Mirror, Text and the Symbolic Matrix:
Writing the Hero in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract

My thesis aims to discuss the “creation” issue in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Depicting how Dorian is made a decadent hedonist, the novel is generally regarded by critics as a story of creation, in which what is created is not only the magical painting but the hero as well. Only through his image mirrored in the painting Basil offers can Dorian come to know himself; the hero is “produced” as what he is by his friends. Thus, to discuss how this creation of the hero takes place, I will employ Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, along with Roland Barthes’ insight of “textuality.”

“Mirror, Text and the Symbolic Matrix.” By suggesting these three interlocking axes I seek to outline the process of creation that governs the novel. Through his image mirrored in the picture, Dorian comes to know himself. He identifies with the image and grows. However, the painting that reveals Dorian to himself is an artifact produced by Basil. What Dorian identifies with is a “text” he “reads” in Basil’s work, an other. Seeing how he changes the portrait, “writing” it with his “passions and sins,” Dorian comes to enter the symbolic realm. Yet it is also through such a move that Dorian is “objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other” as Lacan suggests. He is inserted into the chain of signifiers, in which the “real” Dorian is ceaselessly replaced.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it is through the complex work of texts and the interplay of influences that the hero is created; by analyzing these interactions I would like to disclose the creation issue. In my first chapter I begin by re-examining the relationship between Henry and Dorian, through which I aim at illuminating the characters’ function as “floating signifiers.” I proceed to throw light on Basil, the creator of Dorian’s image, in chapter two: by which I seek to reveal Basil’s influence over Dorian. In chapter three I would analyze how Dorian’s romance with Sibyl influences him—and what Sibyl signifies to him, while I would also discuss the significance of James Vane (Sibyl’s brother). The fourth chapter is a discussion dedicated to the picture, which functions not only as a Lacanian mirror but becomes the canvas upon which Dorian and Basil compete writing—while both are “written” by the text they produce. To conclude, I would re-examine the nature of text: to which man is both its cause and its effect.
本文旨在討論王爾德"朵蓮·格雷的畫像"中之塑造議題。在故事中，主角藉由朋友們的反應/映得以認識自己，並由此成為唯美頹廢的代言人。主角可說是他的朋友們所形塑的產物。是以，本文將借用拉岡的"鏡象階段"理論及羅蘭巴特對"文本"的概念，來討論此一塑造議題。主角藉著週遭呈現的鏡象得以認識自己，並對此產生自我認同。然而，主角所認同的鏡象，本質上乃是拉岡所謂的他者。一如巴特的文本，此一鏡象，如書中主角認同的畫像，乃是在讀者閱讀/書寫中誕生的產物。主角藉由對畫像的書寫，進入了拉岡的"象徵界"的架構；但也由此進入了所謂"能指"或"意符"（"signifier"）的鎖鏈，在與"他者"的認同中逐漸被異化。

第一章藉由重新定位亨利（主角的精神導師）與主角的關係，說明書中腳色所扮演的"浮動的能指"（"floating signifier"）及其與主角的互動。第二章的重點在畫家巴索與主角的關係，說明巴索的畫作，就某層面而言，乃是壓抑慾望的變相重現。第三章討論以往常被忽略的主角的初戀，藉此重申主角的慾望的轉移及自我認同。在第四章中，筆者將說明主角的畫像與其對自我的認同，並進一步指出畫像的改變，乃是"文本"的意義滋生。作為腳色們的作品，畫像實際上也在不斷的"書寫"著腳色們。是以，筆者將以重述文本的概念與"能指鎖鍊"的浮動關係，說明人如何是語文的創造者及其造物。
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Introduction

“There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about” (8). So Wilde’s Lord Henry comments in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Ironically, however, this willful paradox, like many others that Wilde has said, seems to suggest exactly what happens to the ingenious artist who was once so insolent. With his wit and keen observation, Wilde produced a series of satirical comedies that stitch the middle class and amuse the lower class as he wishes; the artist obtains immense theatrical success and thus becomes the most renowned literate in London (the most controversial, to be exact). More dramatic than any drama, however, the artist’s life collapsed for a scandal within few months just after he came to the zenith of his fame, turning from the brilliant star of English literacy to the abominated sinner that is deserted and deprived of everything, left only to exile, oblivion and condemnation seeming almost remediless till decades. “Few artist has fallen so far, so swiftly” (Leach, viii). Indeed, it is dreadful to reflect that the artist, once claiming that “of all men in England I am the one who requires least advertisement” (*The Letters of Wilde*, 257), shall in but a couple of years be imprisoned in such discomfiture and humiliation. “Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have cleft in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed” (*The Soul of Man*, 156). So the artist laments. Who could imagine that Wilde, once the lion of salons and the favorite among dinner-parties, would fall someday so dejectedly? While the momentary glory of the artist’s life passes and fades into broken memories, his works nevertheless live on and maintain all their beauty
and charm—just like what is delineated in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde’s only novel.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is perhaps the best-known representative in fiction that bears witness to the influence on and of decadent and aesthetic movement. Portraying how Dorian Gray, a beautiful young man, is led into sensual enjoyment and is educated as a dandy, a decadent aesthete indulging in hedonism, the novel presents a decadent version of *bildungsroman*—if not an *anti-bildungsroman*. With the doctrine of decadent aestheticism it advocates, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* creates a sensation and influences the author much greater than he could have imagined. “In writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his only novel, Oscar Wilde produces a work whose own history was to become entangled in the life of the author and remain for succeeding generations, as it was for his contemporaries, a sign of contradiction” as Donald L. Lawler comments (vii). Indeed, in writing this “strange colored book” (Letters, 352), Wilde has created a macabre novel, a bizarre work whose ingrain gloom has not only infected the readers but mysteriously, like the magical painting the novel depicts, caused disquiet to the life of its creator. With its publication in 1891, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* creates a great impact on the then still conservative Victorian London. The aestheticism it espouses so radically confronts the cult of Victorian society, touches off “a heated public debate over art versus morality”¹ and escalates Wilde to the apex of his fame²; it, after five years of its publication, was presented in the court as the evidence against its author.

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¹ Quoted from the cover page of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.
² Or rather, his notoriety. The provocative manner of Wilde, manifested from time to time in his works, earned for him the title “the sovereign of insufferables,” which Wilde is proud of having possessed.
During Wilde’s first lecture tour in the United States in 1883, the artist meets Marshall Stoddart. Seven years later, under the latter’s request, Wilde contributes a short novel for *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*. The first one Wilde offers, “The Fisherman and His Soul,” ends rejected by Stoddart (and is later collected in Wilde’s *A House of Pomegranates*, November 1891). Thus Wilde produces another story, which is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The novel marks its debut in 1890. While the first edition of the novel has sold out in America, it surprisingly has caused a maelstrom of criticism in England instead. The decadent aestheticism embedded in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* strongly revolts against the moral code highly valued by the conservative Londoners; the mock and criticism of the society that frequently recur in the novel, in addition, exasperates the public. The murder scene in the novel and the hinted homosexuality must have further enhanced the Victorian public’s repulsion, for both were then considered as serious offense. As Lawler informs us, Wilde is accused “in the popular press of having written a novel of such vicious depravity that the public prosecutor should be alerted to suppress it” (viii). While *St. James Gazette*, to cite but a few examples, labels the book “dangerous and corrupt” and openly suggests that it “ought to be chucked into the fire” (Mason, 34), *Daily Chronicle* denounces the novel as “a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French Décadents—a poisonous book.”

Attacks like these surround the novel and well represent how the English public receives the book.

Following the keen public debate, the artist revises his novel. Wilde expands the original version to a longer one, and later on adds to it a preface justifying his stance. Through working on the book, Wilde comes to master the dramatically satirical and comical style that is to become a distinctive feature of
his. With producing the novel Wilde is then capable of creating his theatrical classics, and, by producing the novel, the artist is accused guilty of corrupting the youth and is ruined. Like the fatal portrait depicted in the novel that so much influences the painter’s life, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* marks the tremendous success of Wilde and entitles him a great writer; however, it later on is only to be used against its creator and has caused utter ruin to the artist. “All art is quite useless” (4). Here Wilde’s work seems to suggest otherwise: it proves the best example to subvert his creed.

Contradictions like this abound in the book. According to Wilde, “[t]he artist is the creator of beautiful things./ To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim”(3). Given many of the author’s habits in details to the characters, however, the novel becomes actually a revelation of the artist: it is in fact *The Picture of Wilde*. Even Wilde himself in his letter has openly confessed that the novel “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” (Letters, 352) (My emphasis).

Certainly Basil, as Wilde prescribes, is the creator of beautiful things. By painting the picture for the hero, Basil justifies himself as an artist. The marvelous picture the painter paints, ironically, however, only brings about destruction to the beautiful lad. To Dorian, Basil creates the wonderful portrait to spoil the innocent young man, and Dorian, in Henry’s interpretation, leads his life artfully (“Life has been your art” (165). So Henry comments)—at the expense of the picture’s ruin. The painter perceives a fresh school of art from Dorian’s presence, and the hero comes to see his beauty by virtue of Basil’s
painting—with the aid of Henry’s words, that is. Seeing in this light, readers may not help but ponder: who is the artist here? That is, who is the “creator” of “beautiful things?” What is created here? It seems to me that essays addressing to these issues are rather limited. Critics generally agree that The Picture of Dorian Gray, like Frankenstein, is a story of “creation.” Critics traditionally affirm that in The Picture of Dorian Gray, what is created is not only the magical painting, but the hero as well. Yet the issue of creating/created as I raise above seems to be often slighted in the discussions. To me, an interesting and important issue embedded in The Picture of Dorian Gray would definitely be the issue of “creation”—or, to be more specific, the interplay of writing and reading that, as it adheres various meanings to the object written/read, gives the object different visages (hence creates a new/anew definition). In traditional readings, Henry is always the capital and the major—if not the only—producer (or rather, destroyer) of Dorian. Like the painter who produces the portrait, Henry, the artist of life, produces Dorian and writes the lad as he is. Nevertheless, few critics have paid attention to the fact that only through the

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3 It is clearly suggested in the novel that Dorian, initiated by Henry, opens his eyes and comes to perceive his beauty from the picture Basil paints. Henry plays an important role in making the hero. Yet Henry’s intention to be the artist (“the artist of life” as he hinted), like Basil’s, can only be possible with the existence of Dorian. It is Dorian’s presence that inspires them: one may even argue that it is Dorian that makes the artists here.

4 Unlike Frankenstein, however, Dorian’s lot is a much better one. In Contrast to the deformed appearance of Frankenstein’s monster, whose body made of decayed carcass that expels him into solitude and exile, the comeliness of Dorian, made manifested in the picture, grants him with irresistible charm and numerous worshipers. While the monster’s flesh, as the expanse of his existence, was run through by scars of heedless blades and needles, making his face loathsome and his fate miserable, Dorian, on the other hand, was privileged to maintain the extraordinary beauty and grace of his that is “unspotted from the world.” (And the burden was left for the picture to bear, just like the shell in Botticelli’s painting of Venus that was to bear the delicate figure.) (18)

5 In fact, the book itself may serve as a good example. Like any work of art, the way one reads the novel determines what one sees in the picture. “The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography” (3). As Wilde puts it, the numerous reviews—interpretations—of the novel give to the work different meanings, its “strange colored” facades that the interpreters prescribe—and sentence the author a label (libel?) from which there is no escape.
interactions of the characters, the exchange of writing/reading (mutual communication rather than one way dominance), can the lad be transformed (and certainly Henry is not left completely unchanged in their relationship). Moreover, in my opinion, Lord Henry alone can never have accomplished carrying this transformation of the hero.\(^6\) In Dorian’s case, while it is primarily Henry that assumes the Mephistophelean figure that “enlightens” Dorian and leads him into the “sinful” world, Dorian, however, is also subject to influences of the characters other than Henry— influences that are no less powerful. To name but a few, Dorian’s encounter with Sibyl and her death causes drastic changes in Dorian’s life; James Vane’s intrusion into Dorian’s life heralds the hero’s annihilation of the self. Basil, among them all, is perhaps the most important one that “makes” Dorian as he poses as the molder of Dorian’s image. In the beginning of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* readers see Dorian, like Eve in *Paradise Lost*, stands as the marvelous creation of the artist-God, obsessed with the sheer wonder of his (her) mirror image.

I should suggest that Dorian’s realization of the self, as depicted in the novel, corresponds to the theory of mirror stage Lacan formulates. Like what Lacan expounds in his theory of the mirror phase, it is through the mirror image that one’s sense of the self, originally obscure and fragmental, is integrated:

We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the

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\(^6\) As I repeat, while the influence of Henry is highlighted, the other characters’ influence over Dorian, on the other hand, have often been left unacknowledged or slighted. An obvious example can be found in *Oscar Wilde* by Donald H. Ericksen, in which Basil is labeled a man of no importance: “Basil Hallward is similarly flat and undeveloped for he seems to have no private existence beyond his studio. His major function is to serve as a foil for Lord Henry, for Basil’s moral sensibilities stand in sharp contrast to Lord Henry’s” (105).
transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an
image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently
indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term imago.

(2)

By virtue of the image reflected in the mirror, one comes to know
himself/herself and is endowed with an ego (and also the subject
simultaneously: the act of split—“spaltung”—as Lacan professes7); he hence
enters into the world of language, the symbolic order that, as the name suggests,
is a world of symbols/representations.

Through reading the images provided by others one comes to establish a
sense of the self—and consequently re-writes the self-image. One learns,
therefore, from these images—his/her “signifiers”—to re-form a new signifier
of his/hers: by which he/she is to be replaced and to be known.8 Thus, as
Lemaire paraphrases Lacan, the human being “acquires his individuality only
on condition of being inserted into the symbolic order which governs and
specifies humanity” (67). Lemaire points out that

man—existentially a being by and for the other—can only
reconcile the necessity of his condition with its drawbacks by
recuperating himself through exchange. The symbolic is the agent
and the guarantor of this step. It is the field, the common ground in
which individuals assert themselves, oppose each other and find
themselves again. (67)

7 While the individual is represented by the subject that language produces for him/her, the
ego, as Lemaire explains, “is that which opposes itself most surely to the truth of the being.
The ego concentrates in it all the person’s ideals, all the person wants to be or thinks himself
to be. The ego is the other of our self, assimilated and stuck on to the self, rather like an
inadequate mould” (72-73).
8 Since the images can always (and only) be what other than the individual, “miscognition”
as Lacan illuminates is deemed inevitable.
Based on this insight of Lacan about how man is created by the chain of signifiers as he (she) is inserted into the symbolic and how he (she), becoming a signifier too, is undone by it, my thesis aims to probe the issue, the creation/writing of the hero as seen in the novel. With the aid of Lacan’s theory of the mirror phase, I shall seek to demonstrate how Dorian, in interacting with the characters, obtains a sense of self through adopting and readjusting to the various images of his offered/presented/“reflected” in other’s discourses. Such a vision is elaborated in Ed Cohen’s “Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation” and Vicky Mahaffey’s “Père-version and Im-mère-sion: Idealized Corruption in A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man and The Picture of Dorian Gray”. Cohen in his essay offers insightful explanation on how the repressed desire of Basil, represented via the picture, shapes Dorian. Mahaffey, on the other hand, goes a step further and suggests that Basil, in their relationship, plays the Oedipal mother that “reappropriates” his (her) product. Both essays provide insightful Lacanian reading of the story, illuminating the important role Basil plays in the making of Dorian, and on these two essays I shall rely heavily to illustrate my point.

Yet what I try to do would be more than this. Dorian, as I mentioned, is influenced by not only Henry, but also all characters around him; his self-perception is generated and modulated by the spectrum of images these characters present. “Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow” (33). As Henry comments, what makes Dorian so fascinating is the “instrumental” nature of his, the “resonance” he is capable of creating. In interacting with others Dorian re-models himself over and over like a chameleon and makes himself “all the
heroes throughout history in one,” just like what he said of Sibyl.⁹ Seen in this light, then, it follows that in this writing of the hero, every character is an artist that helps create him and mold his image. Through such interplays, however, Dorian also comes to see his image reflected, tries to modify it, and hence influences the characters as well, creating for them similarly mirror images in which the characters’ recognition of Dorian, doomed “miscognition,” is challenged over and over.¹⁰ While Cohen and Mahaffey contribute to elucidate how Dorian is produced by the characters (Basil in specific), they, however, put less emphasis on the fact that, as the characters “shape” the hero, they meanwhile are also subject to Dorian’s influence.

I would like to point out that in the novel, there is always a “gap” between Dorian’s images the characters provide and what the hero chooses to present: Dorian is not the mere object that passively accepts the roles assigned. He from time to time asserts himself as a subject that acts and creates his image of the self. Sibyl’s disillusionment of the fairytale prince myth and Basil’s agonizing recognition of the diabolically deformed painting—which Dorian claims his “diary”—may suffice to be good examples, in which the hero is not “the” Dorian they know—or what they imagine they know. Moreover, while the characters “write” Dorian as what they want, they nevertheless fail to see that the lad, in reading/internalizing these images, also “writes” them in return and hence changes the characters. To make this clearer I shall appeal to Barthes’ theory of the text. Dorian’s image, as Cohen puts it, is “dialectically

⁹ As seen in chapter IX, the numerous pictures Basil paints for him may support this argument.
¹⁰ The only exception may be Lord Henry, to whom Dorian remains much the same. “I have known everything” (65). Failing to know the omniscience he upholds may in fact be miscognition, Henry stagnates in the self-enjoyment his imaginary affords. Captured by his complacency, the dandy degrades into the most self-deceived among the characters as Lawler hints.
provided” by the characters (808). It is produced through language, which, following Lacan’s definition, is a chain of signifiers. I would venture to suggest that Lacan’s assertion here, the signifying chain in which the signified is displaced and the signifier becomes floating, somehow overlaps with Barthes’ theory of text, the proteus-like essence of the text from which the “real” meaning is transferred ceaselessly, is deferred endlessly, and is lost. The gap between the mirror image constructed and the subject’s reaction, in my opinion, constitutes exactly the concept of text Barthes elucidates, which is produced between the written and the reader. In “Theory of the Text,” Barthes suggest:

Productivity is triggered off, the redistribution is carried out, the text comes about, as soon as, for example, the scriptor and/or the reader begin to play with the signifier, either (in the case of the author) by ceaselessly producing “word-plays”, or (in the case of the reader) by inventing ludic meanings, even if the author of the text had not foreseen them, and even if it was historically impossible for him to foresee them: the signifier belongs to everybody… (37)

Thus, Dorian’s image, as it is variously defined by the characters and synthesized by the hero himself, could in this light be regarded as the Barthes’ text. As the characters see Dorian from various perspectives—or “read” him, as Barthes may suggest—and give different meanings or definitions to the lad (“Prince Charming” (56), “the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal” (89), “the type of what the age is searching for” (165), and so on.), they in doing so write Dorian’s image, hence write the hero per se as well. Nevertheless, as the hero conceives different images thus represented, reacts to them and integrates them to obtain a sense of the self, he too at the same time becomes not only a
sitter/model/motivation, but a writer as well (or the “scriptor” Barthes suggests). He, like all the characters, participates in this writing process of the text—and is in fact “written” by the text as it invites the writers to model it incessantly, thereby changing its nature. Barthes’ text, as illuminated, is Proteus-like: it interacts with the reader/writer and produces an overflowing of signifiers (“signifiance”), ceaselessly redefines itself and its creator/consumer. Thus, with the insight Barthes’ theory offers, one may see the issue of creation as raised above more clearly, and with the aid of the concept, the interplay Barthes’ text enacts, one shall probe the creation, the mutual influence manifested in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, from a more comprehensive perspective. By using both Lacan’s and Barthes’ concept I expect to probe the writing issue in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The first chapter is an attempted analysis of Lord Henry’s influence over Dorian. Being a fabulous rhetorician and the paragon of dandyism, Lord Henry has since long been accused guilty of lulling the innocent lad into corruption and morbid narcissism that have caused the catastrophic end of Dorian. Certainly, as the cardinal one that initiates Dorian, Henry has no doubt cast immense influence upon the hero. It is through Henry’s observation, as Dorian assures us, that the hero comes to see himself, and it is through Henry’s words that Dorian learns to perceive Sibyl’s death in a new way—hence causing a tremendous change over his life. The dandy, as readers can see, remains a ubiquitous figure, whose philosophy as well as his personality have strongly overshadowed that of Dorian’s: it can be said that the hero is produced by Henry. Therefore, in this chapter I try to make explicit Henry’s attempt to write Dorian, and how this, as a consequence, affects the lad and models Dorian as what he is. I would venture to suggest that, in their relationship, Henry, along
with the theories he offers, functions as a text that re-forms Dorian—while being also read/written and being enjoyed by the lad. Henry in ways poses as a Lacanian father (a bad one, though.) that helps introduce the son to the symbolic. While probing Henry’s influence over Dorian, I however shall also seek to discuss the role Dorian plays in this “game” of influence-wielding. Instead of putting all the blame on Henry, I would like to reveal that in the hero’s intimacy with the dandy, Dorian, rather than the mere object that is inscribed by Henry’s writing, is in fact also acting as a subject that makes choices. I should argue that it is Dorian who chooses to join Henry in this game of writing, in which one can no longer tell who is the subject and who is the subjected.

Chapter two deals with another important figure in Dorian’s growth, namely Basil Hallward, the painter. In contrast to Henry, Basil seems a rather “flat” character, whose presence in the novel is quite scarce and whose lack of eloquence eclipses him and makes him quite inarticulate, if not dull. The magnitude of Basil, therefore, has often been slighted. However, the painter’s influence is not to be dismissed. As mentioned before, it is through the picture Basil paints for Dorian that the hero comes to recognize himself: his perception and construction of the self hence started. To Dorian, the portrait functions as a Lacanian mirror, and Basil, as the creator of it, is the one that endows Dorian with an ego. Thus, in this chapter I would argue that to amend his incapability in employing verbal presentation, Basil has adopted painting, the visual one, as a supplement to his language, through which he communicates himself and “writes” Dorian. I will seek to explore the role Basil plays in this chapter. To me, Basil’s making the portrait for Dorian is a decisive move in his relationship with Dorian. Through painting the picture Basil becomes the creator of
Dorian’s image, and through producing the picture Basil re-creates Dorian, models and possesses the lad as what the artist secretly desires. Hence, by producing the portrait Basil stands as “the creator of Dorian’s physical image”. Basil becomes the “mother” of Dorian as Mahaffey points out; the mother who, in spite of his (her?) repression, desires the lad and aspires to be his lover (197). The ambivalent feeling—if not self-contradictory—of Basil is seen in his attitude toward his painting as well as to his sitter, which I will disclose in this chapter, seeing how this affects the characters.

In the third chapter I would like to analyze how Dorian’s romance with Sibyl has influenced him—and what Sibyl signifies to him. I should point out that Sibyl, like Basil, is another important role in this novel, whose influence over Dorian, enormous as it is, remains scarcely acknowledged. Being the first love of Dorian—the first opposite sex Dorian has ever loved, to be specific—Sibyl plays to Dorian a role that remains “instructive” or “initiative.” Through his relationship with Sibyl, the hero undergoes a process of mutation, which, as it proceeds, has strongly overshadowed his molding of the self. By the magical touch of the actress, the lad’s desire is awakened. The affection/attention of the hero is conjured up and arrested by Sibyl. It is Sibyl that first kindles Dorian’s desire and envisions for him the world other than where the lad belongs to, and it is Sibyl’s death that accelerates Dorian’s narcissism, which has arrested his growth. In this chapter I am going to discuss Dorian’s fascination with Sibyl, in which Sibyl’s identity as an actress, to me, remains a crucial factor. The “fluidity” the actress enjoys, the ability to change among roles and to assume different masks that the occupation entitles her, I presume, becomes what has enchanted Dorian and supported his desire. Via her acting Sibyl embodies that aesthetical ideal that the hero identifies with, and
thus becoming the object of his libidinal investment.

“I have seen her in every age and in every costume,” so Dorian announces (47). I should suggest that as the object of Dorian’s libidinal investment, Sibyl indeed represents to Dorian heroines throughout history: heroines throughout his story—among which the image of the mother is the most important. Being an orphan that was brought up by the saturnine grandfather, Dorian grows up longing for the mother and becomes antagonistic to the patriarchal law. Hence, I would like to discuss how Dorian’s attachment to Sibyl is in fact a vicarious satisfaction to a latent desire—the hero’s quest for the mother—and how this consequently affects both Dorian and Sibyl. The child’s tie to the mother, Lacan illuminates, can only be severed by the interference, the intrusion of the father. To see the forming of the hero more clearly, therefore, I will also discuss the issue of paternal interference in my thesis. While Henry to me represents the irresponsible “bad father,” Basil, on the other hand, at times also takes the role of the father that “annoys” Dorian and gives him “good advice” (though it never really succeeds) (48). However, the father in The Picture of Dorian Gray that really “functions” to sever the mother-child bond, in my opinion, is represented by James Vane, the vengeful brother of Sibyl’s. In this chapter I would offer a more detailed explanation of it.

As seen in the novel, it is through the picture, the image that together Basil and Henry provide, to be exact, that the hero comes to see himself. “This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors” (84). I should suggest that the picture to Dorian functions as a Lacanian mirror: through which he obtains his identity. Hence, chapter four aims to reveal how the picture helps to construct the image of Dorian as Lacan explains in his theory of mirror stage.
In my design the fourth chapter of the thesis is a discussion specially dedicated to the picture, which serves as the best example to illuminate the writing issue. In chapter XII of the novel, when Dorian is to reveal to Basil the changed/changing picture that betrays his secret, Dorian professes that “I keep a diary of my life from day to day, and it never leaves the room in which it is written” (120). The metaphor Dorian employs is an interesting one and is replenished with meaning. The portrait, as a masterpiece of Basil, is the visual embodiment of “the” Dorian Basil knows. Created by Basil, the picture represents Basil’s impression of Dorian. It is the painter’s perception of the hero (what Basil thinks the hero—and wants him to be) that is aesthetically “realized”. As I have mentioned, the picture functions as a writing of Basil’s, in which Dorian’s image is inscribed. Dorian’s referring to the picture as a “diary”, however, soon subverts the role Basil assigns the portrait. Seeing how his actions bring about change on the canvas, Dorian announces that he himself is the one that creates his own image: he is the writer of the image. Dorian’s usage of the metaphor “diary”/self-writing at once proclaims his autonomy: he is free from the creator of his image and is now master of himself. By redefining the painting the lad manipulates his image (which in turn dictates the way how he evolves)—while also re-orients his relationship with Basil to a different orbit. The portrait, in which different authors intersect, is open to interpretation (or, a meta-writing in this case): which as a consequence constantly redefines the roles of the interlocutors. The picture of Dorian Gray, therefore, becomes not only a magic mirror of the hero, but also a canvas upon which Dorian and Basil compete in “writing”, acting out their truths. In this chapter I seek to explore the nature of the painting as text, and how the text functions to redefine the characters.
To sum up, “[t]he artist is the creator of beautiful things. / To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim.” So Wilde claims in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The creed, however, is incessantly challenged and subverted by both the painter in the novel and Wilde himself. “[E]very portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself” (10). With the work the artist manifests himself (herself): by creating the work the artist represents himself/herself—and re-presents the self, models his (her) self. As the novel depicts, however, once the work is presented, it is open to reading/writing. It is given different meanings/definitions, from which the “true” meaning is not secure and is lost. With different interpretations given, the work proliferates itself; it escapes the artist’s control and becomes a floating signifier whose meaning, as Lacan repeats, can never be located. While in the story the deformed picture provokes the anger of Dorian and causes Basil’s death, the novel itself, vile and monstrous to the Victorian society, shocks the public and indirectly quickens the artist’s mortification/mutilation. Thus the work, supposedly the artist’s design, goes beyond the definition its creator intended and reshapes the artist instead. There is no finished work—only “texts” or “signifiers,” by and for which we establishes the symbolic world as it is (when we ourselves in it also function as “symbols”). Synthesizing Lacan’s theory, Anika Lemaire concludes that “one could, therefore, say that the human being is an effect of the signifier rather than its cause” (68). By this essay I hope to clarify how man, being the cause of language, can at the same time be its result. Like the hero in the novel, man is done—and undone—by the magic mirror, his own device.
Chapter One

Mephistopheles and/or Faust

At the very beginning of the novel Lord Henry has made a celebrated speech to Dorian, expounding to him the truth of life and thus enlightening him. “All influence is immoral,” so Henry tells Dorian (20). When being asked of the reason why it is so, Lord Henry offers the following explanation:

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.

(19)

To influence a person means that one imposes his/her own set of values upon an object. One stamps his/her ideals upon the object, therefore reproducing himself/herself in the object. Influence as such, as Rashkin remarks, “involved a subject’s aggressive, invasive projection of an identity onto an object” (69). Through wielding his influence one “transforms” the influenced and changes its nature. If, as Lord Henry suggests, that self-realization is “the highest duty to one’s self,” it follows then, that “[a]ll influence is immoral,” as what the dandy concludes (19). For, through influencing others, one hinders their development and denies them their autonomy. According to Henry, one “sins” as he/she influences others, for he/she reduces them into puppets that act under his/her will. One dictates their growth, penetrates them with elements that remain alien to them.

The exquisite theory of influence and the moral of self-development that
Henry so ardently advocates, serves, however, as a mere preparatory phase—what is called “gambit” in chess play—in his relation to the hero. It is only to be contradicted and subverted by the dandy’s deed in the later chapters. Fascinated by Dorian, Henry, to satiate the “cruel joy” of his as the author terms it, endeavors to possess the lad (99). He “would try to be to Dorian Gray what, without knowing it, the lad was to the painter who had fashioned the wonderful portrait. He would seek to dominate him—had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own.” (34)

Henry’s will to dominate Dorian—or “the passion for property” as he terms it—is revealed in his reflection on the hero (43). As made explicit above, Henry, in his relationship to Dorian, seeks to play the Mephistopheles. Henry poses as the one that educates Dorian, to “reveal himself [Dorian] for himself” and discloses for the lad life’s mystery (22). In his friendship with Dorian, Henry, as can be inferred from his comments that I have quoted, assumes the role of the master/mentor, while Dorian, on the other hand, is constructed as the one in want of the dandy’s instruction. To Henry, the lad poses as the young Faust that yearns for the dandy’s guiding light and invites Henry to fiddle with, to experiment and to “vivisect.” Dorian is “a subject made to his hand” that “seemed to promise rich and fruitful results” (50). To be exact, rather than being the “subject,” Dorian, as the dandy portrayed, seems in their friendship to be

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11 Readers may be reminded of what Basil quoted from Henry in chapter XII, which exactly corresponds with the situation happens here: “I remember Harry saying once that every man who turned himself into an amateur curate for the moment always began by saying that [‘I won’t preach to you’], and then proceeded to break his word.” (118) All the toil accumulated means only to usher in the climax of its final collapse, the last shot. Taking Henry’s desire for Dorian into consideration, the excerpt is thus tinged with erotic longing.

12 To put it another way, the relationship between the two as suggested in Henry’s ideal model represents a varied version of the Sleeping Beauty, in which Henry poses as the fairytale prince that wakens the beauty and presents her (“him” here) what reality is. After talking to Henry the hero’s eyes are open: “Life suddenly became fiery-colored to him” (21). Henry “makes sense” of life for the slumbered one.
converted as an “object” on which Henry tries his hands: through the lad Henry conveys the aestheticism he advocates. “There was nothing that one could not do with him. He could be made a Titan or a toy” (34). It is obvious that Henry has reduced the lad to an implement through which the aesthete may express himself. Dorian is made an echo of Henry’s music—or he becomes the one conducting notes of Henry. The hero is what an “instrument” is to Henry—as what a canvas is to Basil. A violin, it seems. The metaphor of music and instrument haunts, looming and recurring throughout the narrative from time to time. The analogy Henry makes when he first meets Dorian, that one “becomes an echo of some one else’s music” (my Italics) once he/she is influenced, remains perhaps one of the most explicit examples and ushers in this motif of musical instrument that is to be repeated in Henry’s conception of his friendship with Dorian. Through the metaphors the dandy employs readers see that Henry assumes the role of a musician, to whose magical touch Dorian resounds: “The few words that Basil’s friend had said to him… had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before” (20-21). The hero, on the other hand, is rendered as the delicate medium/machinery that answers and conveys the aesthete’s notes. “Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow” (33). The sumptuous music of Henry thus rendered stirs his audience from boredom to joviality; they “followed his pipe laughing” and so on (38). Henry, as these passages affirm, poses as the consummate aesthete, the dexterous one that wields the instrument and endows it with life: in Lacanian terms, he poses as “the subject that knows.”

“That a burnt child loves fire” (152). Dorian, once captured by the “wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories” the dandy offers (or rather,
“materialized” by the words of Henry’s) (63), grows “inseparable” with Henry as Basil informs us (118). While Henry emancipates Dorian from “the terror of God and society” (20), he has, meanwhile, also made the lad forfeit his autonomy. The hero, being thus “poisoned,” grows addicted to Henry. Dorian becomes all the more dependent, resigning himself thoroughly to Henry. Indeed, as Henry asserts, in Dorian readers find the trace of influence: the intellectual views of Henry’s could be found internalized and reflected in the lad. In chapter IX, Dorian, arguing with Basil, suggests that “[a] man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. …I don’t want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them.” So the hero announces (85). Here it is obvious that the creed of dominance that Henry upholds is exactly inherited, and his dominance over Dorian, on the other hand, is accomplished. “To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for” (19). In chapter III, however, the importance of self-development Henry tirelessly preaches is at once undone by his ecstatic celebration of influence-wielding:

There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one’s soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one’s own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth; to convey one’s temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or a strange perfume; there

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13 To Dorian, “Harry is never wrong.” (151) The hero’s behavior, coincidentally enough, remains simply consonant to Henry’s comment on women: “I am afraid that women appreciate cruelty, downright cruelty, more than anything else. They have wonderfully primitive instincts. We have emancipated them, but they remain slaves looking for their masters, all the same. They love being dominated.” (81) Considering the ambivalent relationship between the two, this passage seems all the more interesting and swarming with connotations: Henry becomes to Dorian his “pharmakon.”
Chiang 21

was a real joy in that. (33)

The values of self-realization and influence-exercising, both exalted by
Henry, seem apparently contradicting each other. Splits occur between the
statements the aesthete consecutively made. Henry’s theories prove
self-contradictory. Examples like this swarm throughout the novel. In chapter
XVIII, when Henry is verbally fencing with the duchess, Henry claims that “to
define is to limit” (150). Readers may have observed, however, that it is
characteristic of Henry, a distinguishing habit of his, to deliver willful
paradoxes and to compose epigrams, “with a self-conscious and satisfied air, as
if he had summed up the world in a phrase” (16). By fashioning epigrams,
Henry gives definition—thus limitation—to things. “No life is spoiled but one
whose growth is arrested,” (61) thus the dandy assures his listeners. Yet, in his
attempt to dominate the hero, Henry has imposed definition/limitation on
Dorian. Again Henry contradicts himself. The dandy is inconsistent—thus
unreliable—as he has always been. What he defines has always undone itself
and faded into elusion/illusion. As the lad proclaims, Henry has “explained”
Dorian for himself. Dorian’s growth is shaped/dictated/arrested by the dandy.
“To a large extent the lad was his own creation,” so Henry comments (49). As I
repeated, it is through Henry’s words, as well as Basil’s magic painting, that
Dorian comes to perceive both himself and the outer world differently (or the
outer milieu altered as the reflection/deflection of Dorian’s renewed
self-recognition). In her “Père-version and Im-mère-sion,” Vicky Mahaffey
suggests that it is implied in the Lippincott’s edition of the novel that Basil and
Henry are lovers, and together they produce Dorian. “Basil producing
consciousness of the body through his mirror-portrait, Henry producing
consciousness of the mind—generating thought—through words.” Mahaffey
points out that

Wilde suggests that they not only produce Dorian’s self-image, but they also jointly “parent” him in this encounter in the garden before Dorian appears. Wilde again reinforces the identification of Basil with motherhood in another deleted passage, in which the narrator explains that “there was something in Basil’s nature that was purely feminine in its tenderness.” (199)

Mahaffey’s assertion locates Basil as the mother, the producer of Dorian’s image—while asserting Henry as the father of the lad, the father that, following Mahaffey’s idea, introduces language to the child’s growth and ferries him to the symbolic realm. Henry, known as a fabulous speaker of eloquence, is the one mastering the art of rhetoric, the art of words and language: he is the lord of diction/dictation. Henry’s habitually—almost compulsively—delivering epigrams and forming paradoxes, in my opinion, is thus significant and tale-telling. In Chapter VIII Dorian complains how Henry’s words influence him. “You cut life to pieces with your epigrams” (77), so the hero says. Dorian’s protest to Henry, in my opinion, is quite illuminating. It can be inferred that the act of fashioning epigrams is at one remove an act of giving definition/limitation, an act of introducing rules and an act that is necessarily dealing/done with the verbal, through which Henry manifests his influence, the influence that the words are capable of creating, the words of the father from which “one could not escape” (21). Dorian, as he stands stunned by the theory Henry expounds, begins to ponder and perceive the power of words. “Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them” (20). In fact, as seen at the beginning of their “friendship” depicted in chapter II, while Basil’s painting impresses the lad
with the beauty it reveals and hence triggers for Dorian the imaginary
self-perception of the body, by representing to the lad his theories, Henry, on
the other hand, fills the lad with comprehension/apprehension of the power that
words are capable to create. Through his words, the dandy initiates Dorian’s
recognition of the environment in which he is to live, and with which the lad is
to recognize/reconstruct his reality. Thus, it can be argued that in the affinity
among the three characters Basil plays the mother. Henry, then, represents to
Dorian the role of the father as he, while serving to sever the close bond
between Dorian and Basil, also educates Dorian and introduces to him the
symbolic matrix by representing the law of society (which is represented as
dominating and interdicting to pleasure or enjoyment). Henry as the father
generates for Dorian the symbolic aspect of self-integration. Seen in this light,
then, Henry’s writing Dorian—his invasive influence on modeling
Dorian—may be regarded as the Lacanian father’s attempt to sever the child’s
dual relationship with the mother and to introduce him/her to the symbolic. It is
through the father’s forceful inscription of the paternal metaphor—a set of
language that predates the child—that the child may obtain the ability of
language and thus go beyond the Oedipal phase. It is interesting to note that,
among the bounteous gifts Henry gives Dorian, one that has so much
influenced the hero and overshadowed his growth is, by no means coincidental
as I explained above, a book. “Dorian was poisoned by a book” (114). While
Henry’s words write Dorian, dictates the lad’s growth and reproduces in Dorian
his aestheticism; the book, succeeding the influence Henry creates, further
shapes the lad as it relates to Dorian romances of the “ancestors in literature,”
hence anchoring Dorian’s identification—with the other, that is. The curious
yellow book at once speaks its owner: it is the visible emblem, an extension of
Henry’s influence, the sign of Henry that renders the dandy ubiquitous.

“For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it” (98). In this passage, the infectious influence of writing Henry stands for, the aesthetic doctrine and hedonism he formulates—which so fascinates Dorian and becomes to the hero the guidance in life—seems to find affirmation. Considering the book as the continuation of Henry’s influence over Dorian, one finds Dorian infatuated by the theory Henry offers: the hero submits himself to the dandy’s writing. Readers see that it is Dorian that “never sought to free himself.” The lad is aware of his being “poisoned” and seems absolutely content embracing it. In fact, Dorian’s dedication to Henry (or, to Henry’s words: his writing) may be foreshadowed early in the novel. At the end of chapter III readers see that

As he [Henry] was passing out of the door Dorian Gray touched him on the arm. “Let me come with you,” he murmured.

“But I thought you had promised Basil Hallward to go and see him,” answered Lord Henry.

“I would sooner come with you; yes, I feel I must come with you. Do let me. And you will promise to talk to me all the time? No one talks so wonderfully as you do.” (39). (My Italics)

Here it is clear that in this pageant of degradation, the role Dorian plays, rather than the passive object that Henry suggests—the “child” or “lad” that is supposedly a *tabla rasa*, upon which the law of the father is to be inscribed by the patriarch—is a much more active one: it is a subject capable of making choices; it is one that, in the text, finds pleasure in and demands for the text. It
is a “reader” that enjoys reading the text Henry provides. The hero, seen in this light, is no longer merely the innocent adolescent/Adonis that is invaded/infected/instructed by Henry’s writing. Obviously it is Dorian that chooses Henry—and shuns Basil. Yet questions arise here. If, as Mahaffey prescribes, together Basil and Henry parent Dorian, Basil in this process of producing the hero poses as the mother who creates Dorian’s image and, through it, represents the hero as what he (she?) desires—hence possessing Dorian; it follows that Henry in this dichotomous division of labor plays the role of the father who, as I repeated, is supposedly the intruder that is to sever the mother-child bond and to enact the castration, to install Name-of-the-Father that is necessary for the lad to enter the symbolic (hence becomes a social being). What is revealed in this passage, however, seems to suggest simply the opposite. Certainly Dorian, prompted by Henry, is to desert Basil and to detach himself from the dual relationship he maintains with Basil. However, Dorian leaves the artist, the “mother,” only to join Henry, who, betraying the role of the father that he is expected to play, would “seek to dominate” and to enjoy the lad (34). While Basil the mother bores the hero away, Henry, on the other hand, binds Dorian up to himself. Indeed Dorian mutilates his affinity with Basil—only to forge another “alliance” (with Henry, that is) instead.

It seems to me that the role Henry plays, rather than being just the father of the lad, is constantly changing in his interaction with Dorian (and other characters as well). Henry in his relationship with Dorian functions like a

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14 It is the existence of this “reader,” along with responses from this “other,” that consummates the process of writing. The roles Henry assigned Dorian—willingly accepted by his interlocutor—can thus be understood as Lacan explains: “What I seek in speech is the response of the other. …In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me.” “If I call the person to whom I am speaking by whatever name I choose to give him, I intimate the subjective function that he will take on again in order to reply to me, even if it is to repudiate this function.” (Ecrits, 86-87)
“floating signifier,” whose meaning, as Lacan prescribes, can hardly be fixed. Indeed, Henry’s influence over Dorian is immense: it is through Henry’s writing that Dorian is appropriated. However, if Henry in the production of Dorian functions as the father, it seems the dandy would make a “bad” father who, like the Oedipal mother, also desires the child.\textsuperscript{15} “I want him to play to me” (36). In the mystic request Henry made in chapter III, one senses his wish to possess the lad. Henry takes Dorian away from Basil—only to tie the hero up to himself. The paternal metaphor, supposedly handed down by the father (Henry in this case), seems to me also missed in Henry’s ever-changing theories that so enlighten Dorian. As a floating signifier, Henry’s identity constantly changes. The dandy fails to play the father, for the numerous roles he plays not only prevent him from being the dictator of rules for Dorian, but also lead him into self-contradiction from time to time. Doubtlessly Henry has presented to Dorian the “terror” of “God” and “society”—the terror of the patriarchal law that demands to be observed; yet the law itself, like the moral of self-development Henry preaches, is only to be subverted in the dandy’s ongoing conversation and is opposed by the hedonism Henry ultimately advertises. “Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. …I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality.” So Henry announces (64). To Henry, “\textit{les grandpères ont toujours tort}” (44). The dandy overtly rejects the authority the convention upholds; he expels the obligation it imposes, the role it expects the individual to

\textsuperscript{15} Or we may also say that as a signifier, Henry too at times assumes the role of the mother that nourishes the child and binds him to her (him). The roles the characters around Dorian play, as I repeat, constantly change. They function like signifiers that link to each other, oppose to each other and hence produce meaning to Dorian, constructing his world. While Basil more than once assumes the role of the father who imposes on the lad Law-of-the-Father (and always fails), Henry from time to time also plays the role of the mother, the Oedipal one that “reappropriates” his (her?) product.
play. The theories Henry formulates, the numerous comments Henry makes as seen in the novel, prove contradictory from time to time. They are “practices” to him, “ways” to the hedonist that may lead to “jouissance,” “modes” through which the aesthete could “realize his conception of the beautiful” as Wilde explains (115). Henry’s constant self-contradiction, his “insincerity” as he professes, is to him “merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (111). Thus, to assert that Henry plays the role of the father, the one that patronizes the symbolic order would seem fallible. Obviously Henry also attempts to dominate the lad and to “make that wonderful spirit his own” as he confesses (34). Henry, like Basil, also seeks to “fetishize” Dorian and to “immerse” the lad as Mahaffey suggests (which I will further explain in the next chapter). Both men desire the lad, and both men’s desire to possess Dorian, I shall point out, is tinged with sexual appetite—only the approaches they take remain different. While Basil’s asceticism—symptom derived from repressed desire—idealizes the hero (as a-sexual); the hedonism Henry promotes, on the other hand, satiates the lad with libidinal investment and thus arrests his growth. In his “Writing Gone Wilde” Ed Cohen insightfully points out that Basil and Henry’s rivalry for Dorian, the handsome young man, is overtly highlighted in the painting scene taken place in chapter II

Though the motives behind this competition are left unspoken, it unfolds during Dorian’s final sitting for his portrait. Here, in Basil’s studio, the conflict plays itself out as a seduction: Lord Henry woos Dorian away from the adoring gaze of the painter to awaken him to a new, symbolic order of desire—an order at the very heart of the narrative. (807)

Foreseeing the hazardous influence the dandy may cause to his
relationship with Dorian, Basil makes his plea before he introduces Dorian to Henry. “The world is wide, and has many marvelous people in it. Don’t take away from me the one person who gives to my art whatever charm it possesses: my life as an artist depends on him”(17). Basil’s plea should have reminded the readers of the fact that in the triangular relationship demonstrated in the novel, Henry poses not only as Basil’s lover that parents/produces Dorian at the very beginning, but, as the story goes on, proceeds to become one that competes for Dorian with Basil. I shall suggest that the “carnal” concern (if not erotic) is deeply imbued in the relationship between Henry and Dorian. To me, the genesis of Dorian’s relationship with Henry is quite illuminating:

He [Dorian] could not help liking the tall, graceful young man who was standing by him. His romantic olive-colored face and worn expression interested him. There was something in his low, languid voice that was absolutely fascinating. His cool, white, flower-like hands, even, had a curious charm. They moved, as he spoke, like music, and seemed to have a language of their own. (22)

“I know you [Dorian] quite well by your photographs. I think my husband has got seventeen of them”(40), so Henry’s wife informs us. While Henry is fascinated by the youth and beauty Dorian possesses; Dorian, on the other hand, is drawn to Henry by the sexual appeal of the dandy. It seems to me that Dorian’s perception of Henry is based on erotic imaginations like this. As seen in this quotation, rather than the theories Henry advocates, Dorian’s attention, however, is focused on other “signifiers,” the physical features of Henry: which seems what really attracts him here. To Dorian, seemingly, it is these “romantic olive-colored face”, “low, musical voice” and the “cool, white, flower-like hands” that, albeit absent in the text Henry offers, are really what
presents/presides the dandy. It is on these physical features that Dorian’s gaze is really fixed upon and his erotic longing unleashes. It is focusing on these “signifiers” that Dorian “reads” the dandy. “[T]he text comes about, as soon as, for example, the scriptor and/or the reader begin to play with the signifier” (Theory of the Text, 38), here Dorian seems to me become the “reader” that engages in such a play that is voluptuous, a “full reading” that, as Barthes delineates, is “the kind in which the reader is nothing less than the one who desires to write, to give himself up to an erotic practice of language” (42). I should suggest that Dorian, in his affinity with Henry, poses as the reader, the reader that participates in the writing process and interacts with the writer. Thus Henry, being the advocate of hedonism, not only refuses to castrate the lad—as what is expected in a father but, as seen later throughout the novel, becomes himself the provider of “jouissance,” the provider of texts for the hero to enjoy—he himself in this case also becomes a text to Dorian. In chapter IV Henry comments:

It was true that as one watched life in its curious crucible of pain and pleasure, one could not wear over one’s face a mask of glass, nor keep sulphurous fumes from troubling the brain and making the imagination turbid with monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams. There were poisons so subtle that to know their properties one had to sicken of them. There were maladies so strange that one had to pass through them if one sought to understand their nature. And, yet, what a great reward one received! How wonderful the whole world became to one! (49)

Again Henry’s role becomes elusive here. As Henry comments, the dandy, instead of maintaining the Mephistophelian mask he wears, seems here
to pose as Faust who, to satisfy his thirst for knowledge, yields his soul. To “project” his soul in Dorian—to write Dorian as what he wants the lad to be—Henry in this metamorphosis has to offer himself to mutations, to the influences that take place as Dorian gradually changes and interacts with him. Obviously what Henry signifies, the role he plays, is constantly changing to Dorian in the productivity of meaning—“significance” as Barthes illuminates. Thus Henry introduces the hero to the symbolic as the father, yet also poses as the Oedipal mother that indulges the young man and seeks to keep Dorian to himself. While the paternal metaphor, which Dorian requires to become an independent entity, is left unheeded by Henry; it is later to be registered by other characters—among which Basil remains an important one, whose role is no less complex than Henry’s and whose significance is to be discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter Two
A Romance So Colored with Taboo

As I have mentioned, traditional reading of The Picture of Dorian Gray tends to emphasize Henry’s influence on Dorian. Recently, however, the attention of critics has shifted to another important character, whose influence on Dorian may equal that of the dandy, namely Basil the painter. “Whatever my life is, he had more to do with the making or the marring of it than poor Harry has had” (131). The hero’s comment on Basil seems to affirm the argument made above. Indeed, the effect Basil has on Dorian is no less important than Henry’s influence—it may even exceed that of the latter. Yet it is curious that the painter’s influence, as seen in the novel, remains a “subterranean” force that has often been neglected. Part of the reason, I will say, is due to Basil’s inarticulateness, his habitual silence. In fact, such “inarticulateness,” it seems to me, is a state that the painter more or less consciously maintains. Readers may remember the strange depiction of Basil as he makes his debut at the very beginning of the novel:

As the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skillfully mirrored in his art, a smile of pleasure passed across his face, and seemed about to linger there. But he suddenly started up, and, closing his eyes, placed his fingers upon the lids, as though he sought to imprison within his brain some curious dream from which he feared he might awake. (8)

Basil’s attempt to keep silence—not to “bare his soul” to the “shallow, prying eyes,” as he puts it—results in his frequently being overlooked (15). In my opinion, Basil’s inarticulateness, his attempt to hide his soul, is a riddle that...
sealed with meaning. I shall argue that in spite of the seeming difference, Basil’s silence, like Henry’s habitual talk, is tale-telling: both are signs manifesting the natures of the characters. To make a comparison between these two characters may allow us to know Basil clearer, and the contrast Henry and Basil makes shall help illuminate the nature of the painter and hence help us understand how he influences Dorian. Lord Henry, as depicted in the novel, is known as an excellent speaker, a magnificent rhetorician. The dandy has “such a beautiful voice” (19); he is “really an admirable tonic,” a favorite among dinner-parties and salons as Lady Narborough comments (139). Lord Henry, the visible emblem of taste and intellect in The Picture of Dorian Gray, wins his audience with his enchanting, fluent talk. “He played with the idea, …tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox” (37). As I have made explicit in the previous chapter, the dandy poses as the “magician”, the juggler of words. Henry is incessantly fashioning, delivering his fascinating, poisonous theories and paradoxes whenever readers see him, with which he captures his audience, charming them “out of themselves.” “No one talks so wonderfully as you do,” so the hero attests. The dandy is “brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible”; he is the synonym of elegance/eloquence (37-39).

Basil, on the contrary, is a character with little voice. The painter’s presence is scarce, and he does not speak much except in a few chapters (the prelude in chapter I, the mysterious confession in chapter IX, plus chapter XII and chapter XIII—two chapters that are of fatal importance, literally.). In contrast sharply to the charm of Henry’s quips and the charisma he possesses, Basil the person, as well as his ideas, seems to be belittled and derided by his friends in the novel from time to time. “Basil was really rather dull,” so Henry
comments. To Henry, Basil is “not clever enough to have enemies” (162). As what can be inferred from Dorian’s observation, when juxtaposed with the pale, “flower-like” delicacy of the dandy that so fascinates the hero (who is known as “Prince Charming” and whose extraordinary grace may perfectly match with the civil-ness of Henry, pillaring the culture and corruption that belong exclusively to the civilized, the beautiful things/sins that “are privilege of the rich” (64)), the “rugged” artist, wanting the refinement Henry enjoys, seems “to be just bit of a Philistine.” “He says things that annoy me,” so Dorian complains (48). Basil’s opinions are to Henry “medieval emotions” which remain “out of date” (64). The painter has “no curiosity” and is labeled invariably by his friends as “a bore” (162-163). Thus, it is clear that Basil’s infatuation with Dorian, as already revealed in the first chapter, is doomed unanswered: it is muted from the very beginning. Devoted to Dorian as he is, Basil nonetheless can never stand a chance in his competition with Henry for the hero. “You don’t understand me” (9). To me, Basil’s complaint at chapter I is a pun that is at once illuminating. The painter’s voice is un-decipherable as well as unrecognized; Basil’s desire to possess Dorian is dashed.

Tracing back this way, one may argue that it is this “defeat”, the incompetence in making use of language, which drives Basil mute and converts him into the realm of art—devoting mainly to painting. In my opinion, Basil’s painting is to the artist a supplement of language through which Basil conveys himself. It compensates for his incapability in rendering verbal expressions; it allows him to shape the hero as what he wants, to depict/define his sitter and to

16 “From a label there is no escape.” That is what Henry tells us (149). Thus, Basil is destined a “marginal” character comparing with Dorian and Henry; the painter, unsurprisingly, is often shunned by his friends and whose opinion, annoying to his listeners, always comes untimely and remains unwanted—just like what boredom is.
arrest his love object. Like Henry’s rhetoric, through his painting Basil articulates himself and wields his influence on Dorian. Basil’s gesture of drawing, following the definition I gave, is thus also a gesture of writing. The picture, as a consequence, becomes a text that works on the reader (and the “writer” as well). Indeed, obviously Basil’s affection for Dorian is a main reason that prompts him to paint: appealing to his painting Basil obtains a language of his that grants him access to the lad he wants. The argument may easily find support throughout the novel. “He is all my art to me now.” In the first chapter Basil declares Dorian’s influence on him, “unconsciously he [Dorian] defines for me the lines of a fresh school” (14). It is owing to the influence of the hero that the artist comes to mould the fabulous portrait, his masterpiece. Even Henry marks that Basil’s painting “had quite gone off” since Dorian stops sitting for the painter: “it seemed to me to have lost something. It had lost an ideal. When you and he ceased to be great friends, he ceased to be a great artist. …Since then, his work was that curious mixture of bad painting and good intentions that always entitles a man to be called a representative British artist” (163). Basil paints to “draw” the lad he desires, which is the reason why he won’t exhibit the picture, fearing that “the world might guess it”—that his secret shall be betrayed (15).

Basil’s resolution of not exhibiting the portrait is, it can be argued, at one remove an attempt of the author to “secure” or to “stabilize” his work, the attempt to seal it as a finished object and to legitimate the reading he authorizes, while also preventing the meaning of the work from proliferation. Actually the painter’s attitude toward his object seems to coincide with Henry’s complacency, the “satisfied air…as if he had summed up the world in a phrase” (16). Both characters, in spite of the difference in temperaments, are
“traditional authors” in my opinion, authors who insist upon the definite meaning, the Platonic truth in reading. Readers may recall that in chapter I, when Henry suggests to see the hero that has so changed Basil after he heard the painter’s story, Basil announces that

Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art. You might see nothing in him. I see everything in him. He is never more present in my work than when no image of his is there. He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and subtleties of certain colors. That is all.

(15)

It seems Dorian, to Basil, is also a finished object, a sealed work. Basil insists that his decipherment of the hero, as manifested in the portrait, is the one and the only interpretation. Like Henry, Basil also believes that he is the only one entitled to see the “real”, the definitive meaning sealed in his work. “Basil’s passion for Dorian belies the Platonic invocation of ‘the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal’” (807), as Cohen remarks. The artist claims that his perception of the picture, as well as of the sitter, is in essence a “Platonic Truth” that remains “true” and “unchangeable”: it is stable, incapable of mutation. Such a belief the artist holds remains unaltered even to his death, and echoes of it can be seen throughout the novel. In chapter XIII, when Basil finally faces the hideously deformed portrait, Basil sees the picture as “some foul parody,” claiming that in his masterpiece “there is nothing shameful” and disowning what he sees on the canvas (121). Being a flat character (as most critics would agree), the artist maintains such a “reading strategy” from the very beginning—which is to become a distinguishing feature of his. “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.
The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself” (10). Basil’s assertion on painting elaborated in the first chapter of the novel has explicitly elucidated the theory he champions, in which the author, as the “center”, reigns: he/she is the one that integrates and structuralizes his/her object and grants it with meaning (the meaning): which, according to Basil’s account, is the author’s subjective projection.

Basil’s attitude toward reading is exclusive and domineering. This is also reflected in his relationship with the hero—both as a text (the object Basil reads—and writes) and as a person (the object Basil desires). “I couldn’t be happy if I didn’t see him every day” (14). To Basil, Dorian is the perfection and the “absolutely necessary,” without which the painter’s life would be incomplete. Obsessed with the lad, Basil grows emotionally addictive. Basil’s love for Dorian, as he himself confesses, is vampiric; it is like the “mad hungers” that “grew more ravenous as he fed them” as Dorian depicts (100). Strongly attracted/addicted to Dorian, the artist seeks to possess the lad. Basil’s paradigm of love presents the interplay of dominances, or rather, “bondage,” a mutual possession in which the two parties engaged remain inseparable. It is a circle of need/needed, an enclosed bond in which one belongs solely and entirely to the other (and vice versa) that Basil wants. The relationship the painter yearns to establish is the “marriage,” the “irrevocable vow” as Dorian suggests in chapter VI. “It is an irrevocable vow that I want to take” (63). The painter may have made the vehement proclamation that Dorian once makes as well. Obviously the artist’s love is an exclusive possession of the love object—precisely what Henry terms “the passion for property” (43).

Like Dorian’s dedication to Henry, Basil’s addiction to the hero is further
enhanced as their friendship evolves. Basil’s relationship with Dorian grows entangled along with the development of their “friendship” that is “so colored with romance” (91). In chapter IX readers see the fervent confessional speech the painter makes to the hero:

I worshipped you. I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When you were away from me you were still present in my art… of course I never let you know anything about this. It would have been impossible. You would not have understood it.

(89)

Caught in the unanswered craving, the artist nevertheless grows even more dependent on his love object. Basil is “absorbed”, “dominated” by Dorian, who becomes his muse, the source of inspiration, the indispensable and “the ideal as I shall never meet again,” as he confesses to the audience (122). The painter welcomes enslavement. He, like Dorian, never seeks to free himself form the attachment that proves fatal. “I know that the work I have done, since I met Dorian Gray, is good work, is the best work of my life” (14). Here such a confinement imposed on the artist proves fruitful to his art as Basil affirms.

The painter’s comment extols the contribution of Dorian’s dominance over him. Basil, supposedly the writer of Dorian’s image, the one that, “like Dr.

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17 There are lines from the manuscript (canceled in later edition) that more explicitly point this out. Basil confesses when he informs Henry of his “romance” with Dorian: “I am horribly jealous of him, of course. I never let him talk to me of the people he knows. I like to isolate him from the rest of life and to think that he absolutely belongs to me. He does not, I know. But it gives me pleasure to think he does.”

18 Which, I think, has in turn attests to the validity of the argument I made at the beginning, that Basil’s painting is to the artist a complimentary language through which he accesses to Dorian and models him. To capture his love, the artist thus appeals to his art to convey himself. Basil’s improvement in painting may therefore be seen as the result of his language being “polished” as constantly needed and exercised.
Frankenstein, *produced* [sic] Dorian” as Vicki Mahaffey suggest, is now subjecting himself to the power of Dorian. In her “Père-version and Im-mère-sion,” Mahaffey offers an insightful illustration of the power struggle in the novel, discussing the relationship among the main characters (Basil and Dorian in particular)—the roles they play and how the characters play them. Mahaffey asserts that Basil poses “not only as a man who secretly desires Dorian but also as his ‘mother,’ the creator of his physical image: the portrait that Basil has painted and labeled his masterpiece” (197). Basil’s affection to Dorian, according to the essay, is the mother’s repressed desire toward the child, a perverse desire that is labeled as “im-mère-sion” as seen in the title because it is presided over by “the mother” (*la mère*). Im-mère-sion, as Mahaffey points out, fetishizes the child and locks him/her “in the cordoned-off room of the mother’s unconscious:”

The mother’s exercise of “immersed” desire denies the child a separate existence, condemning it to live in the shadow cast by her own repression. …the mother who idealizes her child and sacrifices her own pleasure in the process subordinates herself in a way that ties the child helplessly to her. (190)

The insight here may help explain Basil’s persistent desire to possess Dorian exclusively. Certainly Basil’s infatuation with Dorian, as I mention, has in ways mirrored the hero’s affection to Henry. Both, I think, are overshadowed with a homosexual overtone illegitimate to the Victorian milieu. Repressed as it is, Basil’s desire for the lad is still betrayed from time to time. Readers see Basil, when recalling his first encounter with Dorian, gives a detailed account on both Dorian’s and his own physical reaction: “When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale.” “Suddenly I found myself face to face with the young
man…. We were quite close, almost touching” (11-12). Deliberately played down by the artist, Basil’s awareness of the physical attraction and connection Dorian evokes nonetheless manifests itself in his narration. It is such a love which “dares not speak its name” that Basil seeks to mute and to restrain. A more extreme example is found in the manuscript, in which Basil tells the audience how Dorian affects his art. “It [The landscape] is one of the best things I have ever done. And why is it so? Because while I was painting it, Dorian Gray sat beside me, and as he leaned across to look at it, his lips just touched my hand. The world becomes young to me when I hold his hand…” (The Picture of Dorian Gray, 180). It is Basil’s erotic craving for Dorian’s body that is revealed in this passage. Like Dorian’s fascination with Henry, the enamored painter’s dedication to the lad—the young male—is at its origin a carnal drive, a love that “dares not speak its name.” Because, homoerotic longing as such, as Ed Cohen points out, is “historically excluded” as “unrepresentable,” the implicit/illicit notes have to be muted. Thus, as the author of the novel deleted these lines, the painter in the novel too must seek to sublime his passion and to elevate it to the aesthetic domain, the field that is outside the government of verbal language.19 Considering Basil as the mother, such a move becomes further more invested with metaphorical meaning: it may be said as the mother’s exodus from the realm of the symbolic presided over by the father.

“[I]mmersion, authorized by the mother, fetishizes the child itself, who in

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19 As Cohen suggests, it is “nevertheless metonymically suggested by a verbally unrepresentable medium, the painting, whose linguistic incommensurability deconstructs the apparent self-sufficiency of these representational codes” (806). While the writing of fleshly desire in the manuscript is mortified, the homosexual longing, however, remains central to the novel. Used as a proof against Wilde on his trial, the infamous history of the novel may serve to attest to the accuracy of this argument. Homoerotic craving becomes to the novel a theme that is, in Derridean terms, “under erasure.”
turn looks for his or her own image as love-object” (197). So Mahaffey announces. Coincidently the discovery Ed Cohen makes seems to in ways support Mahaffey’s claim here:

> In a moment of textual silence, Dorian—misperceiving the true object of Basil’s feeling—defends his idealized self-image by invoking the magical aspects of utterance. To maintain his identity as the object of another man’s desire, he prays to exchange the temporality of his existence for the stasis of an erotically charged visual representation. (809)

Seen in this light, then, in Basil’s silence, as I mention at the beginning of this chapter, lies the “unnatural restraint and self-denial” (190). The painter as the mother represses his desire for the child, “idealizes the child in order to buttress her own repression” (197). “As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me” (16). Basil’s passion for Dorian, in this perspective, is not only sado-masochistic but is “worse than wicked”; it is an act “to make yourself the slave of your slave,” as Henry comments in the manuscript—exactly the immersion in practice as Mahaffey explains. Thus, deep in the picture of Dorian Gray lies the painter’s idealization of the child as well as of his (her) own desire: “by painting it, he has, at one stroke, repainted himself as he would like to be and frozen Dorian as that which—at a distance—mirrors and supports his own desire” (Mahaffey, 197). At the beginning of the novel readers see Basil advertising the indispensability of his muse: “I couldn’t be happy if I didn’t see him every day. He is absolutely necessary to me”, ”he is all my art to me now” (14). The pronoun Basil employs here, the “he” recurring in the painter’s account, seen in this light, becomes hence evasive. Taking the mother’s repressed desire imbued in
immersion into consideration, the real object of Basil’s mad admiration/adoration may be, rather than Dorian per se, the artist’s unquenched desire represented/in disguise (in which the lad is merely “the accident, the occasion” as the painter remarks). The unusual devotion Basil holds for the hero is therefore essentially narcissistic. The vehement confession in chapter IX that I quoted becomes then celebration of narcissism, demonstrating the artist’s self-indulgent jouissance in which the hero, the child upon whose body the maternal desire is projected, is immersed.

Basil’s affection remains the love that “dares not speak its name”. The painter’s love for Dorian is tinged with homosexuality, the love “with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend” as the manuscript depicts. Considering Basil as the mother, such love he bears for Dorian would be what Lacan demonstrates in the Oedipal: both are love that remains historically forbidden. Basil’s passion for the hero remains mute, for Basil’s desire for Dorian remains a repressed desire that is censured by not only the norm, but also by Basil himself as well. It is obvious that the artist himself too questions the legitimacy of his affection for the lad. The forbidden love seems to Basil what fills him with guilt and shame. Basil, as readers know, is the kind of character that D. H. Lawrence has contemptuously termed as “le petit bourgeois.” Though his identity as an artist strikes a rebellious pose, Basil, however, remains a conformist and conservative in the essence who submits to decorum, convention and authority. “… If one lives merely for one’s self, …one pays a terrible price for doing so?” The question Basil raises when Henry expounds his theory of individualism is illuminating here. To Basil, violator of social norms must pay “in remorse, in suffering, in …the consciousness of degradation” (64). As Barbara Charleworth points out,
Basil Hallward still believes in objective absolutes of right and wrong and even gives society the right to punish those who transgress them, not because society really understands either the sin or the sinner but because society’s vengeance is the sinner’s purification. (397)

“Purification” and “sin.” These are precisely what have obsessed Basil: the “medieval emotions” that remain “out of date” as Henry contemptuously remarks (64). Certainly the binary opposition of Hebraism versus Hellenism is a motif recurring throughout the novel. While Henry the aesthete denounces “the maladies of medievalism” and advertises the return “to the Hellenic ideal” (20), Basil, too, as he informs the readers, is incessantly pursuing “the perfection of the spirit that is Greek” (14). Juxtaposed to the asceticism that Hebraic creed stands for, “the harmony of soul and body” that Hellenism patronizes is employed by the characters as the elixir to cure the paralyzed sense (senses). Such a binarism is expounded by Sedgwick in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, whose insight may help readers of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* see the issue here. Sedgwick claims that

the Victorian cult of Greece… positioned male flesh and muscle as the indicative instances of “the” body, of a body whose surfaces, features, and abilities might be the subject or object of unphobic enjoyment. The Christian tradition, by contrast, had tended both to condense “the flesh” (in so far as it represented or incorporated pleasure) as the *female* body and to surround its attractiveness with an aura of maximum anxiety and prohibition. (136)

It is this “unphobic enjoyment” that Basil aspires to—yet can never really obtain. Basil, as he indefatigably advocates the Hellenic ideal, is
nonetheless never really convinced of the accuracy/authenticity of the ideal he promotes. As illustrated above, Basil remains being governed, “fettered” by the social codes, the Victorian milieu in which the convention is presented as inviolable (Wilde’s tragic end may serve as a good example). “I grew afraid that others would know of my idolatry” (90). Readers may notice that in the novel Basil has more than once referred to his infatuation with Dorian as “idolatry.” Basil’s usage of the word “idolatry,” as the term connotes, betrays the secret, the deep anxiety of the painter, that it is still the “orthodox”, the Christian code as Sedgwick points out, that Basil really identifies with. I would venture to suggest that the interdiction to flesh and pleasure, which metonymically presents the social laws or norms that regulate human behavior, is at one remove apparatus to repress desire (of the mother, in particular) and to prevent incest. This is precisely the terror of “society” and “God,” the patriarchal rule that Lacan concludes as “Name-of-the-Father,” which produces the mother’s “unnatural restraint and self-denial, a denial that duplicates and is represented by the unnatural closeting of homosexual desire,” as Mahaffey claims (190). I would like to point out that in self-denial as such, Basil, suffocating his own desire, is seen converted to identify with the Law, the paternal rule. “He [Basil] says things that annoy me. He gives me good advice” (48). As Dorian complains, readers see that throughout the novel Basil poses as the preacher, the spoiler of jouissance to Dorian (this finds explicit example in the didactics Basil offers in XII, which has so troubled Dorian and so annoyed the hero that it drives Dorian to commit homicide, to efface the nuisance). Indeed, rather than Henry, the supposed “father” of Dorian, Basil seems the real one that first seeks to introduce the “Name-of-the-Father” to the lad. Forcing the lad to observe the norms the society dictates, obviously it is Basil
that assumes the function of the father (though only ends up in vain). Basil seeks to annihilate his unspeakable desire for Dorian, to “idealize” the lad so that he may release the repressed passion of his. By doing so, Basil, while creating Dorian as what mirrors and reveals the artist himself, has also denied Dorian his independent existence, his autonomy. To Basil, the lad is to be treated as a-sexual, and the fact Dorian is an independent individual, a subject that “desires”, remains from the very beginning unconceivable. This is what maddens Dorian, drives him to proclaim that “[e]ach of us has Heaven and Hell in him” (122). It can be argued that what causes Dorian’s “uncontrollable feeling of hatred” for Basil is the artist’s attempt to fetishize the lad, to “immerse” Dorian and to mortify Dorian’s desire so that he may escape the scrutiny of the paternal rule and maintain the lad as his (her) love object. This, I think, is what Mahaffey’s idea of “im-mère-sion” is about. Thus, the harmony of body and soul Basil wants is doomed untenable. The painter’s aspiration to “the Greek”, the “imagined dissolving of the bar of prohibition against the enjoyed body” (and “indicatively male”) can always and only be illusions and heresy (136). “Pray, Dorian, pray” (122). Stunned by the hideous portrait, the painter appeals to the power of God and asks Dorian to pray. The solution Basil provides to “redeem” Dorian, it is clear, is in fact a failed attempt to appease the painter’s own anxiety presided by the patriarchy that “stamps” on him. Appealing to the Christian orthodox, Basil’s prayer is at one remove a pose of surrender, the defeated oedipal mother’s submission to the dictation of the father, the insurmountable authority whose laws are branded on the subject as he/she enters into the symbolic world. As a social being Basil internalizes the patriarchal rules imposed upon him. His voice, seen in this light, is muffled by his “conscious,” his conformity/confinement to the convention that
appropriated by the laws hence inscribed. He becomes the overseer, the censor of himself. “What is it that one was taught to say in one’s boyhood? ‘Lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our sins. Wash away our iniquities’” (122) (my italics). Basil’s mis-conjunction of the Lord’s Prayer and the Lavabo prayer of the Mass (“Wash away our iniquities”), therefore, could be connotative. It is a Freudian “slip of the tongue”, in which Basil’s self-contradiction—produced through the father’s laws inscribed in him that he accepts but is never really convinced—is metaphorized and is betrayed.
Chapter Three

The Importance of the Signifier

You know how a voice can stir one. Your voice and the voice of Sibyl Vane are two things that I shall never forget. When I close my eyes, I hear them, and each of them says something different. I don’t know which to follow. Why should I not love her? Harry, I do love her. She is everything to me in life. (44)

The confession Dorian made to Henry in chapter IV overtly celebrates the irresistible charm of Sibyl Vane, lionizing the actress’ power over the hero and even elevating it to the equivalent magnitude of Lord Henry’s influence. Due to her limited appearance in the novel, the importance of the actress, like that of Basil, is often under-estimated. Sibyl’s influence on Dorian, nevertheless, remains decisive. The hero’s encounter with Sibyl not only initiates the first romance in Dorian’s life but, as the sequence, brings about changes on the picture—thus affecting Dorian’s life.

In Chapter IV Dorian for the first time introduces Sibyl to his audiences. Advertising the mobility/mutability of the actress, Dorian denounces the dullness of ordinary women, whose plainness stands in sharp contrast with the charm Sibyl possesses. “Ordinary women never appeal to one’s imagination. They are limited to their century” (44). Compared with these placid women that are “stereotyped,” “obvious,” the actress, with the myriad of roles she plays, fascinates Dorian and satisfies the myriad of desires of his. In contrast to the ordinary women that are “limited” to their century, Sibyl is free to assume different roles and is thus free from the limitation Dorian observes. If, as Henry asserts, “to define is to limit” (150), it then would be possible to say that the
The secret of Sibyl’s charm lies exactly in her resistance to such limitation/definition that “stales” ordinary women: one can hardly assign a fixed meaning/role/definition to her. The mystery of Sibyl’s power lies in her ever-changing identities, the “sexual, historical and imagistic mobility of her artistic persona,” as Rachel Bowlby comments (11). Also as Bowlby points out, against the lure of the mystery woman, or the woman as mystery, is set the “stereotyped” banality and predictability of “ordinary women”, whose daytime transparency of repeated routines and identical clothes and manners bears no comparison to Sibyl’s shifting obscurities “night after night.” (9)

“I have seen her in every age and every costume” (44). In Sibyl, Dorian sees the imaginary heroines throughout history consummately incarnated and combined. Through Sibyl’s acting, the aesthetic ideal of Dorian is realized. “She is more than an individual,” so announces Dorian (47). It is Sibyl’s “plastic-ness,” her genius for acting/playing different roles and freely flowing among multiple identities that satisfies—meanwhile also renews—what Dorian desires, making the lad “hunger for her presence” (47). As what Lord Henry has commented on cigarette, Dorian, in watching Sibyl’s play, gains “the perfect type of pleasure” as it is “exquisite” and it leaves him “unsatisfied” (65).

It is interesting to note that while the actress, with her art, captures her audience, Sibyl herself, however, is “quite unconscious of the effect she was producing” (55). The girl “seemed quite unconscious of her power,” and “She knows nothing of life” (46). Sibyl remains alien to the world outside the theatre. Indeed, the girl lives in the world of her own that is embodied on the stage on which she plays. Aside from her acting only very little is told about Sibyl the
person in the novel, while in the theatre readers see only the actress in the costumes of different heroines throughout ages, without having a fixed role of her own. The “real” personality of Sibyl can hardly be located. The fervent confession Sibyl makes to Dorian in chapter VII seems to in ways affirm the argument I have just made:

Before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true. I was Rosalind one night, and Portia the other. The joy of Beatrice was my joy, and the sorrows of Cordelia were mine also. I believed in everything. The common people who acted with me seemed to me to be godlike. The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. (69)

The girl “believed in everything” as she herself comments in the quotation above. Sibyl, by identifying with the heroines, sharing every single emotion of theirs, has as a consequence merged her self into these figures: among the heroines that fascinate Dorian she maintains the one that is never really present. “Since he sees himself in everyone, his self can have no distinguishing features at all” (Bowlby, 17). It seems Bowlby’s comment on Dorian coincides in ways with Sibyl’s situation here. “She has personality also” (48). In contrast to the assertion the hero jubilantly made, the “personality” of Sibyl, as Dorian claims—the “definitive essence”/“real meaning” of the actress—remains a constant “lack,” as seen from the novel’s depiction. Often through Dorian’s account of her is Sibyl’s image reflected/represented. With her self effaced, Sibyl becomes free to transfer among various identities, to assume different roles whenever she may need to. To Dorian, Sibyl is “all great heroines of the world in one” (47). “One evening she is Rosalind, and the next
evening she is Imogen” (44). Readers see that the actress always fascinates Dorian by appearing as what is other than Sibyl Vane (with perhaps just one exception: which proves a fatal one). “‘When is she Sibyl Vane?’ ‘Never’” (47). Dorian’s answer to Henry’s question is at once candid and illuminating: in the hero’s romance what he loves seems to be always other than Sibyl the person. Obviously Sibyl maintains a “fluid” character that “flows” among different identities: she is a “floating signifier,” whose true identity (the “signified”), through infinite replacement is missed. The girl Dorian loves seems apparently to be simply a pastiche of the heroines of Shakespearean plays (images produced by the texts that the artist provides, that is). Employing Barthes’ theory of the text, one may suggest that Sibyl’s acting, via emerging as the collage of Shakespearean heroines, becomes itself the place where numerous texts meet. Sibyl’s acting is thus essentially an intertext. It is possible, therefore, to argue that Sibyl’s performance night after night provides for the lad “a text” to read and enjoy as it is intertextual by nature; it is “a new tissue of past citations,” just as Barthes illuminates (39). It allows Dorian, the audience or the reader/consumer of the text, to engage in interpreting/inventing meaning for it—hence to “give himself up to an erotic practice of language” (42). Thus Henry congratulates Dorian, for the actress is never—is always other than—Sibyl Vane. For this, as Henry celebrates, the lad’s cathexis will always be granted: until the “real” Sibyl manifests herself—which proves the spoiler of this signification game.

“You came—oh, my beautiful love!—and you freed my soul from prison” (69), thus Sibyl celebrates how Dorian’s appearance “enlightens” her. Sibyl claims the lad has taught her “what reality really is” (69). Ironically, Sibyl’s Prince Charming has freed her from prison—only to lead her to the
abyss, “the way to dusty death.” As what is presented in the novel, instead of emancipating the girl as expected from a fairy-tale prince, Dorian is the one that “imprisons” her and demolishes her acting—eventually her life. Sibyl’s conceiving Dorian as her Prince Charming reconstructs her recognition of the reality, which, however, is based on a shaky ground, as Sibyl’s perception of the reality seems, from its point of departure, built on and fabricated by illusions (products of fairy tales). As Bowlby puts it, “[i]t is by making a new fiction of the world outside that Sibyl can come to see the ‘real’ ugliness of her artistic world” (10). “She was free in her prison of passion” (51-52). The actress is caught in the mirage she has built. Like Dorian, who “never sought to free himself” from Henry’s poisonous book, Sibyl, too, never seeks to free herself form Dorian’s imprisonment (98). Seeing how Sibyl is obsessed with Dorian, James warns Sibyl of Dorian’s will to dominate her, to which Sibyl responds paradoxically. “‘He wants to enslave you.’ ‘I shudder at the thought of being free’ ” (56). Sibyl’s answer to James’s warning is clear. The girl subjects herself to Dorian’s dominance. “The joy of a caged bird was in her voice” (51).

In her ecstasy, Sibyl announces that “our proverbs want re-writing” (56). However, the girl’s romance is much a repetition of some cliché fairytales, some “past citations.” Obsessed with her love to Dorian, Sibyl indeed “rewrites” her acting (what signifies her, what she is known for) and alters her way to interpret the characters she plays. Yet Sibyl’s rewriting proves a fatal one. “But what does he see in me?” (52) The answer to Sibyl’s question, as I have tried to explain, is to be found from the furious protest Dorian makes after the last performance:

You have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don’t even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect. I
love you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid. My God! How mad I was to love you! What a fool I have been! You are nothing to me now…. Without your art you are nothing. I would have made you famous, splendid, magnificent. The world would have worshipped you, and you would have borne my name. What are you now? A third-rate actress with a pretty face. (70)\(^2\)

It seems obvious that the girl is commodified by her Prince Charming. The “third-rate actress” now produces no effect. Dorian loves Sibyl, as can be inferred from the lad’s account, simply because she can act. Or, to be more specific, because of the effect she is able to create. The actress is “productive.” She stirs Dorian’s imagination and curiosity; she mirrors and supports the lad’s desire. As I repeated, rather than the girl in person, what appeals to Dorian is, in fact, the textual function of her—the text she is capable of providing, in which Dorian finds his desire supported and mirrored; the lad sees what he wants and what is destined other than the girl \textit{per se}. In contrast to Dorian’s observation that the actress “has personality,” Sibyl, as I repeat, presents to Dorian only as text or intertext that permits the lad to modulate meaning for it—which, betraying the claim Dorian makes, seems exactly what the hero really wants. Indeed, it is the great heroines throughout history modified by

\(^{20}\) Dorian’s anger to Sibyl, it can be argued, is the fury of disillusionment. As seen in the novel, Sibyl’s acting is always what supports Dorian’s desire. Sibyl in this sense, I venture to suggest, stands to Dorian for “the subject that supposed to know,” as Lacan names it, who understands Dorian and knows his “symptoms”. Hence, the bad acting of Sibyl shatters the myth Dorian constructs; the cruel fact destroys the imaginary relationship the lad maintains and thus kills his love.
Dorian’s imagination and found mirrored in Sibyl’s playing that really fascinate the lad. Has Dorian ever been in love in his “greatest romance?” Perhaps. Yet it remains questionable whether he loves anyone but Sibyl Vane. The actress is, like the sitter that Basil defines, merely “the accident, the occasion” that stimulates the audience-aesthete’s imagination and inspires him to “write”; through which “things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed”—exactly the role that later assumed by the book Henry gives Dorian (97). It is comprehensible then why Dorian, after Sibyl’s death, transfers his passion and addicts himself to the poisonous novel as he claims—and how he is influenced. Through it the creed of Dorian, “la consolation des arts”\textsuperscript{21}, is perfectly realized (86).

As what I have mentioned above, Dorian’s infatuation with Sibyl constitutes a search for what may be called “fulfillment,” the fulfillment that not only satisfies Dorian’s desire but also compensates what he lacks/misses.\textsuperscript{22} In my opinion, Dorian’s confession made in chapter IV, which I quoted at the very beginning of this chapter, is illuminating, in which readers see that the hero struggles between Henry’s voice and Sibyl’s. What takes place here is an inner power wrestling (to be more exact, a “writing struggle,” as I explained in the previous chapter) for Dorian. The hero finds himself torn between two opposite poles. “There is something of a child about her” (46). Opposite to the sophisticated/civilized/corrupted dandy, the actress represents to Dorian the

\textsuperscript{21} Creed of Théophile Gautier, mentioned by Dorian himself in chapter IX, page 86.

\textsuperscript{22} The quest for fulfillment as such, as it gratifies the subject’s desire, has meanwhile also registered for the subject other new desires. It, like what I quoted from Henry, is “exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied”(65). Thus, the fulfillment such a quest seems to promise turns out only a mirage. What it grants is in fact a perpetual process of seeking and of loss. This seems to coincide exactly with Lacan’s concept of object a, which I should further explain later.
innocence that he gradually loses. Sibyl signifies for the lad the “stainless purity” that Dorian once enjoys in his boyish life (95).23

A brief recap of Dorian’s life will make this clearer. As depicted in the novel, Dorian has a lonely and unhappy childhood.24 Disapproving of his daughter’s marriage, Dorian’s aristocratic grandfather, Kelso, hired someone to kill his son-in-law, a penniless subaltern with whom Kelso’s daughter eloped. Deprived of her love, Dorian’s mother never spoke to her father afterwards and died within the same year. Thus Dorian’s memory of the past, as “a child born in pain” that is “left to solitude and the tyranny of an old and loveless man”, is monstrously traumatic (33). Thus it explains the later ambivalent feeling Dorian bears toward his own childhood. As the hero yearns for the unstained purity he once knew in his boyhood, he is nevertheless repetitively thwarted and recoiled from it as agonized by the painful memory that links with exile and solitude—to part with the mother as Lacan may suggest.

Such an experience is well inscribed/incarnated in the attic room in which Dorian hides the fatal picture of his. Located in the aloof attic, a dark, almost forgotten corner, the room, together with the hateful memory it contains, is kept at a distance. Stored with Dorian’s secret, the room is locked up, “secure from prying eyes” as Dorian assures us (95). Yet the lad would himself at times visit the cell where he “had been kept prisoner” (Rashkin 71). He grows afraid that “during his absence some one might gain access to the room, in spite of the elaborate bars that he had caused to be placed upon the door” (110): that the

23 One may suggest that here Sibyl functions again as a signifier. What she signifies to Dorian and arouses his love seems to bear the dimension of narcissism (just as seen in most love stories as Mladen Dolar points out. For a more detailed explanation, see Dolar’s “At First Sight”: Gaze and Voice as Love Objects. Ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.)

24 The detailed account of Dorian’s family and ancestry is to be found from Henry’s uncle, Lord Fermor’s narration, in chapter III, mainly page 31.
secret he so carefully keeps as well as the traumatic past he endeavors to conceal and seeks to forget, may be known and revealed to others [Readers may be reminded of the exclamation Dorian made in chapter XI. “Don’t talk about horrid subjects. If one doesn’t talk about a thing, it has never happened” (85)].

“Without any ‘father’ he can fully trust, Dorian seems an emotional orphan” (Ragland-Sullivan, 119). Being victimized under the brutal interference of the law Dorian’s grandfather dictates, the “tyranny of an old man”; Dorian as a result “winced at the mention of his grandfather. He had hateful memories of him” (92). Dorian’s repulsion to the tyrannical patriarchal rule, that his grandfather embodies/enacts, moreover, is reinforced by the silent protestation, the resistance of the unyielding mother. Through which the law of the father’s, conducted by the cruel patriarch, is questioned and its authority undermined. As Lacan illuminates:

The father is present only through his law, which is speech, and only in so far as his Speech is recognized by the mother does it take on the value of law. If the position of the father is questioned, then the child remains subjected to the mother. (35)

Therefore, Dorian’s early years “shows him as identifying with feminine desire against the patriarchal order” (Ragland-Sullivan 119). Following Lacan’s concept, the lad seems emotionally thwarted. He fails to acknowledge/internalize the Law: he just cannot fully identify with the Name-of-the-Father. Hence, the ambivalent feeling Dorian bears toward the complex thus formed, as the hero grows, launches him into a constant
self-contradiction.25

“Dorian grew up longing for the mother with whom he identified” (Ragland-Sullivan 119). Given the explanation above, it can now be more fully comprehended that Dorian’s love for Sibyl has partially presented a quest for the supplement he unconsciously wants. The extraordinary beauty and grace of Sibyl, as the hero depicts, should have reminded Dorian of the mother he misses and longs for. Sibyl’s innocent, childlike nature, in addition, should also have been reminiscent of Dorian’s own boyish life to which he reacts so ambivalently as mentioned above (It is coincidental enough—or rather by no means coincident, that Sibyl too is a child without a father to rely on). In Sibyl, Dorian sees the reflection of his youth that was stainless. If, as Rashkin suggests, that Dorian “could well have identified with the image of him created …and incorporated it as his own” (72), it then is also possible to argue that Dorian’s encounter with Sibyl may have been to Dorian a continuation of the mirror stage that is motivated through the impact Basil’s painting creates. As Dorian in Basil’s picture sees his self image and begins to perceive himself differently, Sibyl, like the image in the mirror-painting, also functions to direct the lad’s self-recognition. In Sibyl the lad finds his image reflected (or projected), while the actress, in spite of her similarity with Dorian, remains

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25 Thus Dorian would share with Henry’s sentiment, thinking that “in art, as in politics, les grandpères ont toujours tort” (44). “As he looked back upon man moving through History, he was haunted by a feeling of loss. So much had been surrendered! and to such little purpose!” (101) Yet meanwhile Dorian would frequent the theater, devoting himself to plays of Shakespeare, which, definitely, remain the favorite of the grandpères that the hero mentioned with contempt (the plays themselves being the heritage of the ancestors, while in fact the hero/heroines that Dorian so much identifies with are themselves belonging to a set of language that predates him). As Dorian rejects the conventional dictation/interdiction of the grandparents on art, he nevertheless would comment that “one had ancestors in literature, as well as in one’s own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament, many of them, and certainly with an influence of which one was more absolutely conscious” (113). Examples like these abound in the novel.
nevertheless an “other”: one who is other than the hero. Through the dual relationship with this other, the imaginary order of Dorian’s is reconstructed, and, in this romance with Sibyl, Dorian’s self-recognition is re-oriented, just as what Basil’s painting has done to him.

I shall digress here for a while. A curious point worth noticing is that while Dorian’s affinity with Sibyl endows the lad with new sensations that consequently trigger Dorian’s renewed self-perception as what Basil’s picture has once done; such an intimacy, on the other hand, has also affected Sibyl: it moves the girl in a way that is slightly different yet analogous to how it influences Dorian. While Dorian, through watching Sibyl’s playing, finds the object he identifies with, resigns himself to the actress, “the subject that supposed to know” and projects his aesthetic values (accompanies with the sense of self he acquires) onto the text Sibyl provides, Sibyl, on the other hand, begins to see her stage in a different light via the impact Dorian creates, obtains a new sense of self that detaches her from the theatrical world she once identified with, now seen as void. Both in the texts his/her object presents finds what seems his/her “consummation,” that which accomplishes his/her self-integration, both are moved, changed by the discovery they newly have—“re-written” by the texts, and both, nevertheless, are disappointed, finding that what they jubilantly held “true” proves miscognitions.

26 In Dorian’s case, as I explain, it is the text Sibyl provides that attracts...
the hero. Through what Sibyl represents to him Dorian rehearses his boyhood, redefines himself and integrates the fragmented past of his. In my opinion, it functions in ways analogous to the portrait Basil provides, which has incorporated the image of the fragmental body of Dorian’s. The changes of Sibyl’s acting and of the portrait—natural sequence to both as texts that modulate Dorian as I repeat—have undone what they once affirmed, hence triggering the fragment anxiety of Dorian’s: he is losing control over them as they change/become “strange” to him. What Dorian wants seems a “classic text,” that is a “sealed unit,” it “closes the work” and “rivets it to its signified,” as Barthes suggests (33). Sibyl stirs Dorian’s imagination, for she mirrors the lad and re-presents for Dorian his childhood as I mentioned, which is at once linked with the mother he hungers for. It is also possible to argue that the immaculate beauty and purity of Sibyl’s combine to create for Dorian the perfect mother image, the holy Madonna, that Dorian imagines and loves; with her the hero unconsciously identifies. Thus, Dorian’s fervency for Sibyl incorporates a narcissistic love as well as a desire that is Oedipal. Sibyl, in some way, represents to Dorian incarnation of the Lacanian object a. It is the object “always desired and never attained, the object that causes the subject to desire in cases where he can never gain the satisfaction of possessing the object” as Schneiderman expounds (4). Thus Dorian’s disappointment with Sibyl is at once predictable. As seen later on in the novel, Dorian’s sudden fever—and the consequent fatigue—for jewel, music and even his own picture

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27 And Sibyl’s tragic end, to me, has foreshadowed the untimely death of Dorian’s as Sibyl faithfully mirrors the hero.
28 This is the reason why I assert that Dorian’s love with Sibyl is in ways continuation of the mirror stage. In the mirror phase, the child begins to gain a sense of the self and, simultaneously, comes to see the other, while still lingering in the pleasure that the dual relationship affords him/her.
can all be regarded as “symptoms” of the endless journey in which Dorian ceaselessly transfers his desired object, adhering to various objects only to find its voidness. “’I wish I could love.’ …’But I seemed to have lost the passion.’” So Dorian mourns in chapter XVIII (156). Dorian’s lamentation, I would suggest, is to be linked with the drama of love Lacan expounds that Dolar illuminates in the essay: “I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than yourself—the *objet petit a*—I mutilate you” (Lacan 1979, 263). Dorian could not love, for what he is really in love with is that “something,” the *object a*, which, it seems, can only be procured in his narcissistic relation with the self. Thus the lad must not love (others), so that he can maintain the jouissance that he by no means is willing to give up.

To Dorian, man is “a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead” (111). Dorian’s theory, in my opinion, curiously coincides in some ways with what Schneiderman paraphrases the discourse of the Other:

Lacan’s Otherness is the Other scene that Freud …said was the place of dreams. The Other has a discourse that predates the subject’s entry into the world of speaking beings, and Freud called this discourse the family romance or myth, whose structure is written as the Oedipal complex. Otherness is always and irreducibly outside the subject; it is fundamentally alien to him. Insofar as the discourse of the Other agitates a singular subject, it forms the Freudian unconscious. (3)

This, I think, may somehow help to explain the sensual explorations of Dorian’s. Dorian’s wondering in the grimy streets of London and his walking
into the shabby theatre—in addition to his later creeping into the foul
dens—are also themselves gestures of “returning”, answering the drive of the
unconscious. By engaging in these adventures Dorian heads toward a world
that is alien to him (and always calls for him). In contrast to the world of the
light/elegance/culture that Dorian lives in, it is a world of
night/vulgarity/corruption. Yet the “under” world, like the attic room that stores
the picture of Dorian’s, is also a part contained in the whole, occupying a
corner that is obscure/oblivious (suppressed in the unconscious, to be exact).
The filthy corner forms part of the city: It is part of the whole structure. “Each
of us has Heaven and Hell in him” (122). The physical background exactly
supports and mirrors the comment Dorian makes. Deep in the refined sphere of
culture lies what it denies and seeks to exclude, though it can never succeed.
Thus, Dorian’s going to the other side of town is actually a response that
answers the Other. Dorian’s sensual/sensational trips, I would suggest, are
themselves the desire of the Other. “Desire is realized in the dream, and Lacan
added that this is always the Other’s desire. That desire must find expression in
dreams suggest that it is a desire that the subject cannot accept as his own or
cannot act upon” (Schneiderman 3). In his night adventure, his
dream-walking-like wandering, Dorian enters the world of desire—desire of
the Other’s. As Schneiderman elucidates:

   Essentially there are two ways in which the child enters this world.
First, when he perceives that a parent desires an object that is other
than he, he will want to be that object, to be the desired object.
Second, when he perceives a parent desiring an object, he himself
will then consider that object desirable. Here he will identify with
the Other’s desire. (5)
It can be said that Dorian in practicing these “rites” seeks to repeat and to observe the codes inherited—through family romance or myth as quoted before—from the mythical father, the subaltern/”subterranean” culture. Through it Dorian expects to bring into being the father, the object the mother desires. Or it is also possible that Dorian, through tracing these routes and wandering in between the outlawed districts, aims to try the law and thus to perceive/conceive the interdictory Name-of-the-Father he never has the chance to know—with which he must identify to become an independent entity. Yet in either case, Dorian tries to conjure and to identify with the paternal metaphor, all the same. Through performing these rituals, Dorian fumbles to obtain the Name-of-the-Father that he lacks.

The mother image Sibyl represents definitely has immensely affected Dorian. Sibyl’s death horrifies the hero. However, it seems that Dorian, after this crucial incident, remains still unmoved and stagnates in his world. That is, he lingers in the imaginary identification typical to the mirror stage. In chapter XI readers read

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. He felt that he had known them all, those strange terrible figures that had passed across the stage of the world and made sin so marvellous and evil so full of subtlety. It seemed to him that in some mysterious way their lives had been his own. (113)

Affected by the novel Henry gave him, Dorian narcissistically identifies himself with the sinners in history. In my opinion, the desire of Dorian, the
“libidinal dynamism” as Lacan terms it, is conjured up by Sibyl and is killed by her as Sibyl ceases to function as the signifier for the lad. By re-writing her acting, Sibyl sheds the “textual apparel,” upon which Dorian’s libidinal investment is anchored—thus kills Dorian’s love. While the flow of Dorian’s desire is found choked in Sibyl’s bad acting that becomes so disappointing, it, under Henry’s conduction, is referred to the dual relationship Henry maintains with the hero, in which Dorian and the dandy remain “inseparable” as Basil remarks.  

29 Henry, like Basil, has “immersed” the lad as I point out. Through Henry’s manipulation, moreover, Dorian’s desire is transferred to the book that replaces/displaces the role (function) of Sibyl and supports Dorian’s libidinal investment. In the book Dorian finds reflections of his images: the hero, as the novel depicts, identifies himself with the fictional figures. Dorian takes pleasure in identifying with the other (what is other than himself), in playing upon the imaginary self-perception typical to the mirror stage. In Lacan’s theory, the child could mount the Oedipal only after the intervention of the father. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, I shall suggest, the role of this father that “interferes” and severs the mother-child bond is played by James Vane, the vengeful brother of Sibyl’s. While Henry, as the “bad father,” makes the child “premature”—yet refuses to castrate Dorian, Basil, on the other hand, has attempted to register for the lad the paternal metaphor—only to fail. As the artist’s desire to possess Dorian is thwarted, Basil, the Oedipal mother, reacts with an attempt as such to stamp the law upon the lad—to “castrate” him. Basil’s action, however, betrays his latent desire and is thus doomed.

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29 The relationship Dorian and Henry maintain bears the dimension of narcissistic love as Henry, through his interpretation/interpolation of the account of Sibyl’s death (text to the dandy), “found an exquisite pleasure in playing on the lad’s unconscious egotism” (80).
Opposed to the formers, therefore, it seems to me that James Vane poses as the one that really functions to impose upon the lad the Name-of-the-Father and enforces Dorian to transcend the mirror phase by breaking the dual relationship with the other—in which the hero lingers, enjoys and is unwilling to give up. James Vane, seeking to avenge his sister, intrudes into Dorian's world, which has terribly marred the lad's life—and even indirectly “reformed” him. As James’s attempt proves a failure, his influence on Dorian, nevertheless, is fatal. Readers see that from the very first time James appears, his relationship with Sibyl remains a close—if not mysterious or ambiguous—one:

In Sibyl’s room they parted. There was jealousy in the lad’s heart, and a fierce, murderous hatred of the stranger who, as it seemed to him, had come between them. Yet, when her arms were flung round his neck, and her fingers strayed through his hair, he softened, and kissed her with real affection. There were tears in his eyes as he went downstairs. (58)

Lacking parents to rely on (Sibyl’s mother is depicted as a shallow and snobbish woman, while the girl’s father “was a scoundrel,” as James called him (59)), James and Sibyl take care of each other as can be inferred from the novel. Thus, James maintains a highly intense relationship with Dorian from the very beginning, as, to James, Dorian is the threat, the one that competes for the affection of Sibyl with him—robbing Sibyl from him. Seeing how Dorian “seduces” Sibyl, James relates Dorian to his own father and finds in Sibyl the family romance repeated:

He had …a strong sense of danger of Sibyl’s position. This young dandy who was making love to her could mean her no good. He [Dorian] was a gentleman, and he hated him for that, hated him
through some curious race-instinct for which he could not account, and which for that reason was all the more dominant within him.

(55)

James, knowing how Dorian seduces Sibyl, sees the family myth rehearsed and warns Sibyl, “I want you to beware of him” (57). James’s trying to protect Sibyl reveals his acknowledgement of the paternal rule and foreshadows his assuming the role of the father. “If he ever does you any wrong, I shall kill him” (57). In the stereotyped threat of James’s resonates the convention, the patriarchal order (in which the father is the judge and the arbiter). James becomes the substitutional father. “I want to be better. I am going to be better” (161). As readers see, James’s threat to Dorian has altered the hero. It has separated him from the imaginary other he misrecognizes as his self—namely the sinners the book delineates, the images with which Dorian identifies (As Dorian relates himself to the sinner throughout history it is, literally, a “sordid” identification), and forced him to conform with the Law, which Dorian once casts aside and which James patronizes. James, as quoted above, threatens to kill Dorian—only ends up being accidentally killed. However, James’s power over Dorian grows even stronger after his death. While James fails to be the father that “put the lad right” as he lives, he nevertheless quickens Dorian’s resolution in self-reformation after he is dead. Thus, it can be argued that James functions as the father only after he dies. Or rather, it would be more accurate to suggest that it is the influence of the dead characters—James and Basil—that changes Dorian. Both characters seek to impose on the lad the paternal metaphor while they are alive, and both fail. However, as the characters die, they together become the dead father as what Freud formulates and Lacan re-asserts. They function as the “totem” that
introduces “taboo” to the lad and “castrate” him. Through this “castration” Dorian, it can be argued, is introduced into the symbolic phase as he begins to acknowledge the Name-of-the-Father and to internalize it. As a social being Dorian complies with the convention and attempts to reform himself (in ways acceptable to the society: “fitting” to the norms). Observing the norms, Dorian begins his good action with sparing an innocent girl. The hero insists that “I know I was right in acting as I did” (161). However, Dorian loses his faith as he faces the mirror portrait and finds that his reformation turns out unacknowledged. Aiming to “kill the past,” “the monstrous soul-life,” Dorian tries to destroy the picture (169). The attempt, nevertheless, proves destructive to the hero. Dorian fails to see that in annihilating the picture, what he once claims his “diary”—writing of the self, it is actually part of himself that he seeks to demolish (a label from which “there is no escape,” an indispensable part of the self written by him). By denying the picture, Dorian consequently denies himself. In the following chapter I shall offer a more thorough discussion of it.
Chapter Four

Miscognition and the Subjected Subject

The picture of Dorian Gray, from which the book gets its name, is no doubt one of the most important elements of the novel. As the supreme beauty manifested in it catapults the characters into meditation on and quest for the beautiful, the magical picture, in my opinion, stands as the central core of the novel, around which the story is structured. It is obvious that the characters are invariably affected/appropriated by the influence the picture causes, among whom Dorian is definitely the best example. Indeed, it is owing to the portrait that Dorian is justified as the protagonist, while his fate, too, is intricately connected to it—and even determined by the picture. To Dorian, the picture is “the most magical of mirrors,” through which the hero comes to know himself, obtains a preliminary conception of his self-image, and tries to modulate it afterwards. This is made explicit at the beginning of the novel. When Dorian for the first time sees his image that the painter so delicately wrought, the hero reacts with astonishment:

When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. …The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. (25)

The effect the portrait produces is curious and significant. It is from the image reflected in the painting, the magical mirror, that Dorian, not without astonishment, recognizes the total form of himself for the very first time. Through the image produced in the mirror the hero perceives himself as a totality and, through the image he assumes, the hero hence procure an identity.
What takes place here, it is clear, seems to be a demonstrative realization of Lacan’s theory, the mirror stage. The mirror stage, according to Lacan, is to be understood “as an identification”; that is, “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image.” Observing how the child reacts to his/her mirror image, Lacan explains that

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child…

would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form… This form would have to be called the Ideal-I, …[it] situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, …which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (le devenir) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality. (2)

The mirror image has registered for Dorian his primordial perception of the self-image. The picture unveils for Dorian his extraordinary beauty, from which Dorian not only sees his beauty, his physical comeliness that initiates his narcissistic self-perception (the “libidinal dynamism” disclosed in the child’s absorption of the specular image as Lacan prescribes), but also learns the fact that he is extraordinary. He is different from others; he is superior to them. Enlightened by the portrait, the lad grows aware of his uniqueness. The distinction between self and other is now revealed to him. The lad comes to obtain his individuality. The painting, therefore, is the source, the foundation of Dorian’s self-recognition. “[T]here had been things in his boyhood that he had not understood. He understood them now” (21). Apparently the mirror effect is to the hero what the fruit of the tree of knowledge is to Adam and Eve, for
whose work the eyes of the heroes, once secured in their naivety, are open. The wonder the picture has done and the apprehension and delight that fills Dorian as he sees his image reflected in the portrait can thus be understood. For, as Lacan asserts, the mirror image “would seem to be the threshold of the visible world” (3).

Mirror effect as such can still be found in other factors that influence Dorian’s growth. To be specific, Dorian’s identity, as repeated before, is constructed by both the mirror portrait of Basil’s and the rhetoric of Lord Henry: together Basil’s painting and Henry’s words confirm Dorian of his identity (or rather, endowing the lad with it). “You are just like that” (28). “You are quite perfect. Pray, don’t change” (159). All these affirmations as well as the reflection seen in the picture have been inscribed in Dorian, constructing his self-image for him. Embodied through Basil’s painting and approved by Henry’s panegyrics, the picture, registering the youth and beauty of Dorian as the characters believe, “organizes the disparate perception of his [Dorian’s] body into an apparently self-contained whole and reorients Dorian in relation to his own identity and to his social context” (Cohen, 808). From the image

30 Like how the forbidden fruit functions in Bible, in The Picture of Dorian Gray it is through the effect the mirror engenders that the hero comes to know himself—and thus begins to recognize the outer world differently. “Life suddenly became fiery-colored to him [Dorian]. It seemed to him that he had been walking in fire. Why had he not known it?” (21). However, like the influence the forbidden fruit wields on Adam and Eve, the “knowledge” that the mirror effect teaches the hero also proves fatal. As the mirror image generates Dorian’s sense of the self—and of the world, permitting Dorian to perceive himself as a “structured entity” (as what one typically anticipates in the mirror image); the consciousness/conscience it hence produces lives “but to give rebellion its fascination, and disobedience its charm” (146); Both sins Adam (Eve) and Dorian commit, as Wilde comments, are “sins of disobedience.” Both heroes (and heroine) in the quest of the self challenge the indefinable taboo, the Name-of-the-Father, and are hence punished.

31 The argument is affirmed in “Writing Gone Wilde” by Ed Cohen. “Although Lord Henry speaks only of the body’s sensual possibilities, Dorian uses these words to formulate a new self-image. …By defining Dorian’s formerly inchoate feelings and sensations, Lord Henry’s language creates a new reality for Dorian…, and Basil’s canvas records Dorian’s changing self-image—but only as expressed through Basil’s desire” (808).
reflected Dorian receives his identity; he recognizes himself as a complete whole, a fully-grown entity that is independent and isolated as well. His self is now separated from others. In this sense, therefore, it is possible to argue that Dorian’s “sensual adventures” are in fact his reactions to the discovery such as the mirror illuminates. “I have searched for pleasure” (151). What Dorian seeks for, what the hero desires as Dorian himself tells us, is the “jouissance” that is seemingly promised in these journeys, in which Dorian is to engage himself (and, as destined, is lost). In these sensational explorations the lad, in my opinion, takes delight in trying his ability of causing such changes, through which he sees how he may bring about changes to the mirror painting. Such a move may be understood as analogous to the child’s experience in trying exercising his/her limbs before the mirror, experiencing “in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates” as Lacan expounds (1).

“To define is to limit” (150). The paradox Lord Henry offers may perfectly be applied to elucidate the mirror phase phenomenon. As Lacan points out, the maturation of the power that the subject anticipates in the mirage is only given as “Gestalt.” The reflected image prescribes for the subject the maturation that is coming-into-being, integrates the fragmental body, and grants the subject with an identity. Such a move, as it “defines” the subject, has, however, also assigned for the subject a fixed role that he/she is to play: it designates the growth of the subject—it “limits.” The subject’s growth hence becomes the repetition of what is “always already known.”

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufacture for the
subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the
succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented
body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic…. (4)

In Dorian’s case, the mirror portrait constitutes him, situates him as an organized entity in the symbolic matrix. Meanwhile, however, the picture, in this act of indicating the realization-to-be of the subject’s maturity, also dictates the hero’s growth: the picture has arrested his growth. In chapter VII the lad finds out for the first time that the picture has altered. Not until Dorian sees the changed picture does he realize what he has done. “It made him conscious how unjust, how cruel, he has been to Sibyl Vane” (76). The mirror portrait becomes thus the indispensable agent, only through which can Dorian recognize himself. To Dorian, the painting not only mirrors the changes manifested in him but, as the hero investigates it, seems to offer prognosis of his growth; it prefigures the possible way of evolution to Dorian—which then to Dorian becomes the way, the one and only possibility that is always already known. In the picture Dorian, without knowing it, anticipates his “maturity” and toward which—the “real” Dorian as Henry believes, the explorer of sensation as shaped by Henry and secretly wanted by Basil—the lad grows. What is presented in the picture is inaugurated as the truth that has to be realized. “You have explained me to myself” (82). As Dorian once assures Henry, the picture Dorian perceives—or what he “deciphers” since the recognition the painting seems to afford the lad is, in fact, converted from a language that is beyond the verbal—also defines the hero for himself: hence introduces limits to him. Throughout the novel it seems Dorian has never seen that while he “writes” the painting with his “sins and passions,” the picture, itself being Gestalt, has on the other hand “writes back”
in return. The picture, with its “beautiful marred face and its cruel smile,” is “watching” him (73-74). Under the gaze of the speechless overseer Dorian’s growth is arrested. As the hero mocks “the misshapen body and the failing limbs” in the picture that bears his burden (99), he nevertheless is quite unconscious of the fact that, in his act of assuming the mirror image and his narcissistic absorption of the beauty reflected, Dorian is, like what Lacan observes, “objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other” (2). The picture has indeed become “a guide to him [Dorian] through life;” it counterfeits Dorian’s growth, to which the lad subordinates himself (76). At the end of the novel readers see that the hero resolves to reform himself by beginning his “good deeds,” and after that he jubilantly heads for the portrait’s sign of approval. However, to his surprise,

He could see no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite. The thing was still loathsome—more loathsome, if possible, than before…Then he trembled. Had it been merely vanity that had made him do his one good deed? Or the desire for a new sensation, as Lord Henry had hinted, with his mocking laugh? Or that passion to act a part that sometimes makes us do things finer than we are ourselves? Or, perhaps, all these? (168)

It is through the picture that Dorian is constructed as a subject—and it is to the picture that Dorian is to lose himself. The picture, in it silence and its perfect stillness, encroaches and replaces/effaces the hero’s autonomy as a subject, and it seems that Dorian is never aware of it. Identifying with the mirror image, Dorian, however, does not see the fact that he, as I mentioned, is actually identifying with the “other”—what is other than himself. Thus, as the
hero finds his “good acts” fail to move the mirror painting, that his resolution
to be good remains unacknowledged by the portrait that “is such a part of his
life” as he repeats (110), Dorian consequently loses faith in the reformation of
the self he had once insisted: he even begins to doubt himself (the self he
comes to know). At last the hero ponders the liability of the portrait; he
questions the “truthfulness” of the mirror painting. However, Dorian can never
really convince himself of the fact that the portrait he claims “a part of my self”
(27), the mirage that he identifies with is, from the very beginning, an “other.”
It is an artifact, a deflected representation. It “is an unjust mirror” (169). I
should suggest that Dorian’s endless suspicion, his fear that the picture might
be stolen anytime, can actually be treated as a “symptom” which betrays and
foreshadows the fact that unconsciously Dorian’s autonomy is gradually
undermined and replaced by the picture.

I have mentioned that obviously Dorian’s self-consciousness is the
product of the picture. The hero’s perception of the self as a totality, anchored
by the mirror reflection, is manipulated by the magic painting. It is based on the
mirage that Dorian learns his own image while constructing it as what it is—or
what it shall be. Yet is it really a self-knowledge that Dorian gains from the
portrait? Or, to be more specific, is it really his self the lad sees and comes to
know? Being the source of Dorian’s self-recognition, the picture, however, is
the painter’s creation. The magic mirror of Dorian’s is at first place an artifact,
a representation. It is the projection of the hero that Basil knows. The painting
is Basil’s work, in which the painter’s perception of Dorian is aesthetically
captured and embodied. As Basil’s desire of possessing the lad is frustrated and
his words discredited, Basil nevertheless gets access to Dorian through ways
other than language. While the painter’s words fail him, Basil via his painting
still succeeds in conveying himself, articulating his desire and even realizing it. By making the picture of Dorian Gray, Basil creates a new/anew Dorian that solely belongs to him, from which the painter finds vicarious satisfaction. At the end of chapter II, when Dorian deserts Basil and leaves with Henry, Basil comforts himself by sticking to his masterpiece, *his* Dorian that remains “true” to him. “I shall stay with the real Dorian” (28, my italics). To Basil, the portrait, rather than the sitter, is the “real” thing, since to which Basil is free to dedicate all his passion.

By painting the picture Basil fulfills his desire to have Dorian exclusively his own. He forges the image of Dorian as what he wishes. In chapter II, as Henry charms the lad out of himself with his “subtle, poisonous theories,” Basil meanwhile captures the image of Dorian as what he secretly desires. As Cohen points out,

> As Lord Henry’s words provide Dorian with new vistas on the moral prejudices of their era, his “low musical voice” seduces the young man, who becomes transfigured: “…a look came into the lad’s face …never seen there before.” Simultaneously, Basil inscribes this “look”—the object of both his artistic and erotic gaze—onto the canvas, thus doubly imbuing his aesthetic image with the representations of male homoerotic desire. (808)

Essentially the picture of Dorian Gray is itself a revelation/reflection of Basil’s desire. It represents the aesthetic craving of the painter as well as his homoerotic imagination—or it is Basil’s repressed desire artistically expressed and embodied. The beauty manifested in the painting, the magic mirror, arrests the Dorian that Basil secretly longs for. It has “frozen Dorian as that
which …mirrors and supports his [Basil’s] desire” (197).32

“Dorian’s identification with the painted image constitutes a misrecognition as much as a recognition, leading him to confuse an overdetermined set of representations with the ‘truth’ of his experience” (808). So Cohen with his insight points out. In Lacan’s concept, this recognition of the self, obtained from the mirror image, is doomed a miscognition, for the image is essentially and inevitably what is other than the subject. And, in Dorian’s case here, the perception of the self is destined fallible, for Dorian’s identity, as what I have repeated, is “the product of the images that Basil and Lord Harry dialectically provide for him” as Cohen elucidates (808, my italics). What Dorian identifies with is the images dialectically manipulated by his friends. To be exact, the lad is produced by the “texts” that his friends provide.

As I have tried to explain, the hero’s sense of the self is the product of the mirage subjectively conjugated by Dorian’s friends. Vicki Mahaffey claims that Basil, “like Dr. Frankenstein, produced Dorian,” and this is done through the media of painting, the magic picture Basil produces (198). The painter, as he is overwhelmed by Dorian’s beauty, something “higher than Genius” as it “needs no explanation,” has simultaneously manipulated Dorian’s growth with his painting, something that is open to explanation/interpretation (23). In the discussion taken place in chapter IX readers see that both Basil and Dorian claim that they have seen “something” in the picture, yet what they actually are

32 “This invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams, which is fond of representing castration by a doubling or a multiplication of a genital symbol” (Pelican Freud Library, vol.14, 356-57). Following the assertion, then, it can be argued that Basil’ s picture of Dorian is a doubling, a preservation against castration. Through providing this double Basil defers the castration process that the lad must undergo in order to enter the symbolic world and become a social being (or, a “man”). Thus Basil with the aid of the picture has practiced on Dorian the “im-mere-sion” as Mahaffey termed, locking the child “in the cordoned-off room of the mother’ s unconscious” (190).
referring to are certainly—and almost inevitably—different things. The enigmatic painting is to Dorian the magic mirror and to Henry the finest work of modern art, while it is to Basil his secret longing embodied. The picture as a text appropriates Dorian, and the picture, as a text, is consequently open to reading/writing, thus it multiplies itself. In chapter XII when Dorian is about to reveal his secret, he tells Basil that “I keep a diary of my life from day to day” (120). Seeing how he can change the image in the picture—the magic mirror, Dorian claims that he himself is the one that “writes” his own image. Dorian conceives the changes of the mirror image as his own doing, that is, his self-creating/renewing/modeling. Thus Dorian’s referring to the picture as a diary/self-writing at once manifests his autonomy: he is now “in” the writing competition with Basil, once the creator of his image. The metaphor Dorian employed hence undermines Basil’s definition of the picture and assigns to it a new role. It is through the speakers’ use of tropes, the way how they interpret the text, that meaning, or rather, meanings, could be adhered to the text: along with the birth of new interpretation the meaning hence vouchsafed is thus constantly and metabolically renewed. The old meaning is replaced while the new one is established, replacing its ancestor—only to be overthrown again (as the concept of “a bî me” Derrida illuminates).

Thus the picture, as each interpretation endows it with different meaning, becomes a floating signifier. It “belongs to everybody” (Theory of the Text, 37). Text emerges from the written (in this case, the painted) and the readers (the audience that endeavor to interpret the text—or rather, invent meaning for it.), it works tirelessly to locate meaning only to subvert it. The portrait of Dorian Gray, then, is not only the magic mirror, but also a canvas upon which Basil and Dorian competes writing.
It therefore is not surprising to see why the picture of Dorian is deformed as the story goes. Both Basil and Dorian are stunned when they find the picture has altered, yet it should be comprehensible if one takes this in terms of writing /reading relation as Barthes suggests. The changes on the canvas are derived from the characters’ restless attempt to define and redefine the painted thing on the wall. Each interpretation given to the picture has fissured its ancestor, the meaning previously secured, and is destined to be undermined, detracted by the definition that succeeds.\footnote{Exactly Barthes’ concept of “signifiance.” To analogize it psychoanalytically, it is the endless drama in which the “son” replaces the father, reigns as the paternal totem presiding, and waits to be overruled by his successor, to become a part, a member of the totem as the cycle runs.} The layers of meaning, erased yet not eliminated (leaving traces as the concept of “under erasure” that Derrida expounds), to the characters, are degenerated into “some foul parody, some infamous, ignoble satire” (121). The changes revealed on the picture simply lay bare the traces left. The text, hence, is Proteus-like in the essence. What is written is no longer recognizable as its exactitude is confused by its successive version as Barthes assures us. The picture, therefore, is altered: for it is burst with meanings.

Obviously the issue of creation, or the issue of writing and reading, to put it another way, forms one of the central cores of the novel. As demonstrated in the competition between Basil and Dorian, what readers see is a writing struggle, a “quarrel with words” as Henry puts it (149). “All influence is immoral,” so Henry concludes (19). However, as the dandy contradicts his words and affects/infects Dorian, the other characters, it seems to me, are also engaging in such “influence games,” in which the characters take pleasure in writing their “truths.” “The artist is the creator of beautiful things. / To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim.” As celebrated in the preface, obviously in
The Picture of Dorian Gray, in my opinion, each character (the main characters, at least) attempts to be “the artist” or the creator—only that they become so, not so much by erasing their selves, but through manifesting themselves instead. Appealing to different media (Basil paints and Sibyl acts, while Dorian and Henry would label themselves the artists of life), each character aims at acting out his/her truth, influencing and representing his/her objects—writing a new/anew object as explained above. Yet in writing as such, as I elucidated, what the characters attempt to arrest is infinitely replaced in the “signifiance” work, the endless representation, and is lost. The artists too, without knowing it, are replaced by the texts they produce. While Dorian is “materialized” by the mirror representation (without the image reflected the hero can’t exist—just as what the novel’s ending suggests), Henry, the wizard of words, is also lost in the labyrinth of language. His words become him—replace him, without which there would be no Lord Henry.  

Even Basil, too, is unaware just how his painting, as the supplement of his language, “works him and undoes him” (Theory of the Text, 38). “My ideal, …there was nothing evil in it, nothing shameful” (122). Encountering the altered picture for the first time Basil excuses himself and disclaims his responsibility, his involving/investing (libidinally) in the dilution of the picture. The artist, being the product of language (as inescapably everyone of us is), fails to see that the picture is an “unjust mirror.” The portrait is simply not what Basil knows it; it is other than what Basil perceives from the very beginning.

34 “He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it” (2231. Orwell, George. “Shooting an Elephant.” 1936. The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Ed. M. H. Abrams. Vol. 2. New York: Norton, 1993.). The comment that Orwell made, I think, may exactly explain the situation Lord Henry faces here. The mask he wears, the paradoxical speech and the numerous theories Henry expounds—his signifier—becomes himself; while the “real” Henry, the “signified” is replaced and is lost.
Basil’s perception of the picture, essentially also a mirror stage, constitutes for him miscognition as well. Taking the textual nature of the mirage Basil constructs into consideration as I have argued, the picture is an unjust mirror as it is dialectically produced by the artist. It is a representation of the hero that is embodied through Basil’s painting, in which the “text” is engendered: whose meaning can hardly be anchored. In chapter IX Basil asserts that art should be “unconscious, ideal, and remote” (90). However, as the picture of Dorian Gray violates all these aesthetic rules Basil defines/dictates, it turns out to be the best work of the artist for his life. The portrait proves “the finest portrait of modern times” (25). Thus Basil as the creator of the portrait is twice betrayed. As the picture betrays Basil’s homoerotic desire presumably kept in the closet (a predictable result since it is made a substitutional love object by design), it, too, betrays the painter’s artistic ideal. The artist’s work, the written or painted thing that is supposedly “a weapon against time, oblivion and the trickery of speech,” has gone out of his control (*Theory of the Text*, 32). Or, has Basil ever “mastered” his production as he jubilantly presumed? It is rather the picture that defines the painter. Basil’s identity as an artist is done—and undone—by the text he provides.

“You are made to be worshipped,” so the artist assures Dorian (90). Basil seeks to immortalize the lad he loves; he aims to capture and to freeze Dorian’s beauty with his painting—but only succeeds in “mummifying” the lad. While the picture loses the beauty it should have preserved as Basil presumed, leaving only “misshapen body and failing limbs” (99), the sitter too deserts the spotless purity that was once his. *The Dorian* that Basil knows is spoiled by the picture, or, is lost in this endless process of productivity work, the “significance” chain that runs like ooroboro. Basil’s elixir proves poisonous and Dorian is thus
“degraded”: he is made a toy, a fetish in this game as he loses control over his image (hence launched in the fragment anxiety). “I killed him. You don’t know what he had made me suffer. Whatever my life is, he had more to do with the making and marring of it than poor Harry has had” (131). The lad’s anger showers on the creator of his image. However, as what Barthes tells us, such a result is “historically impossible” for the painter to foresee. Basil, the supposed creator, can simply not foretell how the text he provides proliferates itself—and how it bursts with meanings. At the end of the novel the picture restores its splendor while Dorian dies “withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage” (170). The knife Dorian seizes is by no means accidentally found stabbed in his heart as what he tries to kill is in fact exactly the text he produces, which is, indeed, the real “part of himself.” “Once it [the picture] had given him pleasure to watch it changing and growing old. Of late he had felt no such pleasure” (169). Dorian’s death thus is comprehensible as it offers him the only exit to disengage himself from the endless signifiance chain, the “jouissance” that he was once so fond of, is now found empty—or rather, cloyed.
Conclusion

“Nothing is ever quite true” (64).

In the first chapter, when Henry suggests to meet the lad that has so drastically changed Basil’s art and his life, the artist, out of unaccountable fear, rejects by offering the following explanation:

“Harry,” he said, “Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art. You might see nothing in him. I see everything in him. He is never more present in my work than when no image of his is there. He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and subtleties of certain colors. That is all.” (15)

To Basil, the hero is “the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal” (89). By making the picture of Dorian Gray, Basil stands as the creator of Dorian’s physical image, the “mother” of Dorian, as Mahaffey suggests. The artist jubilantly presumes that he has captured the consummate beauty he conceives. Only when he faces the hideously deformed portrait can Basil realize how wrong he is. While Dorian, in assuming the mirror image, misrecognizes and identifies himself with an “other,” Basil, on the other hand, lingers in his recognition/miscognition of the lad—what doomed to be other than the hero per se. Thus, the recognition of the hero Basil assumes can always and only be miscognition.

The picture Basil creates to signify and to represent Dorian, as the hero invests it with different interpretations, becomes, in this signification/production
of meanings, a text, a text that is open to endless readings and writings: through which various visages are adhered to it. Thus, as the creator of both the picture and the lad, Basil loses control over both. Or rather, has he ever had control over either? “The signifier belongs to everybody,” so Barthes tells us (37).

Like Narcissus finds his beauty through the reflection in the pond, only via the mirror reflection can one come to recognize himself/herself. Through the mirror stage one comes to gain a sense of the self: the mirror phase situates one as a subject. One’s knowledge of the self, as Lemaire points out, “will be sought in the images of others with whom he will identify” (73). As exemplified in the novel, Dorian identifies with the mirror painting Basil provides. The image Basil’s canvas records, nevertheless, remains one that is represented through the painter’s desire. Employing the hero as a signifier, Basil, in painting the portrait, has transferred his passion and inscribed it unto the canvas. In duplicating Dorian’s image and charging it with new meanings as such, the artist, by producing the portrait, has produced a “text.” With this text Dorian is to identify himself, and via this text Dorian is to compete writing with Basil by investing it with definitions. As the representation of the hero, however, the picture becomes the “signifier” of Dorian, by which the “real” Dorian is replaced. The reflected image in the picture becomes the “real Dorian” that Basil would rather stay with.

In fact, mirror effects as such penetrate the novel. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, each character serves to mirror the others. While Henry’s habitual talk and Basil’s constant silence are symptoms manifesting the same “immersion” desire, James’ sully and stern savageness, the features of masculinity and prowess as extolled in the Iliad, bears the counter part to Dorian’s grace “that is Greek” (14). It is through the self-image reflected in
others that each character integrates himself/herself; it is with those representations—essentially the “others”—that one identifies and grows (hence the identification is in fact “miscognition” as Lacan asserts). Conditioned by these images others write for one—“texts”—the subject enters the symbolic matrix: he/she becomes a component, a signifier in it, hence obtains his/her existence as an independent entity (in contrast to the identity as a “lack” in the infancy). And, acquiring the rule of signifier exchange in the symbolic, one conjugates his/her own self-image—which, the subject finds, remains a text that is subject to writing and reading of others. In the novel Dorian recognizes himself through the portrait, his image represented by Basil, and to it Dorian is to give different definitions, hence re-writing it. As a text, the picture dictates the hero and replaces him, and by which its creator is also defined. Basil’s identity as an artist is done—and undone—by it.

In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde celebrates that “[t]he artist is the creator of beautiful things. / To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim.” The creed Wilde advocates, however, is only left to be challenged and subverted repeatedly by himself as well as his characters. In a letter to an admirer, Wilde betrays his secret and admits that the novel “contains much of me in it” and “Basil Hallward is what I think I am;” Basil, the assigned mouthpiece of the author, would on the other hand insist that “[e]very portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself”—a statement so radically contradicts the aestheticism the preface prescribes (10). “[T]he literal exactitude of the written, defined by the conformity of its successive versions to its original version, is metonymically confused with its
semantic exactitude” (Theory of the Text, 33). As Barthes expounds, it is through such incessant interpreting work/writing that the text is vouchsafed with definition: its possibility of being read and written unfolds. And it is by flowing of meanings/significance as such, that the author of the novel is “framed.”

Indeed, in The Picture of Dorian Gray, the notion of the text Barthes elucidates is attested, in so far as the text “functions as a transgressive activity which disperses the author as the center, limit, and guarantor of truth…. Instead, it produces a performative writing, which fissures the sign and ‘ceaselessly posits meaning endlessly to evaporate it’ ” (31). As allegorized by the picture in the novel, the moment when the text is presented by its author, it begins to exist and to work as an independent entity—to which its creator, instead of being the master, is to subject himself (herself). Or, rather than an autonomous and an self-sufficient entity, the text is to be merged in the endless chain of signification, in which its meaning is incessantly relayed and replaced. It is tirelessly renewed in this metabolic circulation of meaning, in which what it serves to signify is ceaselessly discarded. Readers may remember Henry’s mock of Basil at the beginning of the novel: “You do anything in the world to gain a reputation. As soon as you have one, you seem to want to throw it away” (8). This, I think, holds equally true to the restless molding of the self-image, the endless quest for identity of Dorian in The Picture of Dorian Gray. Seeing the essential “otherness” of his mirror image, Dorian seeks to get rid of the portrait,

35 Written to justify his motif and attitude toward writing/reading The Picture of Dorian Gray, the preface Wilde gives is to contradict his own work from time to time. It is the interpretation of the author’s intention/inventing of meanings for the book that Wilde, by offering this preface, aims to mute—only to further more provoke instead, and it is owing to this endless production of meaning that Wilde is accused guilty (for writing this “poisonous book”) and is ruined.
which he once claimed “his diary.” Yet “from a label there is no escape” (149). The “diary” painting Dorian “writes” and makes deformed, the text Dorian produces, like Frankenstein’s monster, breaks loose from its creator’s dominance and dogs the lad through his life. Death, perhaps, is the only way for the subject to reunite with his/her divided self, as what Lacan suggests. It is the only way to disengage the subject from the ecstasy—“textasy”—that he (she) once enjoyed and is now by which exhausted.
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