


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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(name of student) (degree)

in English presented on July 15, 2002

Title: **“Wilde’s Kinship to Plato: The Picture of Dorian Gray as a Platonic Dialogue”**

Abstract approved:   
(Thesis Advisor Signature)

The works cited as sources for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are numerous; surprisingly, however, Plato’s *Symposium* is not among them. Based on Wilde’s brilliant academic record in classical studies and salient interest in ancient Greek literature and culture, in this thesis I claim that Plato’s dialogues, and specifically the *Symposium*, have greatly influenced *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. First, Wilde’s book is Platonic in its use of dialogue. Although disguised as a novel, *Dorian Gray* is predominantly dialogical, focused upon a dialogue between Lord Henry and Dorian. Second, Wilde’s Lord Henry and Dorian insistently evoke Plato’s Socrates and Phaedrus. And third, the relationship between Dorian and Lord Henry is firmly grounded upon the relationship described by Diotima but narrated by Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*.

In their eagerness to fit Wilde’s works to their own agendas, most critics have discounted the cultural milieu in which Wilde lived and worked. Hellenism, or the love for everything Greek, was an important movement at the end of the nineteenth century, and Wilde’s place in that movement needs more attention.

WILDE'S KINSHIP TO PLATO: *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* AS A  
PLATONIC DIALOGUE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Department of English

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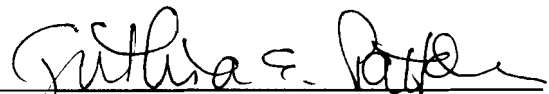
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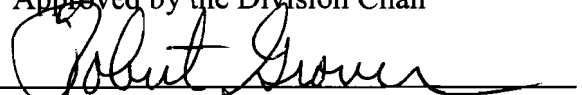
by  
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July 2002

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Approved by the Division Chair



Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my greatest gratitude to Prof. Patton, who constantly encouraged me and helped me throughout this project. Her editorial remarks were always prompt, to the point, and best of all, leading to numerous new and original ideas. In addition, she generously provided me with advice, books, time, and friendship. All this, along with many other things, is greatly appreciated, Prof. Patton.

My gratitude also extends to Prof. Storm and Prof. Holcomb whose sharp observations and useful suggestions were of significant help during the final stages of this project.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff of the William Allen White Library, and most specially, the director of the Interlibrary Loan, Steve Hanschu. My warmest thanks go to my best friend in life and impromptu editor, Ina.

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## INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde is perhaps one of the most vocal proponents of Théophile Gautier's dictum "art for art's sake" (Altick 295). Yet, completely ignoring Wilde's devoted adherence to Gautier's doctrine, the critics almost constantly bring Wilde's life to light when discussing his works. To a great extent, this tendency of Wildean criticism is due to Wilde himself, who claimed his life was more important than his work. Quite often, however, the critics have gone too far in their exploitation of Wilde's life. In fact, as Peter Raby points out in his critical study, *Oscar Wilde*, even casual remarks Wilde made in conversation have become a criterion for critiquing his work: "Wilde's often quoted and uncharacteristically unguarded remark to Whistler, 'I wish I had said that, Jimmy,' and Whistler's reply 'You will, Oscar, you will,' became a standard critique for both contemporary and later commentators" (9). This remark has actually led to one of the most common features of Wildean criticism—that in one way or another the Wildean critics usually mention in passing or discuss in depth Wilde's borrowing or plagiarizing from other authors, be they ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato, or modern contemporaries of Wilde, such as Walter Pater.

That Wilde plagiarized in his works is yet to be unequivocally established, however, although many readers have attempted to do so, beginning as early as his first published book.<sup>1</sup> It is undeniable, nevertheless, that Wilde has been heavily influenced by many authors, as more than a century of scholarship testifies. Following in the footsteps of this long tradition of critical response, in this thesis I discuss one more source of influence that lurks behind a work by Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Although in no way denying the paternal rights of some texts that have already been suggested by

Willean critics, the purpose of this thesis is to identify yet another conceivable forefather of *Dorian Gray*—Plato’s dialogues—and propose a new reading of the novel: as a Platonic dialogue. I argue that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has sprung from a number of Plato’s Socratic dialogues, and especially from the *Symposium*, on the pages of which one could easily locate the origin of Lord Henry and Dorian’s relationship. My argument is based, first, on Wilde’s extensive use of dialogue, something Plato also did, emphatically; second, on the resemblance between Plato’s Socrates and Phaedrus, and Wilde’s Lord Henry and Dorian; and third, on the intimate relationship between Wilde’s Lord Henry and Dorian Gray—a relationship akin to that which Plato claims produces the “noblest of boys and young men” in his *Symposium* (sec. 192 b). By comparing and contrasting parts of Plato’s Socratic dialogues to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I trace what I believe are the roots of the latter. Such a reading ensues logically from a knowledge of Wilde’s classical education and salient interest in Greek philosophy, literature, and culture.

Chapter One of my thesis is mainly concerned with the numerous literary works that have been suggested by critics as sources from which Wilde has purportedly borrowed. In this chapter, I examine two types of Willean critics. The first type boldly accuses Wilde of plagiarism, while the second cautiously speaks of his borrowings, claiming he was heavily influenced by but not stealing from other authors. I side with the latter and eventually conclude that Wilde, like every other writer, was influenced by a number of literary works. Most definitely, in his works, Wilde has used ideas that were first put on paper by other writers, but he has never left those ideas in their initial form, the one in which he had found them.

Wilde's love for everything Greek is the topic of my second chapter. The aim of the chapter is to establish a connection between Wilde and Plato's *Symposium*. Along with other ancient Greek philosophers and writers, Plato was among Wilde's favorite writers, and classical literature was his best subject both in school and university. After years of home tutoring, at the age of ten, Wilde was sent to the Portora Royal School, where he received a standard gentleman's education. During his last two years at Portora, 1869-71, he became a distinguished translator of Greek and Latin texts and won the Carpenter Prize for Greek Testament in 1870. Later, as a student at Trinity College, Dublin, and Magdalen College, Oxford, he continued to excel in the standard classical curriculum. Moreover, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that Wilde was obsessed with the Greeks and their culture and literature.

In Chapter Three, I explore the kinship of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to Plato's *Symposium*. By juxtaposing parts of the *Symposium*, specifically Diotima's speech, and Wilde's novel, I suggest that Wilde has based the plot, characters, and philosophy of his novel on Diotima's discourse. I also suggest that Wilde has employed Plato's dialogical format as a skeleton for *Dorian Gray*. Although camouflaged by such generic novelistic features as action and description, in reality *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is overwhelmingly dialogical. A dialogue between Dorian and his tutor Lord Henry fills the pages of seventeen out of the eighteen chapters of the book. To demonstrate that *Dorian Gray* is essentially a dialogue, I draw upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theory that the novel is a vague genre, one that could "ingest" other genres. That is exactly what Wilde's novel does; it engulfs a dialogue between Lord Henry and Dorian.



The conclusion of my thesis, chapter four, shows how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is less a novel than a disguised Platonic dialogue, which, like every other such, eventually becomes a monologue of the teacher, Socrates' in Plato's case, Lord Henry's in Wilde's. After more than a hundred years of Wildean scholarship, it is surprising to find that Wilde's love for everything Greek, or Hellenism, is still an area barely explored.

## CHAPTER 1

### WILDE'S INFLUENCES AND PURPORTED PLAGIARISM

There is somewhat of a consensus among the critics that Wilde has borrowed much and from many in his works, and numerous articles and books have been dedicated to finding the potential sources of his poetry and fiction. This trend of Wildean criticism is perhaps due to the fact that as early as the first book Wilde published, *Poems* (1881), even his own friends and contemporaries began to accuse him of borrowing and plagiarizing from other authors. Wilde, however, was not disturbed by such accusations, or at least he appeared undisturbed in front of the public. He met these allegations with equanimity and usually responded to his attackers either with arrogance or derision. Rightfully so, I would argue. Wilde did not plagiarize *per se*, but used ideas from other authors in order to create his own, original ones. Everything he took, he modified and eventually made his own.

Oliver Elton, a contemporary of Wilde and “a historian of English literature” (Ellmann, *OW* 146), was the first one publicly to accuse Wilde of plagiarizing. He proposed that the presentation copy of Wilde’s *Poems* be rejected by the Library of the Oxford Union:

It is not that these poems are thin—and they *are* thin. It is not that they are immoral—and they *are* immoral: it is not that they are this or that—and they *are* all this and all that: it is that they are for the most part not by their putative father at all, but by a number of better-known and more deservedly reputed authors. They are, in fact, by William Shakespeare, Philip Sidney, John Donne, by Lord Byron, by William Morris, by

Algernon Swinburne and by sixty more, whose works have furnished the list of passages which I hold in my hand at this moment. The Union Library already contains better and fuller editions of all these poets: the volume which we are offered is theirs, not Mr Wilde's: and I move that it be not accepted. (Ellmann, *OW* 146)

Evidently, Elton fervently mistrusted Wilde's poetic originality, and to Wilde's misfortune, he was not alone in his convictions. Supported by the majority of the members of the Oxford Union, a hundred and eighty-eight members to be exact, Wilde's work became the first and only presentation copy in the history of the Union returned to its author (Hyde 49).

This decision was not unanimous, however. It provoked considerable controversy among the members of the Union, and for good reasons. First, the number of the members who voted for Wilde's book to be accepted was very close to the number of those who voted against—only eight fewer. If Wilde's poems were plagiarized, then why did not a hundred and eighty members see them as such? And second, as Wilde's friend, George Curzon, reminded the other members of the Union after the vote, the Librarian had already found the book worthy of being on the shelves of the Oxford Library and he had solicited it. Nevertheless, the committee decided to listen to the objections a second-year undergraduate, Elton, had against Wilde's book. These objections, interestingly enough, were received "with great cheers and hisses" (Ellmann, *OW* 146). Clearly, then, many were silently harboring unfriendly feelings towards Wilde, and when presented with an opportunity to vocalize their thoughts, they gladly did so. "Why else," as Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson asks, "would a second year undergraduate have taken notice

of what was otherwise a routine acquisition?" (199). It was not a secret at that time that Wilde was not liked in London and Oxford because of his constant self-promotion, "flamboyant style[,] and growing reputation as an aesthetic poseur" (199). Moreover, at the moment his book came out, the expectations of the public were so high that even a "double First" could not stop the critics from discrediting Wilde's reputation as a writer (Holland 199).

The reviewers of the book were no less "galling" than Elton, observes Richard Ellmann. In his biography of Wilde, *Oscar Wilde*, he reports that the magazines did not show any affection for Wilde's first-published book either:

No [. . .] sympathy was forthcoming from the reviewers in the *Athenaeum*, *Saturday Review*, and *Spectator*. *Punch* said it was 'Swinburne and water.' Wilde was accused of all the available vices, from plagiarism to insincerity to indecency, heavy charges against a first book. (144)

Obviously, Wilde was not the favorite writer of his time. Moreover, the worst was yet to come, as his later trials show. He never gained the full respect of his critics, and he was constantly bombarded by negative criticism, even at the height of his literary fame. But once again, one should note that the acerbic ink of the critics was aimed not only at Wilde's work but at his life too. What have Wilde's "insincerity" and "indecency" to do with his book? A lot, it seems. As the last passage by Ellmann reveals, the critics used them to discuss Wilde's book. In fact, usually Wilde's persona and behavior were the thorn in the side of the critics and not his work. Even a year before *Poems* was published, Wilde was regularly depicted in satirical tones by the press: prompted by Wilde's

“unorthodox dress sense,” often called quite “unmanly,” *Punch*’s George du Maurier started illustrating Wilde “in a variety of satirical guises” (Bristow 201). Thus, Wilde’s eccentricity often blinded the critics, and the attacks on his work were typically attacks on his unconventional behavior.

Of course, not everyone judged Wilde according to his daily outfits or conduct, but the word was out—he was labeled a plagiarizer—and to wash away that image, he had to prove himself as an independent writer. It appears, however, that he never succeeded in convincing the critics he was not a plagiarizer, because the accusations never stopped. On the contrary, they were even transported to his later works, most significantly to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde’s teacher and friend, Walter Pater, although only hinting at his student’s borrowings, was among the first critics to note that in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde imitates works by other authors: “Mr. Wilde’s work [*Dorian Gray*] may fairly claim to go with that of Edgar Poe, and with some good French work of the same kind, done, probably in more or less conscious imitation of it” (“A Novel” 38). Today, more than a century after these words by Pater, the critics are still on a quest for potential sources for *Dorian Gray*: “At a conservative count there are 15 books, which are said to have had a major influence on the plot or the depiction of the characters [of the book] (Holland 204).

The book most often recognized as the main source for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Perhaps unwilling to directly accuse Wilde of plagiarizing from his teacher’s book, Ellmann charges Lord Henry instead of Wilde with that disgraceful act. Thus, like Pater, he evades pointing his finger straight at Wilde’s appropriations: “Lord Henry is forever quoting, or misquoting without

acknowledgement, from Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Plagiarism is the worst of his crimes. He brazenly takes over the best-known passages" (OW 317). In a manner more direct than Ellmann's, while discussing the origins of Wilde's novel, Christopher Nassaar also recognizes Pater's *Renaissance* as a source for Wilde's novel: "Indeed, *The Renaissance* casts a long, sinister shadow across *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the entire book seems to be structured with Pater's book as its focal point" (39). Undoubtedly, Pater's *Renaissance* was an important book in Wilde's life—Wilde himself calls it "my golden book" (Ellmann, OW 47)—and it is only natural that he may have used it in one way or another in his *Dorian Gray*. A quick glance at the Conclusion of *The Renaissance* is more than enough to uncover clear parallels between the two books. For example, if Pater's narrator is saying, "what we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte or Hegel, or of our own" (211), Wilde's Lord Henry will be echoing these words with something of the sort, such as, "Be always searching for new sensations! Be afraid of nothing" (18). The similarity of these two statements is obvious, and a closer look at both books will lead to many such parallels between them. Still, Pater's *Renaissance* hardly exhausts the list of the texts cited as a source for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Edouard Roditi, to cite one example, finds the roots of Wilde's novel not only in one but in several other novels at once:

Much as Wilde may have been influenced, in his art and in his life, by the more dandified Romanticism of such novels as Bulwer Lytton's *Pelham* or Disraeli's *Vivian Grey* and *Lothair*, with their epigrammatic brilliance and

foppish haughtiness inherited from the Regency bucks, there is also, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, distinct evidence of borrowings from *Melmoth*. (48)

For Roditi, then, Wilde's novel is a distant cousin of the Romantics. For other critics, however, *Dorian Gray* shares many features with its more immediate literary relatives, including works by Poe, Balzac, Zola, and several other French as well as American authors. In reality, as Isobel Murray playfully points out, "the authors cited as sources" for Wilde's novel are so many—"including Balzac, Disraeli, Flaubert, Gautier, Goethe, Huysmans, Maturin, de Musset, Pater, Poe, Stevenson, Zola and miscellaneous French writers"—that it "would be hard to say what Wilde himself contributed to the novel" (*Some* 220). But "the very number of influences cited," Murray continues, "seems to imply that Wilde was not copying, but writing in a well established tradition [. . .]" (220). Murray is right in her observation that Wilde wrote in a "well established tradition" when he imitated the works of his literary forefathers. This is not to say, however, that he plagiarized from them.

Finally, besides borrowing from other authors, Wilde has also been accused of recycling his own works. In their essay on Wilde's self-plagiarism, "The Context of Invention: Suggested Origins of *Dorian Gray*," Donald Lawler and Charles Knott find "*Dorian Gray* [. . .] to be a masterful reassembling of materials whose full potential has not been realized by Wilde in the earlier works" (389).<sup>2</sup> Another critical work that discusses Wilde's self-plagiarism is Ed Cohen's *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*. In it Cohen pronounces *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as the book in which Wilde "traveled the road not taken in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*" (106). But if in *Dorian Gray* Wilde was

adding to an earlier work of his, how was he recycling? Traveling the rest of the road to a place is not the same as traveling the part already traveled.

It should be more than evident by now that the originality of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been almost constantly challenged. Wilde, however, was not intimidated by the accusations of plagiarism coming from his reviewers, and “had no hesitation in borrowing what he needed, partly because he usually touched it up,” observes Ellmann (*OW* 133). Actually, Wilde frequently confronted his accusers with taunting remarks or derided them in his works. For instance, Ellmann notes a review in which Wilde wrote, “ ‘It is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything’ ”(qtd. in *OW* 133). The point of this statement is quite obvious—Wilde was more than aware of his borrowings, and he used the material and ideas of his ancestors and contemporaries as grounds for creating his own ideas. And if he did not create his own ideas, he used other people’s ideas, but almost always clothed them in his own, original words.

The word “almost” in the previous sentence begs more attention here, because in truth, Wilde did sometimes lift whole phrases from other authors without touching them up. Chapter Eleven of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* bears a few instances of such unaltered appropriations, as Murray points out in a footnote to her edition of the novel:

[a]ll the musical references as far as the comparison with the drum of Bernal Diaz (i. e. *juruparis*, earthen jars, flutes of human bones, green stones from Cuzco, gourds, *clarin*, *turé*, *teponaztli*, and *yotl*-bells) are copied, often word for word, from one short chapter on ‘ The American



Indians' in the South Kensington Museum Art Handbook *Musical Instruments* by Carl Engel (London, n.d.). (191)

It is hard to argue with facts like these, which could justify the critics' suspicions of Wilde's plagiarism, but surprisingly, they have dismissed this passage in their quest for Wilde's plagiarism. As I have shown earlier in this chapter, the critics discuss passages from Pater's *Renaissance*, which in reality are much harder to interpret as plagiarized. For, if indeed Wilde was plagiarizing from Pater, why does not Pater himself name his own work as a source for Wilde's novel? In fact, Pater's above quotation suggests that he was somewhat careful when writing about *Dorian Gray*: using the word "imitation" and qualifying it with the adverb "probably," thus avoiding a word as strong and specific as plagiarism. One could of course explain Pater's cautiousness by citing his friendship with Wilde, but the former remains silent on the subject even after Wilde disparages him.<sup>3</sup> It is not far from the truth, then, to claim that Wilde was not stealing from his teacher.

That Wilde imitated his teacher, as well as other authors, is more than certain, however, mainly because there hardly is an author whose works do not imitate, resemble, or echo someone else's, especially if this author belonged to a movement whose ideas were shared by many. Both Pater and Wilde shared a love for everything Greek and celebrated experience. It should be only normal, then, that Wilde's work is rather close to Pater's or to that of any other writer of their age who shared the same beliefs. James Eli Adams has found the perfect name for such closely related works. He calls them a "collective discourse" and explains how through "elaboration and revision of other models" writers shaped "their distinctive rhetorics" (16). That is what Wilde did: he elaborated on what was already written by Pater, thus looking for his own style.

Besides, as Boris Brasol points out, Wilde's imitative qualities can be attributed to his classical education, which stressed the importance of models (Behrendt 27). The importance of imitation during classical times is emphasized by Quintilian in his *Institutes of Oratory*:

From these authors, and others worthy to be read, a stock of words, a variety of figures, and the art of composition, must be acquired; and our minds must be directed to the imitation of all their excellences; for it cannot be doubted that a great portion of art consists in *imitation*, since, though to invent was first in order of time, and holds the first place in merit, yet it is of advantage to copy what has been invented with success. (400)

This passage clearly indicates that imitation had a notable place in classical Greece. Later in his work, however, Quintilian also stresses that simply imitating other authors was not enough for an author to develop, “[f]or what would have been the case [. . .] if no one had accomplished more than he whom he copied?” (401). Most certainly, Wilde has been exposed to this classical doctrine, since he was among the best classical scholars at both colleges he attended—Trinity, Dublin and Magdalen, Oxford. Of course, in the nineteenth century, a demand for literary originality was superseding imitation, which was central to the English literature of two earlier periods—medieval and renaissance. For Wilde, however, imitation was still a significant part of creating art. Ellmann summarizes Wilde's words from a lecture delivered in New York in 1882 in the following statement, “It was the capacity to render, and not the capacity to feel, which brought true art to being” (*OW* 165). Clearly, then, like Quintilian, Wilde perceived

imitation as an important step in creating one's own art. Furthermore, he often applied that same principle when writing his own works.

Nonetheless, Wilde's contemporaries and some of their twentieth-century followers did not see, or rather, were unwilling to see, Wilde's classical education, beliefs, or friendship with Pater and other writers and philosophers of his time as grounds for his appropriation of other texts in his own writing. Concentrated on bringing Wilde himself down to their colorless and tedious lives, they aimed at him but shot at his works, which became victims not because of their content and form, but because of the person who wrote them. The sole fact that so many texts have been cited as sources for his works, and specifically for *Dorian Gray*, strongly suggests that in reality Wilde was not plagiarizing but deliberately appropriating or imitating other writers.

## CHAPTER 2

### WILDE'S HELLENIC NATURE

The accusations of plagiarism certainly demonstrate that Wilde was an avid reader, from ancient literature to the most modern writing of his time. Indeed, Wilde loved reading, but above all he admired classical literature, most keenly the works of the ancient Greeks. In fact, not only did Wilde love classical literature, but he was among the best classical scholars of his time and received numerous awards for his classical work. As early as his years at the Portora Royal School, he showed signs of being a student with a bright future in the field of classical literature—he made “deft and mellifluous oral translations from Thucydides, Plato, and Virgil” (Ellmann, *OW* 22).

A few years later, when a student at Trinity College, Dublin, Wilde was already a distinguished classical scholar:

Oscar Wilde's academic career at Trinity was a series of unbroken successes, as it was later largely to be at Oxford. He was twice placed in the First Class in the university examinations, he won a Composition Prize for Greek Verse, he was elected to a Foundation Scholarship in Classics in addition to the two entrance scholarships which he already held, and in February 1874, when in his third year, he carried off the coveted Gold Medal for Greek. (Hyde 13)

These numerous achievements provide enough evidence for Wilde's remarkable classical knowledge, which, I believe, has led to some idiosyncratic features of his later work, such as their predominantly dialogical structure and predominantly male characters. In this

chapter I examine this affinity of Wilde to classical literature and suggest that he was greatly influenced by one of its most distinct Greek representatives, Plato.

Wilde had substantial preparation in classics at Portora, but he continued his diligent work in that field at Trinity College, Dublin. One of his classical teachers at Trinity, whom he himself acknowledged in a letter in 1893 as “ ‘my first and my best teacher’ and ‘the scholar who showed me how to love Greek things’ ” was the Reverend John Pentland Mahaffy, a professor of ancient history (Ellmann, *OW* 28). One reason that Wilde loved Mahaffy was the latter’s choice of Greece over Rome and the fact that Mahaffy was “one of the few scholars writing in English for a general audience” who, “in defense of Greek wholesomeness, [. . .] ventured to touch gingerly upon the vexed question of Greek homosexuality” and described that relationship “as an ideal attachment between a man and a handsome youth” (28). Later in his life, Wilde would frequently employ that relationship in his works, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Mahaffy’s work on the Greeks had a strong impact on Wilde, but as Ellmann notes, “[He] did not have to depend upon Mahaffy alone for his classical knowledge” (*OW* 29). Another scholar at Trinity who may have influenced Wilde’s love for the Greeks was Robert Yelverton Tyrrell, “as good a classicist [as Mahaffy] and a pleasanter man” (29). Of Tyrrell Ellmann writes: “His wit, like Wilde’s, was more jovial than Mahaffy’s, and he had a genuine literary inclination, which prompted him to found and edit the magazine *Kottabos*” (29). In addition, Wilde himself claimed that Tyrrell was a better Greek scholar than Mahaffy:

I got my love of the Greek ideal and my intimate knowledge of that language at Trinity from Mahaffy and Tyrrell; they were Trinity to me;

Mahaffy was especially valuable to me at that time. Though not so good a scholar as Tyrrell, he had been in Greece, had lived there and saturated himself with Greek thought and Greek feeling. (qtd. in Hyde 12)

Obviously, Wilde respected both Mahaffy and Tyrrell, but his friendship with the latter seems to have been truer and stronger than that with the former. Much later, in 1896, Tyrrell “compassionately signed” a petition asking for Wilde’s release from prison, while Mahaffy “refused to affix his name and referred to Wilde as ‘the one blot on my tutorship’ ” (Ellmann, *OW* 29). It appears Mahaffy was disappointed with Wilde, or perhaps he was afraid for his own skin—since he was among the first to tread on the dangerous grounds of Greek homosexuality—and so he decided to turn his back on his student.<sup>4</sup> Still, Mahaffy remains an important figure in Wilde’s life. Wilde’s earlier-quoted words about him indicate that Mahaffy was the first to foster Wilde’s burning love for everything Greek, a love that Wilde was to nourish for the rest of his life.

Wilde’s impressive academic performance at Trinity also won him a Classical Demyship (scholarship) to Magdalen College, Oxford, in June 1874. Although not as perfect a student as the one he had been at Trinity, Wilde continued to perform best in Greek, which at Oxford was a compulsory subject. The teachers Wilde most wanted to meet at Magdalen were Ruskin and Pater—two sharp intellectuals who were quite opposed to each other despite the fact that the latter was at one point a student of the former. What most attracted Wilde to these two scholars was their work, especially Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, a book that implicitly favored male intimacy as the best form of love, an idea that Wilde had already encountered at Trinity in his work with Mahaffy.

Wilde had to wait until his third year at Oxford to meet Pater in person, but this did not prevent him from falling “under the spell of Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, published the year before” (Ellmann, *OW* 47). Although in his later years Wilde was more partial to Ruskin than to Pater, whom, according to Robert Ross, “he disparaged as man, as writer, and as influence” (*OW* 52), he was much more influenced by Pater than by Ruskin. In fact Pater’s *Renaissance*, Wilde himself claimed, was his “‘golden book’ ” (qtd. in Ellmann, *OW* 47). In addition, Pater was perhaps closer to Wilde ideologically, simply because he saw homosexuality as the ancient Greeks did—something to be revered—while Ruskin refused to accept it as “sanctified because it was practiced in Athens” (Ellmann, *OW* 51).

Like Pater, Wilde was a Hellenist; he loved everything that was practiced by the Greeks and found in their culture a liberation, sexual as well as intellectual. According to Robin Gilmour, “[H]ellenism, became available as an outlet for the expression of ambiguous sexual feelings” (44). Thus, through Hellenism and classical studies, Wilde was able to liberate himself “from the stuffiness, the obscurantism, the false verities, the repressions and taboos now attributed, fairly or not, to the Victorian mind” (Altick 301). It would be only fair to conclude, then, that if Greek culture was the only place where Wilde found peace for his existence, it definitely should have influenced his beliefs, philosophy, and literature. As big an influence as this appears, however, so much is it neglected by the scholars interested in Wilde’s work. Perhaps distracted by the fact that the classical education was every gentleman’s education in nineteenth-century England, most scholars have discounted or underestimated Wilde’s salient interest in classical literature and the impact this interest may have had upon Wilde’s later works. Like

Patricia Behrendt, one of the few Wildean scholars who sees classical Greek literature in the roots of almost everything Wilde has done and written, I believe Wilde was immensely influenced by that literature, especially by Plato, whose dialogues Wilde knew thoroughly.

At Oxford, Ellmann reports, Wilde “kept a Commonplace Book,” according to which he “was on easy terms” with many philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Locke, and others. The Greeks, however, seem to have been closer to his heart than anyone else, because he usually related everything modern to his classical concerns: “ ‘In modern times Dante and Durer, Keats and Blake are the best representatives of the Greek spirit’ ” (qtd. in Ellmann, *OW* 41). Wilde’s preference for Plato’s ideas is also obvious in the life he led. After he graduated from Oxford, 1878, when asked by his friend, Hunter Blair, “what his real ambition in life was,” Wilde replied:

I won’t be a dried-up Oxford don, anyhow. [ . . . ] I’ll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I’ll be famous, and if not famous, I’ll be notorious. Or perhaps I’ll lead the *bios apolaustikos* [life of pleasure] for a time and then—who knows?—rest and do nothing. What does Plato say is the highest end that man can attain here below? To sit down and contemplate the good. Perhaps that will be the end of me too. These things are on the knees of the gods. What will be, will be. (qtd. in Hyde 39)

As offhand as this statement may have sounded to Blair, it turned out to be literally as true. Wilde’s later life exemplifies everything he states in that passage. Like a true Platonic dialectician, he constantly “contemplated the good,” be it in conversations with his friends or on the pages of his critical and fictional works. Actually, “contemplate”



was not the best word for Wilde to use in this case. He probably meant “question,” not only because that is what he did throughout his life—he constantly defied the materialism and commercialism of his age—but also because that is what Plato himself meant: to search for good, or truth to be exact, through dialectic, by questioning it constantly.

That Wilde closely followed Plato’s philosophy is also obvious in his conviction that the love between an elder and a younger man is the best of all loves: Plato had approved such homoerotic relationships in his *Symposium*. During his trials, Wilde would even openly admit that this Platonic principle lay at the basis of the accusations against him:

The ‘Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michaelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michaelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the ‘Love that dare not speak its name,’ and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it

should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it. (qtd. in Ellmann, *OW* 463)

One could certainly interpret this speech as Wilde's open confession of living according to Plato's teaching in the *Symposium*, a book he knew quite well, or so claim several of his biographers. Michael Foldy writes of Plato's *Symposium* as "a book that was very well known to Wilde during his days at Trinity and Oxford" (113). Ellmann notes that Wilde referred to that book in one of his articles: "In an article of 4 September 1880, [Wilde] pointed out that in Plato's *Symposium* the host, Agathon, was 'the aesthetic poet of the Periclean age' " (*OW* 88). Indeed, Wilde knew this Platonic dialogue very well; later, he was even able to improvise on it in his *Dorian Gray*.

In short, Wilde's love for everything Greek played an integral part in his life, and it is only natural that it may have imprinted his work. There is a Greek, more specifically Platonic, residue in almost everything he wrote, from his poetry to his prose. For the most part, the critics have recognized this Wildean debt to Plato, especially in his critical dialogues. But, perhaps misled by *Dorian Gray*'s novel-like appearance, they have failed to discern Plato's dialogues behind this work. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I believe, distinctively echoes Diotima's speech from Plato's *Symposium*, as my next chapter will show.

## CHAPTER 3

### WILDE'S KINSHIP TO PLATO

As I outlined in Chapter One, many critics believe Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not a child of one father. Most of them, however, although right in their belief, seem to have been blinded by the closest influences in time and space to the book—such as Pater's works or Wilde's own—and took them as the plausible parents of *Dorian Gray*. Not many have gone as far back in the history as the fourth century B. C. to look among the Greek philosophers' works for potential predecessors of Wilde's novel. Quite surprisingly, however, even the few who have found a relationship between the novel and some of Plato's philosophical treatises have dismissed the idea of investigating those ties in depth. Thus, my aim in this chapter is to show how close to Plato's dialogues, and specifically to the *Symposium*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is. Although disguised as a novel, *Dorian Gray* is predominantly dialogical, focused upon a dialogue between Lord Henry and Dorian. Likewise, Wilde's choice of characters, specifically Lord Henry and Dorian, insistently evokes Plato's older figure, Socrates, and his much younger interlocutor, Phaedrus. And finally, the relationship between Dorian and Lord Henry appears to be firmly grounded upon the relationship described by Diotima but narrated by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*.

#### **Dialogical Format**

When the book publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared in 1891, few critics found merit in it. Wilde's teacher and friend, Walter Pater, was among those few, and he particularly applauded the book's dialogue: "There's always something of an

excellent talker about the writing of Mr. Oscar Wilde; and in his hands, as happens so rarely with those who practice it, the form of dialogue is justified by its being really alive" (*A Novel* 35). Pater legitimately compliments the dialogical format of the novel, because dialogue is the most notable component of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It forms the backbone of the novel—seventeen out of the eighteen chapters of the book are mainly composed of dialogues, chapter eleven being the exception—and it is more important than any other aspect of the book, even the plot or the characters. The role of the plot, for example, although embodying so much action—"one murder, one attempted murder, one accidental homicide and two suicides, [. . .] and the mysterious death of Dorian Gray" (Murray, Introduction viii)—is only minimal. It is there to enable the characters to converse rather than to rationalize their actions. Arguably, none of these criminal acts is a memorable event in the book, because Wilde, unlike most of his nineteenth-century predecessors, does not elaborately tell the stories behind these crimes: he simply reports their result, the death or the suicide of one of the characters. Perhaps the best example of Wilde's lack of interest in developing the plot of *Dorian Gray* is his almost "casual" announcement of the suicide of Allan Campbell in chapter nineteen (Murray, Introduction viii). Evidently, then, for Wilde, the action or the plot of the book is not its most important component.

Meanwhile, however, Wilde never loses interest in the dialogue of his characters, and dialogue constantly flows in *Dorian Gray*. Wilde starts his book with a dialogue between Lord Henry and Basil, which soon evolves into another between Lord Henry and Dorian, which, on its part, becomes the central (inter)action of the book, and never ends until the book does. In addition, Wilde constantly elaborates on the dialogue of the living

characters and refines the conversational skills of those who need refinement. He portrays Basil and Lord Henry as excellent interlocutors from the onset of the book, while Dorian, who is a mere listener in the beginning of the book, becomes an intelligent companion and equal to Lord Henry at its end.

The dominant power of the dialogue in the narrative of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also justifies Wilde's choice of a weak narrator for the novel. After he delivers four paragraphs on page one, the narrator makes only a few short, sporadic appearances until the end of chapter three, and thereafter, his role is solely to set the background needed by the characters to converse.<sup>5</sup> In reality, all the narrator does in these early chapters is to introduce one new character, but even when completing this basic task, Wilde does not allow him to utter more than a few lines: "As they entered they saw Dorian Gray. He was seated at the piano with his back to them, turning the pages of a volume of Schumann's 'Forest Scenes' " (Wilde, *DG* 12). Moreover, in order to foreground dialogue, in Chapter Three Wilde even deprives the narrator of this duty and resorts to the introduction of Lord Fermor, whose role in the novel is only to tell the story of Dorian Gray's family. Thus, Wilde introduces the story of Dorian Gray through a dialogue between Lord Fermor and Lord Henry instead of simply providing an account of it by the narrator. Actually, *Dorian Gray* abounds with undeveloped characters, like Lord Fermor, who seem to be employed by Wilde simply to keep a dialogue constantly going. Basil, the Duchess, Alan Campbell, and most of the secondary cast all seem to be included in the book only to fill in the occasional gaps in the dialogue between Lord Henry and Dorian. And not surprisingly, for the most part, the secondary cast fills these gaps with conversations with one or the other of these central characters. Basil, for instance,

although quite an important character in the beginning of the book, quietly disappears after the first pages and comes back only occasionally, to attempt to talk Dorian out of Lord Henry's hedonistic teachings. The other members of the auxiliary cast, including Lord Fermor, Lord Henry's wife, and the Duchess, do not even appear occasionally. They play transitory roles, which last only during the brief breaks in the main dialogue—the one between Lord Henry and his student, Dorian.

Occasionally, as in Chapter Eleven, however, Wilde allows the narrator to interrupt the dialogue for more than a paragraph or two. Yet, this modification does not make the narrator more noticeable than he used to be. In the previous chapters Wilde has already almost fully obscured the presence and identity of the narrator by frequently assigning him lines that seem to be only an extension of Lord Henry's thoughts, rather than ones that express the narrator's own opinion: for example, "Yes, the lad was premature. He was gathering his harvest while it was yet spring" (47). Hence, instead of breaking the dialogue between Dorian and Lord Henry with these narratorial intrusions, Wilde actually shrouds the identity of the narrator, only to leave us, the readers, wondering who is speaking and, more importantly, *whether the dialogue has ended at all*.

Evidently, the characters' dialogue is more intriguing to Wilde than any other component of his book. As a matter of fact, Wilde himself claimed he preferred writing dialogues to narratives. Immediately after he finished the first version of *Dorian Gray* in 1890, while complaining about being exhausted by the writing of the book, Wilde himself confessed to be better at composing dialogues than depicting action: "I can't describe action: my people sit in chairs and chatter" (qtd. in Ellmann, *OW* 314). In addition, most of Wilde's prose works employ dialogue as their main means of

narration.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the critics often discount the dialogical form of Wilde's works, and Behrendt rightfully observes that "scholars have concerned themselves primarily with the contents of the dialogues—mainly the relationships Wilde explores between art and life—but have overlooked the structural dynamics of the dialogues in specific relation to the subject matter" (100). Indeed, Wildean scholars are mostly interested in the content of Wilde's works, while ignoring the fact that the dialogue structure constitutes their core. But why does Wilde use dialogue so often in his works?

Naturally, one answer to that question follows from Wilde's own claims that he preferred writing dialogues to narratives. Another could be that, in accordance with the spirit of the *fin-de-siècle*, when almost everything was put to test and subjected to change—as Ellmann writes, "the claims of action over art were challenged by the idea that artistic creation, related to that contemplative life celebrated by Plato, was the highest form of action" (*OW* 306)—Wilde was perhaps testing a new narrative technique as well, looking for a different way of writing fiction. Most significantly for my purposes, however, Wilde was simply reapplying (or borrowing, if you wish) a narrative technique that was refined more than two millennia before him by Plato, whose works—as I have established in the previous chapter—Wilde knew well.

A number of scholars have noted a relationship between Wilde's and Plato's dialogues, but none of them sees *The Picture of Dorian Gray* structured as a dialogue—and that is why they fail to see a Platonic work behind it. Patricia Behrendt, as noted earlier, is one of the few scholars who finds Wilde's use of dialogue to be central to his work. Behrendt, however, claims that "Wilde's handling of the dialogic form [. . .] differs radically from the Platonic formula—a factor which is of some significance in light of

Wilde's affection for things classically Greek" (109). She then elaborates on that idea by distinguishing between Plato's older figure in his dialogues, Socrates, who is gentle in his relationships with younger men, and the older figures of Wilde's dialogues, who force their ideas upon their younger listeners:

Wilde's older figure attempts to lead his younger disciple not by gentle questioning [like Socrates] but rather by playful bullying in which he self-centeredly asserts ideas which he has already formulated and which he cleverly defends against the younger auditor who is no match for him.

(109)

Behrendt is right in her observations about the older figures in Plato's and Wilde's dialogues. Nevertheless, her observations are true only for Wilde's critical dialogues, "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist." If applied to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, however, Behrendt's observations will not work, because Lord Henry passes his ideology to his younger listener, Dorian, in a totally Socratic fashion—by manipulating Dorian's beliefs "gently" and carefully.

But *Dorian Gray* is not a dialogue, one would note. Indeed it is not, or so its appearance suggests. If one looks at *Dorian Gray* through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, however, one could easily see it as a dialogue dressed in novelistic clothing. According to Bakhtin, the novel as a genre is quite elusive to define, because it is permeated with all preceding genres, or as Michael Holquist summarizes Bakhtin's words, the novel is "best conceived either as a supergenre, whose power consists in its ability to engulf or ingest all other genres [. . .]; or not a genre in any strict,



traditional sense at all”(xxix). In short, according to Bakhtin, the novel could hide in itself one or several other genres.

This Bakhtinian definition of the novel as a genre could certainly help one to see *Dorian Gray* as a novel that has ingested a dialogue and thus define it as such. Moreover, as I have shown earlier in this chapter, even if not identified as a dialogue *per se*, the most important component of *Dorian Gray* is its dialogue. That the dialogue is the most important component of Wilde’s novel is also maintained by Bakhtin:

The novel, being a dialogized representation of an ideologically freighted discourse (in most cases actual and really present) is of all verbal genres the one least susceptible to aestheticism as such, to a purely formalistic playing about with words. Thus, when an aesthete undertakes to write a novel, his aestheticism is not revealed in the novel’s formal construction, but exclusively in the fact that in the novel there is represented a speaking person who happens to be an ideologue for aestheticism, who exposes convictions that then are subjected in the novel to contest. Of such sort is Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [. . .]. (333)

Therefore, through the dialogue between Lord Henry and Dorian, Wilde presents his aesthetic ideology, and only through their actions does he contest it. Dialogue constitutes, then, the pith of *Dorian Gray*, and it would be only fair to treat Wilde’s novel as one.

### **Choice of Characters**

In his “Ethics and Aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” Michael Gillespie claims, “Socrates’ pronouncement that ‘unexamined life is not worth living’ can serve as

a valuable preliminary assumption for anyone undertaking an interpretation of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" (137). This statement is certainly true, but in no way does it exhaust the relationship between Plato's expert-philosopher and Wilde's book, as Gillespie's essay seems to suggest. Investigating this relationship only one step further will reveal an even more apparent resemblance between Socrates and Lord Henry, thus certainly demonstrating that Wilde had Plato in mind when writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates is charged of being a "doer of evil, who corrupts the youth" (41). Likewise, Lord Henry has also been accused of being a corruptor of a youth by both the characters of his book and its critics. Even before one becomes well acquainted with Lord Henry, his friendly companion, Basil, tells that the former could affect Dorian negatively: "Don't try to influence [Dorian]. Your influence would be bad" (Wilde 12). The critics of the book are even more merciless towards Lord Henry's character. Epifanio San Juan, Jr. likens Lord Henry to "the presumed Mephistopheles of this Faustian drama" (63), and in her introduction to *Dorian Gray*, Isobel Murray remarks, "In Basil's garden Lord Henry acts the part of the serpent in Eden, and his success is inevitable" (x). Both these similes emphasize Lord Henry's resemblance to Lucifer—perhaps the worst corruptor of soul and body in the textual world. The likeness of Socrates and Lord Henry to the Devil is certainly arguable; nonetheless, my task is to demonstrate their resemblance or kinship, and it is definitely clear—they are both depicted as corruptors of youth.

Another feature of Lord Henry that reveals a blood relation with Socrates is his eloquence. That Socrates is counted among the best Greek rhetoricians is evident from

his numerous victorious rhetorical battles, as recorded on the pages of Plato's Socratic dialogues. Socrates always dominates his debates and almost invariably convinces his listener of what is right and what is wrong. Perhaps the best example of Socrates' persuasive abilities is his discourse in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where the former completely changes Phaedrus' views of rhetoric by constructing several speeches on love. Lord Henry, just like his Greek predecessor, also uses mellifluous rhetoric as his main weapon to influence his interlocutor's (in most cases Dorian) beliefs and even actions, and he is as successful as Socrates—Dorian does and believes everything Lord Henry has taught him.

Moreover, Socrates' and Lord Henry's propinquity becomes even more obvious if we take a closer look at their interlocutors. Dorian, like most of Socrates' interlocutors, is a mere "yes-man," who does not need much persuasion to believe in something new. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, for example, Phaedrus interrupts Socrates by asking provocative questions, which in reality only clarify Socrates' statements. The dialogue in this Platonic work is actually only a cloak behind which lurks a monologue of Socrates. Plato, the originator of this deceptively dialogical style, skillfully turns Phaedrus' questions into extensions of Socrates' claims, thus allowing the latter to reaffirm his positions against the sophists. A sample list of Phaedrus' interrogations would certainly include "What do you mean?" and "How so?," which, with some degree of variation, are repeated throughout the so-called dialogue. Furthermore, when Phaedrus is not asking questions, he is eagerly agreeing with his expert-philosopher. "Decidedly," "very true," and "evidently" are only a few of the many affirmative statements Phaedrus utters to confirm Socrates' philosophical theories. Dorian, just like Phaedrus, agrees with everything his

mentor has said. Only a month after he has been introduced to Lord Henry, Dorian already repeats and preaches his mentor's ideas, as Lady Henry points out: "Ah! That is one of Harry's views, isn't it, Mr. Gray?" (Wilde 37).

What distinguishes Dorian from Phaedrus is only their manner of endorsing their teachers' theories. Unlike Phaedrus, Dorian does not always vocally reaffirm his teacher's philosophical theories. He simply silently accepts them and later tests them: "I don't think I am likely to marry, Harry. I am too much in love. That is one of your aphorisms. I am putting it into practice, as I do everything you say" (Wilde 38). Meanwhile, Phaedrus makes Socrates test his own theories by constructing speeches based on their premises. This difference between Phaedrus and Dorian should not mislead one, however. It follows from the idiosyncrasies of both works, Plato's being a pure dialogue and Wilde's being a "contaminated" one, including action. If we set aside the parts of *Dorian Gray* that include action, however, we will find that the book is overwhelmingly based on dialogue—a Platonic dialogue between Lord Henry and Dorian, every once in a while interrupted by Basil or another character. Therefore, Dorian is not much different from his predecessor. His likeness to Phaedrus is simply camouflaged by a few moments of action, which are not that important anyway.

That Lord Henry and Dorian resemble Platonic characters is also apparent in their homoerotic relationship. Almost all characters of Plato's dialogues exhibit more or less homoerotic relationships. Moreover, in his *Symposium*, through the words of Aristophanes, Plato describes in detail and readily approves male intimacy; he even denounces the people who see it as improper: "The people who speak of these fellows as shameless are wrong" (64). Wilde, however, only implicitly favors such relationships in

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* through the camouflaged intimacy among his male characters, Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian. But Wilde's prudence is only understandable, taking into account the times he lived in—not only was homosexual conduct punishable by law, but it was considered among the worst crimes to commit at the end of the nineteenth century.

British law was more than strict when it dealt with homosexual conduct or “sodomy,” which was the nineteenth-century term for a homosexual act:

- (1) Sodomy is a felony, defined as the carnal knowledge (per anum) of any man or of any woman by a male person; punishable with penal servitude for life as maximum, for ten years as minimum. (2) The attempt to commit sodomy is punishable with ten years' penal servitude as maximum. (3) The commission, in public or in private, by a male person with another male person, of ‘any act of gross indecency,’ is punishable with two years' imprisonment and hard labor. (qtd. in Behrendt 12)

This law provides enough reason for Wilde to avoid showing Lord Henry and Dorian “performing acts of love” (64) in accordance with *The Symposium*. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, their constant companionship and casual physical contact imply an unusual affection and intimacy between two men: “As they entered the studio, Dorian Gray put his hand upon Lord Henry's arm” (Wilde 19). Perhaps willing to remain true to his original source—Plato's *Symposium*—even if only partially, Wilde decided to portray Lord Henry and Dorian as intimate friends. Thus, once again, Wilde's novel reminds of a Platonic work.

## Plot and Philosophy

The observations made throughout the previous section of this chapter certainly suggest that some of Plato's older-younger male couples might have served Wilde as prototypes for his older-younger male couple, namely Lord Henry and Dorian Gray. Nevertheless, the characters and the dialogue are not the only components of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which remind of a work by Plato. Another such component can be found in Plato's plots and philosophical beliefs.

It would seem a difficult task to find an original plot among Plato's Socratic dialogues, for they are all rather repetitive—two or more people meet and start a discussion on a certain topic, and after a while, one of them, usually Socrates, convinces the other(s) he is right. To detect an interesting story or idea that could serve as plot, story line, thesis, or any other ingredient of a literary work in the speeches presented by the characters of these dialogues would not be so difficult, however. In his book, not only does Wilde adopt Plato's signatures, Socrates and dialogue, but he also turns a relationship described by Diotima in the *Symposium* into the major plot of *Dorian Gray*, an older man teaching a youngster the wisdom he has acquired in his life. After a close examination of Diotima's "account concerning love," one could easily uncover the roots of Dorian and Lord Henry's relationship.

Surprisingly, not many critics have found a relationship between Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Plato's *Symposium*. Even more surprising, however, is the fact that those who have found such a relationship have not explored it further. The most startling example of how a critic sees the closeness of these two works and then refuses to confront it is Sarah Kofman's "The Imposture of Beauty: The Uncanniness of Oscar

Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." In this essay, Kofman discusses the significance of Lord Henry's influence on Dorian: "The formidable influence that Lord Henry exercises over Dorian from the first moment of their meeting awakens him to an awareness of himself and his beauty [. . .]" (27). While deliberating on the relationship between Dorian and Lord Henry, Kofman also briefly examines the relationship between Basil and Dorian, and how the beauty of the latter blinds the former. It is exactly here that Kofman points out the closeness of Plato's *Symposium* and Wilde's book:

This wonder (that possesses and captivates Basil) is ideal beauty, the idea of beauty such as might be contemplated in the initiate in Plato's *Symposium*, who is sent into unimaginable raptures at the end of the dialectic: an unchanging, eternal, marmoreal beauty that nothing can taint, wither or ravage and that, in contrast to visible beauty, is not destined to decay. (27)

It is perhaps Kofman's philosophical background that prevents her from probing deeper the roots of this relationship, because in her essay she examines only its philosophical value. In the last note to her chapter, she even suggests that

it would be interesting to read Wilde's "Portrait of Mr. W. H.," written the year before *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. There the narrator undertakes a reading of Shakespeare's sonnets that stresses the lover's wish to see his beloved remain eternally young and beautiful. One can also find in this text a direct reference to Plato's *Symposium*, which Wilde considered the most admirable of the dialogues. (242)

Obviously, Kofman sees an association, based on unchanging *beauty*, between “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” and the *Symposium*, and another, also based on unchanging *beauty*, between the former and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Following a simple mathematical rule—if one line is parallel to another, which is parallel to a third one, then the first and the third lines are also parallel—she could logically conclude that if *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is related to “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” it is also related to the *Symposium*, but she never examines these ties further.

Another critic who makes almost the same observation as Kofman is Rodney Shewan. Just like Kofman, Shewan falls short of seeing the kinship of *Dorian Gray* to the *Symposium*, although he too sees one between each of these and “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” When discussing “Mr. W. H.,” Shewan writes:

Wilde adds the section on neo-platonic thought [to “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”], in particular its conception of friendship, to develop more fully his theory of ‘the marriage of true minds’ between actor and dramatist. Emphasizing the contemporary fascination with such books as Facino’s translation of the *Symposium*, he argues that friendship between Shakespeare and Mr. W. H. was largely ideal. (86)

As Shewan indicates in this passage, in his essay on Shakespeare’s friendship with Willie Hughes, “Mr. W. H.,” Wilde avowedly based his argument on Plato’s ideas from the *Symposium*. Only a few pages after the above passage, however, Shewan calls “Mr. W. H.” the predecessor of *Dorian Gray* (93), and a bit later elaborates on the likeness of these two: “Both works are based on all-male trios, and both are principally concerned with the relationship between art and life, theory and feeling” (114). Thus, again, a critic



claims that the *Symposium* is behind Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," which on its part is the basis for *Dorian Gray*, but fails to conclude that the *Symposium* may have also provided the foundation for the building of Wilde's novel.

Yet a third scholar who finds a connection between a Wildean work and Plato's *Symposium* is Patricia Behrendt. In her discussion of Wilde's critical dialogues, *The Decay of Lying* and *The Critic as Artist*, she notes:

In both dialogues, the older and more knowledgeable individual undermines the younger's self-confidence by challenging his values, by suggesting their absurdity, and by attempting to replace them with his own for the pleasure, as Lord Henry says in *Dorian Gray*, of 'projecting one's soul into some gracious form' and of 'hearing one's own intellectual view echoed back with all the added music of passion and youth.' [ . . . ] The desires of the older man in both dialogues are a reminder of the idea, which pervades Plato's *Symposium*, that individuals love and desire those qualities in others which they feel that they themselves lack. (113)

As evident from this quotation, in a similar fashion to that of Kofman and Shewan, Behrendt only acknowledges a relationship between the *Symposium* and *Dorian Gray* without exploring it further. Nevertheless, the relationship is more than worthy of examination, as the following paragraphs will show.

The part of the *Symposium* that I believe has mostly served Wilde in the construction of *Dorian Gray* is that where Socrates relates Diotima's discourse on love. Diotima starts this segment of her speech by explaining what kinds of men there are and how one can distinguish them. She divides men into two groups: those who are pregnant

in the body and those who are pregnant in the soul. The first ones, she claims, “turn in preference to women and in this way are their lovers, so that through the conception of children they achieve immortality, memory and joy, and they believe that they are *providing all things against a future time for themselves*” (sec. 208 e, emphasis original). The second ones, whose souls are pregnant with wisdom, look “for the beautiful thing in which [they] can generate” (sec. 209 b). This second kind is the one to which Lord Henry belongs. He could easily fall into this category, as the following passage, in which Diotima elaborates on what the second kind of men do, indicates:

And so, being pregnant with these things [wisdom and justice], he welcomes beautiful bodies rather than ugly ones, and if he should chance on a soul who has beauty of nature and body, he delights greatly in both together, and immediately indulges in talks with this man about virtue, and about the sort of person that a good man must be, and about what things are properly done by him. He is taking his education in hand. For I believe that when he fastens onto this beautiful person and has intercourse with him, he gives birth to the things he has been carrying up to then, and brings them to life when, present or absent, he thinks about him. He then nurtures what has been conceived together with that person. Such men share an intimacy with one another which is far deeper than one coming from children and enjoy a surer affection, because they have taken part in the creation of more beautiful and immortal progeny! (sec. 209 c)

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Lord Henry unequivocally proves himself a distinguished member of that class of men. He does exactly as Diotima says—even to the smallest

detail. He first finds his beautiful body, and although one does not see him on an actual quest for it, he certainly must have been on the search for one mentally, because at the moment he spots Dorian in Basil's studio, he recognizes the youngster's beauty. Lord Henry's own thoughts, as reported by the narrator of the book, surely demonstrate that he perceives Dorian as beautiful:

Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candor of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt he had kept himself unspotted from the world. (13)

This passage not only portrays Dorian as physically beautiful but also as someone spiritually pure. It is no accident that Dorian's "candor" and "purity" impress Lord Henry, whose task at hand is to find "a soul who has [both] beauty of nature and body." Clearly, Dorian is the perfect student for Lord Henry's tutoring, possessing both a beautiful body and soul, and obviously the future mentor realizes it, because he "immediately indulges in talks" with his potential student—just as Diotima says he should.

In fact, as if willing *strictly* to follow Diotima's words, the next step Lord Henry takes is to explain to Dorian "what things are done properly by him." Only shortly after he has been introduced to Dorian, he tells him what his proper vocation is: " 'You are too charming to go in for philanthropy, Mr. Gray—far too charming' " (13). It is also worth noticing here the adjective Lord Henry chooses to use to describe Dorian: "charming." As a whole, his statement shows an interest in Dorian's mental or professional development;

however, it also indicates some sort of physical attraction, which is implied by the compliment Lord Henry pays to Dorian by calling him “charming.” It is questionable whether this remark implies willingness on the part of Lord Henry to be physically intimate with Dorian, as Diotima recommends he should—“Such men share intimacy which is far deeper than one coming from children and enjoy surer affection”—for nowhere in the book does Lord Henry explicitly show or vocalize his physical attraction to Dorian. Nevertheless, most of Lord Henry’s subsequent actions demonstrate intimacy with or fondness for Dorian—the least to mention are his constant chatting and regular going out with the youngster while ignoring the company of his own wife, Lady Henry. Thus, Lord Henry follows Diotima’s guidance quite stringently.

The only instruction from the above-quoted passage from Diotima’s speech, which Lord Henry has not yet used as a guideline for his relationship with Dorian, is that he has to educate and nurture “what has been conceived together with [Dorian].” In the early chapters of the novel, Lord Henry and Dorian have just conceived a relationship, and in order to keep it alive, Lord Henry has to nurture Dorian, who at this stage is well behind his teacher’s knowledge. Realizing his duty from the outset of the friendship, Lord Henry manifests his intentions to take Dorian’s education in his own hands through his absolute devotion to his new companion. He completely ignores his wife and his good old friend, Basil, in order to be constantly with the youngster. In fact, Lord Henry takes Dorian’s education so much to heart that at the end of the book he himself commends Dorian’s maturation: “There is no use your telling me that you are going to be good [. . .]. You are quite perfect. Pray don’t change” (Wilde 172). Evidently complying with

Diotima's rules, Lord Henry has diligently nurtured his student, who appears to have digested his teacher's words quite well.

For his own part, Dorian turns out to be an attentive and assiduous student. From his first meeting with Lord Henry, Dorian echoes his tutor almost in every word he speaks. When talking with other people, he even directly quotes Lord Henry—"To become the spectator of one's own life, as Harry says, is to escape the suffering of life" (90)—and proudly reiterates his philosophy: " 'Life is a great disappointment' "(147). Furthermore, Dorian's actions are nothing but an attempt to test Lord Henry's theories:

Ah! Realize your youth while you have it. Don't squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless future, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims, the false ideas, of our age. Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you. Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. . . . A new Hedonism—that is what our century wants. (Wilde 18)

Led by his teacher's principle to experience life at its full, Dorian does not deprive himself from anything that is human, in the broadest terms of this word's meaning. He explores life looking for adventure, and drinks and drugs himself almost to death. He even goes as far as murdering people. Apparently, following Diotima's directions diligently, Lord Henry has well nurtured his apprentice, but as the book's events and ending indicate, with grave consequences for the youngster. It is a fair question, then, whether Lord Henry has properly nurtured his student; in other words, is he the one responsible for the tragic end of Dorian?

A widely accepted view among the critics is that Lord Henry is the evil corruptor in the book.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, as Esther Rashkin argues, one should not dismiss the idea that Dorian could have been prone to corruption before he meets Lord Henry, just as every interlocutor of Socrates is inclined to accepting Socrates' ideas. Rashkin claims that "Lord Henry (unknowingly) awakens the 'degenerate, rotten' identity projected by the grandfather and dormant within Dorian" (72). It could be conceived, therefore, as Rashkin argues, that not Lord Henry's poisonous teaching but Dorian's "rotten" soul leads to his own tragic end and that of so many innocent people. Indeed, Dorian himself is responsible for his own actions, for even if one could justify his initial, sinful behavior on the account of his youth and *naïveté*, one cannot do so at the end of the book, when Dorian is able to comprehend the gravity of his actions. Evidently, he understands his own corrupt deeds, as his frequent, albeit short, pangs of conscience indicate:

He felt that if he brooded on what he had gone through he would sicken or grow mad. There were sins whose fascination was more in the memory than in the doing of them, strange triumphs that gratified the pride more than the passions, and gave to the intellect a quickened sense of joy, greater than the joy they brought, or could ever bring, to the senses. But this was not one of them. It was a thing to be driven out of mind, to be drugged with poppies, to be strangled lest it might strangle one itself.

(Wilde 133)

As the narrator relates in this passage, Dorian is afraid of what he has done to Basil and wants to drown his fear in drugs. His fear is certainly a strong indication of his realization that he has committed a wrongful act. Never before has he felt that way, although he has

already been responsible, albeit indirectly, for another death, that of Sibyl Vane. Yet, Dorian's realization of his own corrupt behavior still does not provide a firm enough ground on which to establish whether the negative outcome of this teacher-student relationship is actually a result of Lord Henry's depraved teaching or Dorian's inherently corrupt soul. For both characters, following Diotima's teachings, actively participate in the educational process and are equally responsible for its outcome.

One could, however, find clues for the failure of the student's education in the later parts of Diotima's speech, where she examines the necessary steps one should take to be successful in such a passing of knowledge:

It is necessary, she asserted, for one who is going to proceed to this goal properly, to begin as a young man by being drawn to the beauty of the body, and if he is being guided properly by his guide, to love the beauty of one body, and for the fruit of this love to be beautiful conversations. But then this man must perceive that the beauty of one particular body is related to the beauty of another body, and if he must pursue beauty of form it is utterly senseless not to consider as one and the same the beauty which exists in all bodies. Once he has understood this, he will become a lover of all beautiful bodies, but he'll despise his lust for the one, and give it up, considering it petty. After this, he will find the beauty that exists in souls more valuable than that in the body, so that when there is decency of soul in someone, although this person may have very little of the bloom of physical beauty, it satisfies him to love him and care for him [. . .] so that

he will come to consider physical beauty rather a minor thing. (sec. 210  
b&c)

On the one hand, this passage proposes that Dorian is the one responsible for the failure of his education, because he never comes to a full grasp of the meaning of beauty; he always values physical or external beauty over the spiritual one. On the other, nonetheless, Diotima's words do not free Lord Henry of responsibility either, because one can never know whether he has "properly" guided his student—Lord Henry disappears from chapters X to XV, and that is the time when Dorian commits most of his dreadful deeds, including the murder of Basil. As if to test Dorian's recently acquired knowledge from Lord Henry, Wilde does not speak of the latter in these chapters, thus leaving the blame for Dorian's actions on his own shoulders only. Yet, Lord Henry's absence also suggests that he was not present to complete his student's education—a fact that shifts the burden of responsibility to the teacher himself.

In any event, the contrast in outcomes between the relationship described by Diotima and that described by Wilde should not prevent one from inferring that Wilde has used hers as the basis for his, only with a negative sign in front of it. Wilde deliberately misinterprets Diotima's words; he wants a negative result at the end. In fact, further examination of Diotima's speech, where she elaborates on the result of such a relationship, will show this misinterpretation to be even more apparent:

[T]he man who has been instructed, up to this point, in an understanding of matters of love, looking at beauty in correct and orderly succession, when he comes to the end of these love matters will suddenly behold a thing which is miraculously beautiful by nature! It is this very thing,



Socrates, for the sake of which all earlier hardships were suffered. First of all, it is eternal, and neither comes into being nor perishes, neither waxes nor wanes. Then it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another, nor is it beautiful from one point of view but ugly from another (so that to some it is beautiful while it is ugly to others). Furthermore, the Beautiful will not manifest itself to this man as a face or pair of hands, or any other bodily thing [ . . . ] . (sec. 210 e-211 b)

In short, Diotima claims that eventually the student should be able to see beauty not in the appearance of an object but in its internal, invisible part. A closer examination of Dorian's perception of beauty and the object he perceives as beautiful, however, will reveal that they both aim exactly in the opposite direction of Diotima's teachings, thus suggesting that Wilde intentionally changed the course of Diotima's teaching.

First of all, the object Dorian perceives as beautiful is his own portrait, while Diotima proposes a progressive relationship with things that exist outside the self—i.e., a more social than personal relation. In addition, Diotima claims the beautiful object will not “manifest itself [ . . . ] as a face, or pair of hands, or any other bodily thing,” while a portrait of a body, his own body, is exactly what Dorian finds beautiful. Second, the object Dorian perceives as beautiful is beautiful at one time and ugly at another—in the beginning of the book and at its end respectively—while Diotima claims it should remain beautiful at all times. The beauty of Dorian's object is obviously not permanent, because it fades, as Basil tells us: “It was some foul parody, some infamous, ignoble satire. [ . . . ] Still it was his own picture. [ . . . ] What did it mean? Why had it altered?” (127). And

finally, while according to Diotima, the beauty of the object should not change in relation to its beholder, according to Dorian it does, very often at that.

Clearly, the outcomes of both relationships, as described by Wilde and Diotima, are a hundred and eighty degrees apart, but they are so because, unlike Diotima, Wilde needed a tragic ending in order to stress the moral of his novel. As Wilde himself asserts in defense of *Dorian Gray*, “The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment [. . .]” (*Letters* 435). Therefore, to teach that moral with his book, the ending definitely had to be unhappy, and different from Diotima’s, which leads to the establishment of a better and more knowledgeable person. But again, that the two works have different endings does not make them entirely dissimilar, for they employ similar characters and aim at the same end: to prove physical beauty is only temporary, while that of the spirit is eternal. Hence, it would be only fair to conclude that Diotima’s speech from Plato’s *Symposium* might have served Wilde as the basis for the relationship between Dorian and Lord Henry: Wilde’s novel represents only a bad example of Diotima’s speech.

## CONCLUSION

Evidently, the similarities between parts of Plato's *Symposium* and Wilde's novel are too strong and too many to be passed by unnoticed. This does not mean, however, that Wilde plagiarized from Plato. Yes, the intimate spiritual, as well as physical, relationship between an older man and a youth is something that Plato first developed, or at least that is what history claims. But Wilde was neither the first, nor was he the last one to employ it in his work, as he himself points out in his defense during his trials.<sup>8</sup> By employing Platonic structure, characters, and ideas in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde is paying bigger homage to Plato than to Pater or anyone else, from whom he has borrowed only bits and pieces here and there. Indeed, the sources of *Dorian Gray* may be found elsewhere, as many critics have already suggested in the numerous articles and books they have written on that topic. Yet, one cannot, moreover should not, discount Wilde's salient interest, almost to the point of obsession, in Greek culture, philosophy, and literature—a fact that surely puts Plato's dialogues among the main conceivable sources not only for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* but for Wilde's work in general.

Throughout the ages classical Greece has been as much glorified as condemned, but as Richard Jenkyns points out, it had an enormous impact on the Victorians:

Hellenism may sound a mandarin topic, and so in a way it is; yet ancient Greece preoccupied many of the finest minds of the last century, and thus directly or indirectly, it became a pervasive influence, reaching even to the edges of popular culture. Even those who hated Greeks or detested the system of classical education were affected willy-nilly. Unless

we realize how much the Victorians thought about Greece, we will not fully understand them. (x)

Obviously, classical Greece played an integral part in the life of the Victorians. Furthermore, Wilde was particularly affected by classical Greece, as his works and life show. Hellenism was an important movement in the nineteenth century, and Wilde's place in that movement definitely needs more attention by the scholars of today, for it will return his works to the Victorian period, where they belong first and foremost. In their eagerness to fit Wilde's works to their own agendas, most of the recent critics have discounted the fact that Wilde lived and worked through that period. Returning Wilde to the Victorian age and looking at his works through Victorian lens will uncover a side of them which, I believe, is too important to be left unexplored.

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See the first paragraph of Chapter Two, where I discuss the beginning of Wilde's accusations in plagiarism.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on that matter, see the discussion on Wilde's self-plagiarism that Lawler and Knott provide on the first pages of their essay.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed description of Wilde's disparagement of Pater, see Chapter Two, page 16.

<sup>4</sup> That Mahaffy may have been afraid of being related to Wilde's homosexuality is suggested by his actions a few years earlier. In 1875 he excised pages from the second edition of his *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander*, which were about homosexual love: "When a second edition appeared the year after, he dropped the pages about homosexual life" (Ellmann, *OW* 29).

<sup>5</sup> Considering that none of the female characters in the book is fully developed or important, I assume the narrator is a man.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Wilde's dialogues, see Thomas' "The Intentional Strategy in Oscar Wilde's Dialogues." Another valuable source on the topic is Watson's "Wilde's Iconoclastic Classicism: 'The Critic as Artist.'" "

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Murray's and Juan's earlier-discussed works.

<sup>8</sup> See Wilde's speech on p. 24, where he points out that Michelangelo and Shakespeare have also written of the "love that dare not speak its name."

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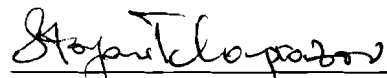
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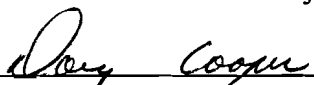
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