This view obviously corresponds to Wilde's notion of the ideal critic/artist, and in writing *Dorian Gray* he seems to have tried to find a way of presenting such various aspects of "a complex multiform creature" in one novel.

In the notorious chapter 11 the narrative undergoes a strange transformation. Firstly, Wilde seems to have used this chapter to emphasise the aesthetic atmosphere by including the enumeration and detailed account of the objects that are supposed to offer sensational pleasure to people, such as perfumes, musical instruments, jewels, and embroideries, as well as the descriptions of Dorian's actual and imaginary ancestors, quite often depending on apparent plagiarisms.⁽⁷⁾ The style he uses there is highly artificial, partly because he rather directly plagiarised large parts of these descriptions from other books, each of which specialises in one of the categories listed above, and in this chapter, where Dorian's pursuit of pleasure for a period of years is summarised in a condensed narrative, the passage of time is obviously dealt with in a different manner from that of the other chapters. What is noticeable here is that this chapter, with such distinctive characteristics of its narrative, works as a device for blocking, or changing, the natural flow of the imagery in the novel. Insertion of an excessively artificial chapter at the midpoint of the novel, other parts of which are made up of the texts of comparatively normal, natural narrative forms — though not so natural as that of many other novels — could be regarded as a deliberate contrivance for indicating the self-conscious method of writing. This is another factor which helps us to confirm that Wilde is not merely telling the story in this novel, but trying to incorporate various kinds of narration there.

As far as the the progress of the plot is concerned, we should pay due attention to the place where Wilde has set this contrivance, for it is just after chapter 11, in which Dorian experiences all these sensational and sometimes immoral pleasures under the spellbinding

influence of the book given by Lord Henry, that the night of the ultimate crime, the murder of Basil Hallward by Dorian's hand, is described (chapter 12 and 13). Obviously chapter 11 marks a distinct watershed in the novel. Roughly speaking, Wilde only describes the process of the fall of an innocent juvenile before chapter 11, while after that he deals with the world of experience, crime, and sin. In fact, though Sibyl kills herself and the signs of sin appear on his portrait, Dorian himself has not committed any actual crime in the first half of the novel. What is described there — in an idyllic world like Eden or the Paradise — is nothing more than the awakening, or the fall, of the innocent Dorian towards experience, crime, sin, and suffering. It is noteworthy that the contrast between the idyllic world and the world outside it is occasionally mentioned in this novel.⁽¹⁸⁾ In chapter 19 and 20 Dorian's vain decision, and hope, of returning to the innocent "idyll" (p.151) are immediately dashed by Lord Henry's cynical remarks and further degeneration of the portrait, as it is impossible for the innocent mode of fairy-tale or romance in the first half to be carried on into the latter half of the totally different nature, where a vicious murder and a menacing attempted revenge are the dominant factors of the plot.

The contrast between these two parts also reminds us that Wilde wrote two collections of fairy tales; *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), each of which comparatively puts emphasis on the innocence/purity and the experience/suffering respectively. *Dorian Gray* could be considered, in this respect, to be a novel which consists of two parts of different natures, with chapter 11 inserted between them.

The literary genre which Wilde suggests by the narrative in chapter 13 and 14 is rather simple. In chapter 13 he introduces the aspect of a crime (or detective) story. Dorian, after killing Basil, fabricates a false alibi for himself (p.118), and later, in chapter 16, he secretly takes an outing to an opium-den near the quay in the guise of the common people, "glancing back now and then to see if he was being followed". (p.135) Ellmann mentions Wilde's acquaintance with Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, and

suggests his influence on Wilde seen in the plot of Dorian's murder.⁽¹⁹⁾ It is known that the composition of *Dorian Gray* was prompted, in the first place, by an American publisher, J.M. Stoddard, who asked both Wilde and Doyle at the same dinner party to write a story for *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*.⁽²⁰⁾ The answers to this request were Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and Doyle's *The Sign of Four*. Closely connected with this aspect of a crime story, the element of chemical science is effectively used in chapter 14: Dorian entreats, urges, and forces Alan Campbell to destroy Basil's dead body by chemical means. We ought to suppose that Wilde was well aware of that atmosphere of a 'modern' crime story which is created by describing the disposal of a dead body by such a method. He was careful enough to have a surgeon inform him, before writing, how this could be done by chemical means.⁽²¹⁾ The popularity of R.L. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) should also be taken into consideration for the factors of chemical science and crime, as well as the theme of the doppelganger or the divided self.

The newly added chapters 15- 18 in the revised version have greatly affected the nature of this novel in some ways. Obviously they contribute to the wider variety of the narrative modes. The locales in the novel are remarkably diversified by the descriptions of the scenes of driving to the quay, of the opium-den, and of shooting. This point is quite clear when we compare the 1891 version with the original one, in which most incidents and conversations take place in houses. There is no doubt that the number of naturalistic descriptions has been increased, and it is possible to say that Wilde added "chapters which are of a more conventional Victorian narrative", as Peter Ackroyd puts it.⁽²²⁾

In these chapters there appear many examples of witty table-talks, and it should be noted that the revision had an intriguing influence on the nature of the conversation scenes in general. Roughly speaking, there are two distinct types of conversations in this novel, each of which is characteristic of Wilde in its own way. One is the witty table talk with Lord Henry as the leading figure, which mainly deals with social matters. The other is the exchange of lengthy and often monological statements mostly by Lord Henry, and

occasionally by Basil and Dorian, which mainly deals with aesthetic ideas in life and art. Some of the sheer monologues of Lord Henry and Dorian, as well as some narrative parts in which their thought and emotion are expressed, have the same characteristics as the conversation of this second type. Though both of them are effectively used to exhibit the atmosphere of decadence and aestheticism, their characters as conversation are totally different.

Typical examples of the first type — seemingly superficial and often paradoxical table talks which bear remarkable resemblance to the repartee in Wilde's comedies — are to be found in scenes (mostly party or dinner scenes) in chapters 3, 15, 17, and 18.

'Ugliness is one of the seven deadly sins, then?' cried the Duchess. ...

'Ugliness is one of the seven deadly virtues, Gladys. ... Beer, the Bible, and the seven deadly virtues have made our England what she is.'

'You don't really like your country, then?' she asked. 'I live in it.'

'That you may censure it the better.'

.....
 '[English people] are more cunning than practical. When they make up their ledger, they balance stupidity by wealth, and vice by hypocrisy.'

'Still, we have done great things.'

'Great things have been thrust on us, Gladys'

'We have carried their burden.'

'Only as far as the Stock Exchange.'

She shook her head. 'I believe in the race,' she cried.

'It represents the survival of the pushing.' (p.140- 1)

This conversation from chapter 17 is a typical example of the first type, and this particular one seems all the more satirical when we realise that the author is not English, but Irish. Examples of the second type remind us of Wilde's style in his essays such as *Intentions* or *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, or even Pater's *Renaissance*, and when we recall that the most successful and important two essays in *Intentions* were written in dialogue form, their similarity seems not merely accidental, but rather an inevitable consequence

of his writing style.

'There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr Gray. All influence is...immoral from the scientific point of view.'

'Why'

'Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of some one else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. The aim of life is self-development. To realise one's nature perfectly — that is what each of us is here for.' (p.28)

From time to time in chapter 2 and some other chapters Lord Henry just keeps on talking in this manner for much longer than this example, almost without anyone interrupting his solo performance.

A remarkable fact here is that the monological conversations of this second type are found scattered in many chapters of the novel, but *not* in chapters 3, 5, 15, 17, or 18 (the exception being just one monologue by Lord Henry in chapter 3). It is immediately noticed that most of the second type (the monological preaching) had originally been included in this novel, while most of the first type (the witty table-talks) were added afterwards in the 1891 version. This makes it clear that Wilde had the intention of diversifying the modes of narrative by adding to it the new type of conversation, which he, as we know, was to use more and more successfully from then on in his comedies such as *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

Concerning the development of the plot, the newly added chapters 15- 18 (the James Vane episode) largely affect the meaning of Dorian's decision to try to become good in chapter 19. In short, it can be considered to weaken Dorian's natural moralistic inclination. If he decides to do so just after killing Basil without feeling any presence of threat or pressure from others as he does in the original version, the main reason for his conversion is supposed to be his

spontaneous feeling of penitence. Yet in the enlarged 1891 version, the emphasised threat of the revenge by James Vane should be counted as the strongest reason for his decision. Thus his conversion has become less spontaneous and Dorian's nature is, in a sense, made more hypocritical, as if to support Lord Henry's cynical words at the beginning of chapter 20.

It is clear that Wilde deliberately made such a change, for when revising he also added a passage which conclusively labels Dorian as a hypocrite. Near the end of chapter 20, Dorian is shocked to see further degeneration of the portrait, and in agony asks himself if he was just hypocritical about his decision to "leave her (Hetty) as flower-like as I had found her"(p.151). He tries to make himself believe that "[t]here had been something more" in his renunciation (p.158). But in the revised version Wilde added an passage just after the question to give a clear answer to it.

No. There had been nothing more. Through vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity's sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognised that now. (p.158)

By these words the narrator, or Dorian himself, apparently concludes that he is a hypocrite, and thus an immoral person, while the ending of this novel, in which Dorian "tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself" could be in itself considered undoubtedly moralistic, as Wilde says in a letter.

[I]t is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. ...Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. ...Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray*... . It is the only error in the book.⁽²³⁾

By having Dorian display more distinct hypocrisy in the revised version, however, Wilde changed the way of presenting morality in the novel. In the revised version the morality appears more clearly in the form of a punishment to an immoral man who, after being terribly

threatened by a revenger, had once tried to become good just for vanity, hypocrisy, and curiosity. In other words, the morality of the ending of the story was made all the more distinctive by defining the character of Dorian Gray more decisively as an immoral hypocrite than in the original version, and Wilde evidently emphasised the cruelty of the fate towards such an immoral person who, as it were, asked for it.

Ah! in what a monstrous moment of pride and passion he had prayed that the portrait should bear the burden of his days, and he keep the unsullied splendour of eternal youth! All his failure had been due to that. Better for him that each sin of his life had brought its sure, swift penalty along with it. (p.157)

This passage added to the revised version succinctly summarises the moralistic lesson that the ending of the novel illustrates. What has to be noticed here is that Wilde made that lesson more distinctive, and easier to understand for the readers, by labelling Dorian more clearly as a hypocrite, and his ruin as a retribution, as well as by adding such an explanatory comment as quoted above.

It is still open to question, however, whether we can simply say that he created a novel which is more moralistic in itself. It becomes more dubious especially when we consider the fact that by the revision he not only intensified the immorality of the main character but extensively increased what we could call immoral elements in the novel, like the description of the opium-den or typical fin de siècle conversations. *Dorian Gray* surely has moralistic elements in it, as Wilde himself explained in the letter and made clearer by the revision, but it is impossible, we ought to say, to conclude that the novel which includes plenty of immoral elements is moralistic just because it shows an example of moralistic lesson by bringing ruin upon the immoral protagonist. We might recall here that Dorian's attitude concerning morality fluctuates at some significant points in the story, such as after deserting Sibyl in chapter 7 or before the portrait shocks him in the last chapter. His attitude towards morals or morality is quite unreliable, and Wilde's attitude to them, or to

aestheticism in general, seems to have carefully been made ambiguous, as if rejecting a simple interpretation. 'Healthy' people may find morality there, as Wilde claimed, while others may pay more attention to the immorality in the same novel. This is entirely a matter of the viewpoint of the reader, and the novel itself is written without offering a fixed conclusion so that it may leave room for either interpretation, or room for yet another way of appreciating it.

* * * * *

As we have seen so far, the narrative of this novel is structured as a strange amalgam of various methods of narration with ingeniously contradictory viewpoints, all of which are united under the pretext of telling one simple story about aestheticism, though it does not present any definite (which means 'fixed') view on it. It is true that there are some quite simple and obvious points about this novel: The main plot is basically that of a Gothic novel, with a supernatural portrait and the divided-self motif at its centre, and its general atmosphere is unmistakably 'decadent'. But the diversity of the narrative and the possibilities of different viewpoints incorporated in it make it difficult for us to evaluate according to simple standards for ordinary, more conventional, nineteenth century fictions. It would be inappropriate and insufficient to read it just as a novel of naturalism or realism, or just as a crime story or a collection of lectures for aestheticism, or that of witty table-talks. This novel as a complex mixture seems to make us become conscious of the necessity of having multiple viewpoints to fully understand and appreciate it.

We would have to admit that *Dorian Gray* has faults, but we need to be careful not to confuse the faults with the ostensible awkwardness or inconsistency which in reality contributes to the unique success of this novel by producing certain effects in its own way. Wilde is presenting a novel with the possibilities of diverse interpretation on certain levels, and, by doing so, rejecting a simple viewpoint or standard to be applied to the novel, and to the author as well. The reader can find either morality or immorality in it

according to his particular viewpoint. Similarly, he can find in it either a Gothic novel, a crime story, a (parodied) fairy tale, a Wildean play, or aesthetic preachings. In this regard *Dorian Gray* justifies Wilde's statement that "[i]t is the spectator, not life, that art really mirrors." (p.17)

As for the three main characters of the novel, we can never fully identify Wilde with any of them. Wilde's own explanation of his relationship with these three characters helps us to proceed with the autobiographical interpretation of them.

...it [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be... in other ages, perhaps.⁽²⁴⁾

Intriguing as this clarification of his own view is, it could also be a little misleading if we rely on it too much. If we accept the identification by the author himself quite literally, Basil, what he thinks he is, should be considered to be his most direct self-portrait. But we have to say that the other two are no less important as a self-portrait of the author, for the character of Lord Henry as an aesthetic seducer, what the world thinks him, and that of Dorian as a handsome pursuer of pleasure and experience, what he would like to be in other ages, are both essential reflections of the personality of Wilde himself, as many biographers have told us. At least it is necessary to see the book as "a triple portrait of the artist as a young man," as Shewan points out.⁽²⁵⁾ Or Wilde the author should be considered to be "larger than his three characters together," as Ellmann writes.⁽²⁶⁾

Almost the same can be said of the characters and the narrative structure: Wilde rejects easy identification. Both Wilde and the novel reject one fixed viewpoint in, or for, them, urging the reader to start searching his or her own identity according to how he or she reads it, and it is because of this rejection that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has long continued, and will continue, to exert certain influence on a wide range of readers.

Notes

- (1) Edouard Roditi, *Oscar Wilde* (1947; rev. and enl. ed. New York: New Directions, 1986), p.80.
- (2) Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1987), pp.296-7.
- (3) *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (1948; rev. and enl. ed. Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), p.1144. All references to Wilde's works, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, are to this 1994 edition. The page numbers are given in parentheses in the text.
- (4) See, for example, Declan Kiberd's Introduction to the poems in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p.741.
- (5) In *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1989), pp.56-8, Smith II and Helfand examine the revision of 'The Truth of Masks', and try to clarify the meaning of this passage by indicating the influence of Hegelian dialectic on Wilde. Roditi also interprets the passage in a similar way. See Roditi, p.60.
- (6) Roditi, p.74.
- (7) Ellmann, p.297.
- (8) Introduction to her edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1974), p.ii.
- (9) The details of the disputes are recorded in *Oscar Wilde: Critical Heritage* (ed. Karl Beckson; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp.67-71. Wilde's letters written in the disputes are also included in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (ed. Richard Ellmann; Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1969), pp.237-54, under the title of 'Defence of Dorian Gray'.
- (10) The echo of "The Lady of Shalott" has often been mentioned. For example, see Rodney Shewan *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p.126, and Christopher S. Nassaar *Into the Demon Universe* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1974), pp.49-50.
- (11) For the comparison of the original version and the revised one, I used the Norton critical edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (ed. Donald L. Lawler; New York, Norton, 1988), which includes the texts of both versions.
- (12) Shewan, p.125.
- (13) Concerning the description of Dorian's walk to Covent Garden in chapter 7, Norbert Kohl comments in *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1989, trans. David Henry Wilson), p.148, that "[a] naturalistic author would have used the opportunity for some social criticism, but here we have a fleeting and impressionistic tableau, with the reality of poverty somehow reduced to the level of alien fantasy." But the description he mentions there and that of Covent Garden which follows it still seem to be among the more conventional and naturalistic narratives than most of the other ones in the novel, especially in the original version.
- (14) For the detailed discussion about the possible sources of, and influences on, *Dorian Gray*, including Maturin's *Melmoth*, see Kohl, pp.160-166.
- (15) Roditi, p.83.
- (16) In 'The Critic as Artist' Wilde writes, "It seems to me that with the development of the critical spirit we shall be able to realise, not merely our own lives, but the collective life of the race... ." (p.1137) He also expressed the unique view in *De Profundis* that "he (Christ) pointed out that there was no difference at all between the lives of others and one's own life. By this means he gave to man an extended, a Titan personality. Since his coming the history of each separate individual is, or can be made, the history of the world." (p.1030)
- (17) For the details of Wilde's plagiarism, see notes in Murray's edition, p.233, and Kohl, pp.165-66.
- (18) In chapter 3 Lord Henry asserts, in his characteristically witty manner, that the fact that America is the Paradise for women "is the reason why, like Eve, they are so excessively anxious to get out of it". (p.39) In chapter 19 he tells Dorian, contrasting the idyllic country with

town, that "anybody can be good in the country"
because "[t]here are no temptations there".

- (19) Ellmann, p.296.
- (20) Ellmann, p.296, and Kohl, p.141.
- (21) Ellmann, p.296.
- (22) Introduction to his edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (ed. Peter Ackroyd; London: Penguin, 1985), p.8.
- (23) *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (ed. Rupert Hart-Davis; London, 1962), p.259.
- (24) *Letters*, p.352.
- (25) Shewan, p.112.
- (26) Ellmann, p.302.