The Picture of Dorian Gray as a Proto-Modernist Text

Antonio Spaccapietra

This paper discusses Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a proto-modernist text for the innovative changes it brings to the novel form in the 1890s. Modernism’s disavowal of literary history and striving for originality has led scholarship to treat modernism as a movement somewhat segregated from its literary past. This paper demonstrates how modernism can be seen to begin before the twentieth century (the conventional understanding of the start of modernism). The article argues that Wilde fuses the formal features of realism and aestheticism, a new formula that is significant to the development of modernism. This fusion of realism and aestheticism manifests itself in two ways. The first is how Wilde stylises reality, whilst the second concerns how Wilde mixes the messages of aestheticism with the didactic properties of realism. This is a new reading of the novel’s seemingly ‘undidactic’ approach to its treatment of immorality and Wilde’s own statement that ‘there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book’ (Wilde and Bristow, 2008, p. 3). Many critics read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a deviation from the realism of the nineteenth century for its unwillingness to teach a lesson, social, spiritual or otherwise; however, the space of the novel becomes a place from which to lecture on Wilde’s own epicurean and artistic philosophies. The result is that a new formula of the novel is born. To demonstrate the influence of Wilde’s techniques on modernism, the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov are read alongside *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

**Keywords:** modernism, aestheticism, proto-modernism, Wilde, didacticism.

*Antonio Spaccapietra:* Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Surrey. Email: as01344@surrey.ac.uk

Copyright © 2017 Antonio Spaccapietra; licensee SURJ. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence.

ISSN: 2058-5551 (Online)
A style of novel has arisen … [which] present[s] to the reader, instead of the splendid scenes of an imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him (Scott, 1815).

When Walter Scott comments on the development of the novel in his review of Jane Austen’s *Emma*, he has a historical tradition in mind that saw the art-form first begin as a type of satire, most notably in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (Swift and Womersley, 2012). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the novel began to move away from the comical portrayal of contemporary life. In his promotion of realism, Walter Scott supposes that the most realistic novels are similar to drama. Scott believes that realism is ‘as essential to the labour of the novelist as to that of the dramatist’ (1825, p. 7). The author and critic draws a corollary between the struggles present in melodrama, the tragedy of life, the comedy of life, and the realism he thinks necessary in the novel. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde begins to invert the tradition of realism that was beginning to consolidate at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Wilde takes a typically dramatic situation — a poverty-stricken actress in distress — and adds an embellishing aesthetic perspective. This essay argues that Wilde fuses the formal features of realism and aestheticism, a new formula that is significant to the development of modernism. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is here discussed as a proto-modernist text. By ‘proto-modernist’ I adopt the traditional understanding that modernism begins in the twentieth century.

Wilde’s first change to the novel form is that he marries together both an objective realism and a subjective pursuit of pleasure. One may treat excessive pleasure and realism as two contrasting terms because the senses can often blur human perception of reality. From a historical perspective, when Scott (1825) comments on realism, he has before him an enlightenment tradition that rejects the senses and favours impartial scientific proof. Two formal features of realism are also class struggle and the depiction of poverty, two qualities in direct opposition to the extravagance of aestheticism. Whilst it would be a mistake to call *The Picture of Dorian Gray* a realist novel, vivid realist scenes do emerge at different times. Waldrep comments that ‘in order to discuss Wilde’s novel one must come to terms with the ways that it functions within the confines of a realism’ (1996, p. 1). The ‘confines’ of this realism are indeed marked out by the character of Sibyl Vane, an actress whose family experiences extreme hardship. One begins to learn of this hardship when Sibyl’s mother says: ‘Mr. Isaacs had advanced us fifty pounds to pay off our debts and to get a proper outfit for James. You must not forget that Sybil. Fifty pounds is a lot of money’ (Wilde and Bristow, 2008, p. 53). This passage is spoken very much in the vein of realism, such as one might find in a Dickens novel. Sybil’s brother, who goes to Australia in search of fortune, is also an archetype of the
realist genre. These features of realism, however, are underpinned by a stimulation of visual pleasure through emphatic descriptions where ‘Wilde’s art [becomes] a matter of debate . . ., a combination of aestheticism and realism’ (Taghizadeh and Jeihouni, 2014, p. 1145). The distance from realism is further increased by adding imaginary elements such as the portrait which mimics the status of Dorian’s soul.

This fusion of aestheticism and realism was significant to the development of modernism. Peter Gay (2007) identifies how the rebellion of turn-of-the-century aesthetes such as Wilde and Baudelaire parallels modernists’ rebellion against literary tradition. Wilde’s unconventional combination of extravagant aestheticism and misery-depicting realism in The Picture of Dorian Gray thus became key to the development of the modernist novel that combined these two qualities, both of which are prominent features of modernism. Indeed, Wilde stylises reality by portraying a rosy, luxurious lifestyle, but never forgets the tragedy of real life with the ending that culminates in death. Castle comments that for the modernists, ‘the stylisation of reality comes to serve the aim of simulating the real’ (2015, p. 22). Wilde’s promotion of ‘beauty’ in the novel form became the ‘style’ that modernists such as Scott F. Fitzgerald used to ‘simulate the real’.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a proto-modernist text because it introduces a technique of stylisation used by later modernist writers. Like Wilde, Fitzgerald presents a realism, such as the unpleasant struggles of a marriage, back-lit by beauty. In the ‘New York Review of Books’ one critic states that Fitzgerald’s prose “has the tough delicacy of a garnet” (Fitzgerald and Leithauser, 2000, p. 3). This is a sharp analogy that makes one understand that Fitzgerald’s writing is sturdy and real, but also glittering and beautiful, like a garnet or gem. This blend is most apparent in his novel The Beautiful and Damned (2004). Here, Fitzgerald tells the story of a complicated marriage, of war and the struggle for money, alongside ‘stylistic moments’. The most salient of these is the chapter ‘A Flash-back In Paradise’, where the narrative suddenly transforms into a sensuous play-script:

*Beauty, who was born anew every hundred years, sat in a sort of outdoor waiting room through which blew gusts of white wind and occasionally a breathless hurried star. The stars winked at her intimately as they went by and the winds made a soft incessant flurry in her hair. She was incomprehensible, for in her, soul and spirit were one — the beauty of her body was the essence of her soul. She was that unity sought for by philosophers through many centuries. In this outdoor waiting room of winds and stars she had been sitting for a hundred years, at peace in the contemplation of herself.*
It became known to her, at length, that she was to be born again. Sighing, she began a long conversation with a voice that was in the white wind, a conversation that took many hours and of which I can give only a fragment here.

BEAUTY: (Her lips scarcely stirring, her eyes turned, as always, inward upon herself) Whither shall I journey now?

THE VOICE: To a new country — a land you have never seen before.

BEAUTY: (Petulantly) I loathe breaking into these new civilizations. How long a stay this time?

THE VOICE: Fifteen years.

BEAUTY: And what's the name of the place?

THE VOICE: It is the most opulent, most gorgeous land on Earth — a land whose wisest are but little wiser than its dullest; a land where the rulers have minds like little children and the law-givers believe in Santa Claus; where ugly women control strong men.

BEAUTY: (In astonishment) What?

THE VOICE: (Very much depressed) Yes, it is truly a melancholy spectacle. Women with receding chins and shapeless noses go about in broad daylight saying ‘Do this!’ and ‘Do that!’ and all the men, even those of great wealth, obey implicitly their women to whom they refer sonorously either as ‘Mrs So-and-so’ or as ‘the wife.’

BEAUTY: But this can't be true! I can understand, of course, their obedience to women of charm — but to fat women? to bony women? to women with scrawny cheeks?

THE VOICE: Even so.

BEAUTY: What of me? What chance shall I have?

THE VOICE: It will be ‘harder going,’ if I may borrow a phrase.

BEAUTY: (After a dissatisfied pause) Why not the old lands, the land of grapes and soft-tongued men or the land of ships and seas?

THE VOICE: It's expected that they'll be very busy shortly.

BEAUTY: Oh!

THE VOICE: Your life on earth will be, as always, the interval between two significant glances in a mundane mirror.
BEAUTY: What will I be? Tell me?

THE VOICE: At first it was thought that you would go this time as an actress in the motion pictures but, after all, it's not advisable. You will be disguised during your fifteen years as what is called a 'susciety gurl.'

BEAUTY: What's that?

(There is a new sound in the wind which must for our purposes be interpreted as THE VOICE scratching its head.)

THE VOICE: (At length) It's a sort of bogus aristocrat.

BEAUTY: Bogus? What is bogus?

THE VOICE: That, too, you will discover in this land. You will find much that is bogus. Also, you will do much that is bogus.

BEAUTY: (Placidly) It all sounds so vulgar.

THE VOICE: Not half as vulgar as it is. You will be known during your fifteen years as a ragtime kid, a flapper, a jazz-baby, and a baby vamp. You will dance new dances neither more nor less gracefully than you danced the old ones.

BEAUTY: (In a whisper) Will I be paid?

THE VOICE: Yes, as usual — in love.

BEAUTY: (With a faint laugh which disturbs only momentarily the immobility of her lips) And will I like being called a jazz-baby?

THE VOICE: (Soberly) You will love it....

(The dialogue ends here, with BEAUTY still sitting quietly, the stars pausing in an ecstasy of appreciation, the wind, white and gusty, blowing through her hair...)


Fitzgerald not only stylises reality, he also uses Wilde’s characteristic turns of phrase. Of note in the passage above is Fitzgerald’s inversion of body and soul, ‘the beauty of her body was the essence of her soul’ (2004, p. 28), which seems a direct reinvention of a passage in The Picture of Dorian Gray: ‘soul and body, body and soul ... was the body really in the soul? ... The separation of spirit from matter was a mystery’ (Wilde and Bristow, 2008, p. 51). Here one sees Fitzgerald use chiasmus - a literary technique where words or grammatical constructions are repeated in reverse order. Chiasmus is a typical Wildean rhetorical device that helped
shape a great part of his topsy-turvy epigrams. This stylisation that Wilde first adopted made modernist writers such as Fitzgerald apply similar reversals, to try and turn upside down the worlds in which they live. The link between Wilde and Fitzgerald is profound. In *Flappers and Philosophers*, a collection of short stories, Fitzgerald (2010) writes about a certain Marjorie that cribs epigrams from Oscar Wilde. Prigozy identifies how Fitzgerald himself comments that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 'largely flavoured' his work (2002, p. 149).

Wilde’s fusion of aestheticism and realism can also be seen in his new consideration of didacticism. Didacticism, the belief that literature should teach something, may be considered as a by-product of realism. Foley comments how realism is the place where ‘didacticism can be embedded or declared in the form of the novel’ (1994, p. 249). The critic Tindall believed that there is no didacticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when he said that aestheticism ‘implies the autonomy of art and artist … the rejection of didactic aim and the refusal to subject art to moral or social judgements’ (Tindall, 1980, p. 5). Whilst art does gain its autonomy, Tindall might be mistaken in this last point. Wilde does not reject didacticism; instead, he uses the space of his novel as a lecture theatre to promote his own aesthetic ideals.

It is true that the novel does not teach a Christian or social lesson – qualities usually associated with the didactic – but it does set out to forge its own philosophy, one which Pater (1974, quoted in Losey, 2000, p. 255) calls a ‘dainty Epicurean theory’ in his review of the book. This is precisely what Vladimir Nabokov means when he calls Wilde a ‘rank didacticist’ (De Vries, Johnson and Ashenden, 2006, p. 64). Wilde is not, as many believe of him, ‘in opposition to Victorian moral and spiritual didacticism in art’ (Warwick and Willis, 2008, p. 66); instead he replaces the lessons of realism with lessons of art. This takes place primarily through the figure of Lord Henry and, more importantly, through the yellow book that he gives to Dorian. Dorian, who becomes a student of decadence through that book, represents the union of the didactic approach — taken from realism — and the message of aestheticism.

Wilde’s ‘didactic aestheticism’ may be read in the work of a figurehead of modernism: James Joyce. In Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (2005), Stephen Dedalus is an erudite aesthete who frequently lectures on artistic theory. The critic Attridge (2009) notes how Joyce took the title of his novel, *A Portrait*, from Wilde’s own *The Picture*; thus, this is far from a tenuous link. Joyce and Wilde also share an Irish background which Joyce writes about extensively in *Ulysses*, especially in the beginning when one of the characters holds a mirror to Stephen’s face and mocks: ‘If Wilde were only alive to see you’ (Joyce and Johnson, 2008, p. 6). The character of Stephen Dedalus is similar to Wilde’s Lord Henry with his lectures on the ‘esthetic emotion’ (Joyce, 2005, p. 238).
When Stephen speaks, the scenes are often overcharged with fin-de-siècle allusions: ‘If I am to listen to your esthetic philosophy give me at least another cigarette’ (Joyce, 2000, p. 224). As Lord Henry’s lectures take place amongst ‘whorls of smoke’ (Wilde and Bristow, 2008, p. 6), so do those of Stephen Dedalus. Stephen philosophises: ‘What is that beauty which the artist struggles to express from lumps of earth?’ (Joyce, 2000, p. 205). Other characters from the same novel, such as Lynch and Temple, also ask: ‘What is art? What is the beauty it expresses?’ (Joyce and Dean, 2000, p. 244). Stephen imparts in one of his most salient teachings: ‘Beauty is beheld by the imagination which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the sensible’ (Joyce and Dean, 2000, p. 244). In these lines one hears the distant echo of Wilde’s voice resound in modernism.

The principles that Wilde attempts to teach will, in a style that is characteristic of the author, eventually contradict and undercut themselves. Dorian’s death, so richly symbolic of the demise of the aesthetic hero, may be seen as a negation of the ideals Wilde is so intent on advertising. In this sense the novel is unquestionably didactic; it teaches a fable-like lesson that the pursuit of vanity and pleasure will eventually end in self-destruction. In a defensive letter to the editor of the St. James Gazette on June 26, 1890 Wilde himself wrote:

But alas! They [the public] will find it is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: all excess, as well as all renunciation brings its own punishment … Yes: There is a terrible moral in Dorian Gray, a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all those whose minds are healthy (Wilde and Glaenzer, 1906, p. 108).

Is the ending of the novel merely realist? No, once again it is a fusion; the fact that Dorian’s painting is restored to its beautiful state adds aestheticism to the equation. The Picture of Dorian Gray’s ending may be seen as both an aesthetic and realist ending; the former contained in the restored beauty of the painting, and the latter in Dorian’s death. The entire struggle between realism and aestheticism may, in fact, be seen in this binary of painting and person, a symbol of the relationship between style and realism.

Oscar Wilde seems fully conscious that what he is doing is new. One may look upon Wilde’s work as proto-modernist. As Lord Henry declares in the novel: ‘A new Hedonism — that is what our century wants’ (Wilde and Bristow, 2008, p. 19). This term, ‘new hedonism’, is vitally important in understanding Wilde’s change to the novel form as a revolutionary gesture. The ‘new’ almost seems to presage the modernist motto that would follow: ‘make it new’ (Pound and Eliot, 2007, p. 5). With this slogan, writing in 1934, the poet and critic Ezra Pound
encouraged his contemporary writers to innovate and experiment. When Basil, the artist of Dorian’s portrait, speaks to Lord Henry, the novel attempts to conspicuously cry out to this concept of the new. Indeed, the word ‘new’ is repeated five times in Basil’s monologue: ‘the appearance of a new medium for art… of a new personality for art also… an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style… He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner’ (Wilde and Bristow, 2008, p. 12). Wilde seems to have the same innovative vision as Ezra Pound, reinforcing the affinity between The Picture of Dorian Gray and the modernist movement.

Modernist writers such as Fitzgerald and Joyce used some of Wilde’s themes and techniques, such as didactic aestheticism and aspects of the perverse. A third name may be added to the list of writers who fall under this influence: Vladimir Nabokov. The Picture of Dorian Gray pushed forward the idea that the novel could become a platform of experimentation, through its own experimentation with realism and aestheticism. The word ‘new’ became the poetic license to teach or touch upon scandalous themes in the name of art. In Sexual Anarchy, Showalter describes how ‘Wilde first instilled the fascination of the perverse’ (1992, p. 17). Wilde’s novel provided the scaffolding for modernist texts that dealt with aspects of perversion such as Nabokov’s Lolita, a novel about pederasty. In Shopping with Freud, Bowlby reads Nabokov’s Lolita alongside Wilde’s novel: ‘Nabokov’s Lolita [was] another novel that was controversial at the turn of the 1960s [and] as with Dorian Gray, this is the story of a connection between eroticism, youthful aesthetic perfection and pleasure’ (1993, p. 3). Bowlby’s reading makes it possible for one to draw a series of links between Wilde’s Dorian and Nabokov’s Humbert, the protagonist of Lolita. Both stories are about trapping youth. Dorian tries to keep his youth forever in the portrait and Humbert quite literally tries trapping a teenage girl, his ‘nymphet’, who he hopes will ‘never age’. Such similarities climax in a precise moment of Lolita, when the narrator says:

> With her right hand holding her left arm behind her untannned back, the less nymphet, a diaphanous darling, would be all eyes, as the pavonine sun was all eyes on the gravel under the flowering trees, while in the midst of that oculate paradise, my freckled and raffish lass skipped (Nabokov, 2000, p. 163).

The passage above is charged with fin-de-siècle allusion. The word ‘pavonine’, which means ‘peacock-like’, seems a nostalgic reference to the 1890s where peacocks were mascots of Western end-of-century culture. The most notable example of the peacock’s cultural

---

1 *Fin-de-siècle* is a French term meaning end of century, used to refer to the art that developed in the 1890s, particularly by figures such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley.
significance is the American artist James Abbott Whistler's 'peacock room', now a museum in Washington, DC, where it is possible to delve deep into late Victorian history. The word 'pavonine' is also an archaism, one that harks back to that very era. Nabokov's passage is furthermore constellated by a number of 'aesthetic terms', such as 'diaphanous darling' and 'oculate', which remind one of Wilde's own flamboyancy. *Lolita* is full of these moments of rich and ornate prose, which may be understood under a *fin-de-siècle* lens.

Although a great deal of modernist writers distanced themselves from the past, in the search of innovation, modernism has this literary debt. One may view modernism as a movement that develops from the limb of the decadence and aestheticism of the roaring 1890s. 'And my senses were filled to the brim' (Nabokov, 2000, p. 15), says Humbert, who later dotes: 'there would have been those luminous globules of gonadal glow that travel up the opalescent sides of juke boxes' (p. 134) and in another moment, further says: 'resplendent rubious in the light rained' (p. 117). Yet the actual subject matter behind all this richness is paedophilia, just as behind Dorian's own extravagances lies the destruction of his own soul. Nabokov's infamously<br>meticulous Humbert takes up the charm of perversion that Wilde's characters first conjured up. Like the cynical Dorian, Nabokov's Humbert becomes one of the most important and 'fascinating' egoists in his generation of literature (Showalter, 1992, p. 17). In a 1964 interview, commenting on art for art's sake, Nabokov himself said:

*Although I do not care for the slogan ‘art for art's sake’ -- because unfortunately such promoters of it as, for instance, Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists -- there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art* (Nabokov, 1973, p. 133).

In his characteristically scornful and recalcitrant manner, Nabokov tries divorcing himself from the aesthetes, only to then make their same point. *Lolita* stands for 'its art, [and] only its art'. Nabokov confirms aestheticism's influence on modernism. The *Picture of Dorian Gray*, as a prototype novel of the turn of the century, may thus be read by modern readers, transhistorically, as proto-modernist.

Wilde's changes to the novel form laid the foundations not just for his own generation, but for modernists of the twentieth century. Three Wildean characteristics appear in modernism: the stylisation of reality, didactic aestheticism and perversion. The *Picture of Dorian Gray* evoked a new stylisation that built 'the trust that many modernists held in the ability of beauty to offer transcendence over the limits and suffering of mortal life' (McLeod, 2007, p. 2). Just as Walter Scott watched realism unfold amongst his contemporaries, so Wilde inaugurated a new
phenomenon. It is this marvellous recipe of realism and aestheticism that was to make for such a great part of modernism.
References


