CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Oscar Wilde's perceptions of salvation, atonement and redemption reveal fascinating influences of paganism and Christianity. The purpose of this study is to evaluate these Wildean beliefs, more particularly that of redemption, which surface not only in the short stories and fairy tales but especially in The Picture of Dorian Gray, and compare them with the biblical witness. I use the Bible as a theoretical framework to examine the motifs of redemption that surface in Wilde's novel to show us a moral the paradoxical aesthete of late Victorian England could not, despite his best efforts to keep it "subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect," resist preaching (Artist As Critic 245). Scripture verses are taken from the New International Version of the Holy Bible unless otherwise stated. Wherever "God" is mentioned, my reference is to Yahweh\textsuperscript{1}, the deity of Israel.

This study begins with a very brief overview of critical attitudes towards Wilde's works. There are those who as John Allen Quintus objects, "have emphasized aestheticism, Satanism, decadence, and degeneration in Wilde's work" and those who, though they have "noted a moral intent in Wilde's art" consider it "an anomaly in view of Wilde's personal habits" (708). In this introductory chapter, I examine some of Wilde's biblical borrowings and show how he has adapted scripture to point to the nature of the Christian God and the contrasting character of pagan deities. I briefly discuss biblical parables, and the connection between the prodigal son, that young renegade who appears to have inspired Wilde's model of Dorian Gray, who is also a waster of his own birthright. I briefly discuss Wilde's concerns with the debate between religion and science and its unsettling influences upon the social fabric and the soul of man. Because
Dorian Gray’s hedonistic lifestyle exemplifies rebellion against God and the boundaries he imposes upon man, I compare Wilde’s protagonist and the average Victorian struggling with beliefs he can all too easily set aside in favour of new developments in science and suggest that this mirror image, in some part, coloured contemporary critical reviews of The Picture of Dorian Gray. Recent criticism furnishes a basis from which to move on to the biblical overtones in The Picture of Dorian Gray. I attempt an interpretation of the motifs and imagery of the novel’s opening scene which suggest the Garden of Eden, the struggle within it that led to the Fall and God’s subsequent provision for the redemption of man.

The second chapter examines the tonalities in The Picture of Dorian Gray resonating with the account of the Fall of man in Genesis. As the principal characters in Wilde’s novel bring to mind the main players in the Eden account I discuss influence, free will and individual responsibility, all of which are issues pertinent to the struggle in Eden as well as the story of young Dorian Gray. My discussion includes a brief evaluation of three of Wilde’s shorter pieces of fiction, “The Happy Prince”, “The Devoted Friend” and “Lord Arthur Seville’s Crime”. This yields some common strands between characters in these works and The Picture of Dorian Gray for comparison with the scriptural witness. I then look at Wildean gardens that figure as sites of struggle, as Eden was in the Genesis story. I conclude this chapter with a comparison of Basil’s obsessive devotion to Dorian and the overwhelming love of God for His creation. As serpentine intrusion is present in both instances, I evaluate the serpent’s role in Eden and that of his various counterparts in The Picture of Dorian Gray and conclude with what I believe Wilde succeeded in doing by using this motif.
In the third chapter, I discuss biblical redemption, its origins and form as recorded in the Bible and trace the echoes and patterns of redemption present in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The portrait of Dorian Gray resurrects images of the Jewish Passover lamb and the Crucifixion of Jesus, and even its sequestration resembles the Old Testament cloister for the holiness of Yahweh's presence. As these images represent the divine initiative for the salvation of man—God presenting Himself as the final sacrifice—the argument I tender is that the portrait, though it fails in some points, does carry out a similar function of scapegoat for Dorian Gray and that consequently redemption is no further from his grasp than a simple prayer of repentance will allow. I simultaneously outline the biblical requisites for redemption and evaluate Dorian Gray's life and actions against the scriptural prescriptions.

To conclude this study, I look at Dorian's failures from a biblical perspective, the limitations of the portrait as a scapegoat for sin, and the implications of these limitations upon the moral of the story. As Christian atonement is rooted in the love of God for man, I evaluate Sybil's death, which Dorian views as an atoning sacrifice, and the motivations for his clouded perspective on the severely tragic end of a young woman he once imagined himself to be very much in love with. I then consider the role that Dorian himself plays as a man struggling between faith, doubt and unbelief and the implications of his punitive end as suggestive of Wilde's own convictions with regard to the value of the human soul, the degrading effects of a life consciously consecrated to sin and the possibility of redemption through simple faith. With this brief overview I now turn to the critics who have, as much as Wilde himself, informed and inspired my study of biblical redemption in Wilde's only novel.
Joyce Carol Oates observes a "parable like simplicity" about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which subtracts from the subtlety of the work and "the complexity of Oscar Wilde's imagination" (419). The parable is identified by John Gabel and Charles Wheeler in *The Bible as Literature* as "[u]nquestionably, the most famous literary form in the gospels [...] the use of which especially characterized Jesus' teaching" (21). Quoting Mark who writes in 4:34 that Jesus "never spoke [...] except in parables" (21) these authors also explain the parable as "a brief story that used details from ordinary life to illustrate a moral point" (189). That Wilde should have been inspired by a technique favoured by Christ is not surprising given his absorption with the Nazarene who was frequently at odds with the keepers of the Jewish faith. "Wilde's identification with Christ, particularly during his imprisonment, continues to fascinate" writes Barbara Belford (344). Belford has good reason for her mild articulation of wonder at this aspect of Wilde. While Wilde identified with Christ and expressed much admiration for him, critics are perhaps justified in refusing to see him as a true convert of Christianity. Harvey Kail, who has traced the literary qualities of *De Profundis* to "an ancient tradition of confessional writing" whose roots are both religious and secular, perceives that "Wilde consciously appropriated the conventions of the genre for use in *De Profundis* and turned them to his own uniquely modern purpose—the confession of sins against neither God nor society, but against art" (141). In *Aspects of Modernism: From Wilde To Pirandello*, Janko Lavrin says of the lengthy confessions in *De Profundis* that "some of [the pages] read as if they had been written by a repentant Dorian Gray who, instead of slashing his own portrait, had decided to redeem the vices reflected in it" (32). Lavrin then argues that Wilde's self-dismust and despair lacked the depth necessary for a true state of
repentance—that “[o]n the actual crossways” Wilde, unlike Huysmans, who turned from “his cult of vice” to Roman Catholicism, “changed his mind and went to Paris instead” (33). At the other end of the spectrum are critics who are more inclined to be charitable towards Wilde especially in consideration of his fairy tales and short stories. Some four decades after Lavrin’s book, John Allen Quintus argues that these works are “prima facie more serious and more moral than the amoral hedonism, the ‘studied triviality’ so long associated with Wilde’s life and his art” and laments the hesitation “to allow that the real Oscar underneath the masks and poses, was a Victorian gentleman who could not altogether escape a Victorian predilection to preach—indeed to be moralistic” (708). Recent criticism seems to be in agreement. Elizabeth Goodenough cites a reversal in the stand of at least one religious agency towards Wilde’s fairy tales—that of the 1998 Anglican Digest, which reviewed his tales as “gems of Christian literature” with Wilde himself tagged, “one of the most fascinating figures of the nineteenth century” (338). Quoting the Anglican Digest, she notes that

Wilde’s once iconoclastic creeds now undergird a wide body of literature connecting faith with fiction in conservative and mainstream religious circles that look to the arts to “incarnate our experience of mystery, wonder and awe” and to “aid us to encounter the holy or sacred” in “the original vision” of embodied childhood. (338)

But for the fact that the writer of the article in the Anglican Digest is referring to Wilde’s fairy tales, and not to “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” or The Picture of Dorian Gray, both of which are clearer examples of the gay literary tradition, this may seem a surprising reversal. Most critics would agree with Claude Summers’ assertions that “Modern gay fiction in English begins with Oscar Wilde” and that “his own art is inseparably bound to
his personality, or at least to the persona he so assiduously cultivated and promoted” (29). With Leviticus 20:13 (“If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads”) laying down the Mosaic position, it might fairly be assumed that covenant keepers of the Old Testament will admit little change in their view towards homosexuality. However, Jesus’ treatment of the woman caught in adultery suggests a change (John 8:2-11). When he said that he that is without sin should cast the first stone, Jesus was reminding his followers that as all are sinners, no one has the right to judge or condemn another human being; and, what’s more, as he was “the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29), and he knew that he himself was about to bear the punishment for that very sin the woman was guilty of, he could, therefore, not condemn her but give her a second chance to “leave [her] life of sin” (John 8:11). The sinner who will forsake his former ways, or alter his life by showing love to his fellow creatures, and thus avail himself of God’s grace and love is at least present in many of Wilde’s tales, if not in his novel. The Happy Prince, the little Swallow and the Selfish Giant are exquisite examples of such sinners.

Wilde’s writings make abundant use of the motifs, imagery, and literary forms of the Bible. Goodenough suggests a reason why this is so when she identifies the “intense inner question” that inspires Wilde’s fairy tales—“How the lapsed could find salvation—by changing their mind or that of God, by meritorious works, or by grace, faith, love, friendship, prayer, suffering, or art” (337-338). The Picture of Dorian Gray, though it lacks the figure of the repentant sinner in Dorian Gray, does explore these issues in much the same way. The brief nature of the fairy tale and the short story does not allow the
subject of sin, redemption and salvation enough room for exploration and it is in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that we find these issues grappled with at a deeper level. The novel as Oates has commented is indeed “parable-like” in its simplicity. Biblical parables point man back to his Redeemer. Jesus never told a parable for the sake of entertainment. He was unashamedly didactic, though refreshingly original. There was always a lesson to be learned which when learnt led the sinner back to God.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde explores one man’s reluctance to receive God as the Redeemer of his soul. Dorian is the prodigal who attempts to feed himself by his own strength. He desires salvation and seeks atonement but cannot envision a return to the Father’s house, nor take the steps toward biblical redemption, which require belief in the Scriptures as the divinely inspired word of God and belief in the divinity of Christ and His complete work of atonement. Wilde’s works show that he was not out of touch with the temper of the age in which he lived, which was unsettled by developments in science and criticism. In “Faith, doubt and unbelief” J.W Burrow attributes “the more notorious causes of unbelief” to “biblical criticism and science” (163) and gives us a clue to what might be the root causes of Dorian’s, and by inference, a doubt-ridden man’s personal difficulties with Scripture:

The vital issue in the Higher Criticism, and particularly in the work of [David Friedrich] Strauss³, was the biblical miracles, and especially those of the New Testament. Jesus’ divinity, and hence the validity of his Atonement and promise of eternal life, were generally held to rest squarely upon the credibility of the Gospel miracles, particularly, of course, the Resurrection. No miracles, no resurrection; no divine Redeemer, no assurance of a hereafter or of the ultimate meaningfulness of existence. (163-4)
Burrow notes that for Strauss, who wrote *Life of Jesus*, "it was an axiom that miracles do not happen" (164). He also explains how the eighteenth century sceptic tended to favor a theory of priestly subterfuge to explain the origin of miracles. The nineteenth century was presented with a newer "more subtle" argument: "Man was a myth-making animal. Strauss, in formulating his explanation of the divine character ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels, was drawing on more than half a century of German historical and classical scholarship devoted to tracking the folk-soul or collective consciousness" (164). Strauss’ work ultimately discredited Scripture, and miracles were reduced to myths.

To further account for the damage to faith through biblical criticism which Burrow reasons "came first and cut deepest" (163) we must turn to David Breese who makes a case against Julius Wellhausen. Breese explains how Wellhausen questioned Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and ultimately started a new trend in biblical interpretation:

According to Wellhausen [...] some passages, including all of Deuteronomy, were written as a result of an evolutionary process and not by divine revelation.

Wellhausen regarded Israel’s history prior to the beginning of the monarchy of Israel as uncertain. Exodus, he thought, was completely historical; prior to that, all was myth.

Wellhausen’s scholarship became an important contribution to liberalism as it sought to demythologize the Bible by taking God and spiritual things out of it. [...] The logical consequence [...] was a defection from sound doctrine by the church and its leadership, as well as a fundamental shift in religious allegiance from Christianity to an empty humanist religion. Although the Bible still remained, because of Wellhausen it was dry pages of variable human theory, rather than the living, breathing revelation of the eternal God. (87)
That scholars like Strauss and Wellhausen led men to reconsider or abandon their faith is historically evident. At the same time, there was also as Burrow points out, "the reluctance of unbelief" in the Victorian era—the anxiety of "naturally Christian souls" who if persuaded by the Higher Critics, were left with no comforting hope to hold on to (167). One wonders if the supernatural, miraculous, soul-life of Dorian’s portrait was not invented as a challenge to the religious sceptics and critics of Wilde’s day. If, as Vivian insists in “The Decay of Lying” that “Life imitates Art [...] A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher” (Complete Works 982), then fictional miracles beg real life wonders. Vivian’s assertion that “Life is Art’s best, Art’s only pupil” (983) is not an unchristian idea. The God of the Bible is a “Creator” (Ecclesiastes 12:1), whose artistic visions were spoken into being. His Son taught the people who thronged to him for miracles that “According to your faith will it be done to you” (Matthew 9:29). When Jesus raised the dead, gave the blind sight, the lame strength to walk and the leper cleansing wholeness, he made what was ugly, wanting and dead in their lives beautiful, while simultaneously teaching them—and us—that hope was within human grasp, that man can, by confessions of faith, trade in his poverty for riches. Higher critics of Scripture stripped God of credibility and men of faith. John E. Hart observes, “The great fin de siècle (or fin du globe) disappointment of life is that with all the wisdom of the medieval and scientific worlds at his command, man still fails in coping with his environment and with himself” (8). Wilde portrays the human plight in young Dorian Gray who has knowledge of a religion he struggles to come to terms with, has access to the worldly wisdom of Henry Wotton which though he uses to seek various pleasures fails to satisfy him, and has recourse even
to science, which though it rids him of damning evidence without, cannot silence the reproaches of conscience within.

Dorian's insistence (to Basil Hallward in Chapter XIII) that it was too late to repent, his yielding to greater impulses of wickedness and his craving for absolution are explorations of the struggle that consumes man no matter where he stands with regards to established religion. Dorian's doubts are the fruits of religious liberalism. Without the prospect of eternal life in a heaven ruled by a loving, forgiving, fatherly God who is far above all other gods, Hedonism makes perfect sense. Without divine authority to back up the Scriptures, Christian commandments and Christian morality are of little import. They lose their value. Religion can be done away with and the human soul guide itself as it sees fit. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde draws for us the self-guided soul. Dorian devotes his life to sensation and pleasure. It hardens his conscience but never completely kills it. Deep in the spirit of the man is a yearning to return to his original state of innocence. He attempts to find a reversal in the portrait through good deeds and finds to his utter disappointment that no deed can match the price of his redemption. Before he has killed Basil, he refuses to pray that one simple prayer of repentance that the Bible assures would have settled the account with God. Believing that it is too late to repent, he despairs and his heart is filled with rage against the artist who has given him a mirror of his soul. Dorian murders Basil in the same spirit that the Pharisees murdered Jesus—the plea to repent issuing from the lips of both men could not be answered in faith. That faith required humility at the expense of personal pride. It required a confession of sin, which strips a man of the cherished, self-tailored garments of respectability and righteousness. No peace is gained in either case, perhaps because one can never be sure that the
Scriptures are not Truth. The Christ of the Gospels is a magnetic personality who made disturbing claims that demand attention; and those who are well read in the gospels cannot easily dismiss him. Wilde, taken by the personality of Jesus, returned again and again to the Scriptures to explore issues that still had the power to confound men despite what Burrow termed the "new clerisy of science" (167). Burrow reports that at first, evolution was "an old hypothesis [...] not generally accepted by the scientific world, and its credit among scientists was diminished rather than advanced by the anonymous publication in 1844 of Robert Chamber's Vestiges of Creation" (166-7). A change came, however, when Darwin published The Origin of Species in 1859. Within a decade Darwin's book was "generally accepted by the scientific world" (Burrow 167). Science, as I mentioned earlier, solved Dorian's problem of obliterating all traces of Basil's corpse but it could not erase his guilt. In much the same way science appeared to settle the question of the divine authority of the Bible for Wilde's age. But what science does not do is "minister to human spiritual needs" (Levine 9).

Perhaps, the rage against The Picture of Dorian Gray was in part because Dorian is the Victorian agnostic and unbeliever all rolled into one. His loss of innocence symbolizes a societal loss—the Victorians had likewise lost the trusting innocence with which they once viewed Scripture. Dorian's destruction rings close to a threatening prefigurement of eventual spiritual death—the death that in Christian terms is inevitably the result of unbelief and rejection of a creed once held dear. Wilde's novel, uncanny for its prophetic anticipation of his disastrous relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, also envisions the destruction of the religious fabric of society.
We note, not merely in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* but also in his other works, that Wilde was especially bold in mixing the pagan with the Christian. In doing so, it would seem that he stands in breach of biblical laws of separation that prohibit mixing or hybridizing everything from types of yarn in cloth-making to the planting of varieties of grape in the same vineyard. Naomi Wood commenting on Wilde’s fairy tales contends,

> At the same time that Wilde preaches an ostensibly orthodox Christian morality in his tales, he also expresses a pagan joy in sensation for its own sake; he seduces his readers away from joyless innocence, takes them out of conventional bounds in order to explore new pleasures, and proffers an artificial, idealistic sensuality. (157)

While there certainly is a mixing of pagan and Christian elements, Wood’s adjectival choices for “joy” and “innocence” in Wilde’s art as being “pagan” and “joyless” suggest that Christian morality and innocence afford no pleasure and are kept at the cost of joy. And yet in art as in his life-long dealings with his fellows, it is the very things that Yahweh decries—selfishness, cruelty to one’s fellow creatures, and a purposeful blindness to the suffering of the unfortunate—which Wilde frowns upon. When, for instance, in “The Birthday of The Infanta,” the Infanta is chastened by the Camerera-Mayor for “making so merry before those who were her inferiors in birth”, what is being enforced is rooted in royal traditions that have no support in biblical terms (*Complete Works* 239). King David was similarly despised by his wife Michal for “leaping and dancing” as the ark of the LORD entered the City of David: “How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!” David replied that he had celebrated “before the LORD” and that
to honor God he was willing to "become even more undignified than this [...]." The end of the passage "And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death" implying that Michal suffered barrenness for her response to David's joyful worship, does suggest that Yahweh does not frown upon, but rather is pleased with exuberant joy (2 Samuel 6:14-23). In Wilde's tale, there is a scenario similar to the biblical text when the little Dwarf, upon hearing that the Infanta would have him dance a second time, "runs into the garden kissing the white rose in an absurd ecstasy of pleasure, and making the most uncouth and clumsy gestures of delight" (Complete Works 240). The indignant Flowers are described as "haughty," a word a child articulate in the language of fairy tales would associate with Cinderella's wicked stepsisters (242). In contrast, Wilde records:

But somehow the Birds liked him. They had seen him [...] sharing his nuts with the squirrels. They did not mind him being ugly a bit. Why even the nightingale herself, who sang so sweetly [...] was not much to look at after all; and besides, he had been kind to them, and during that terribly bitter winter, when there were no berries on the trees, and the ground was as hard as iron, and the wolves had come down to the very gates of the city to look for food, he had never once forgotten them, but had always given them crumbs out of his little hunch of black bread, and divided with them whatever poor breakfast he had. (241)

The little dwarf's monstrous form is compensated for by his kindness to the creatures in the garden. The flowers have beauty but neither kindness nor compassion. Perhaps, what kills the dwarf is not so much the realization that he has been mocked not loved, but his own personal reactions towards his shape and form. The dwarf interprets his mirror image as being "the most grotesque monster he had ever beheld." Its face "seemed full of
terror" and he "loathed" it (245). The dwarf, ironically, has loved beautiful things—the flowers, the children and the Infanta. While he did overlook the plainness of birds like the nightingale and did not perceive any ugliness in the lizards, he unfortunately failed to show that precious and heartwarming acceptance of his own individuality. This tale hints, as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does that no matter the joys that it affords, blind worship of beauty robs rather than enriches an individual. Furthermore, when the Flowers associate themselves with "well-bred people," who "send for the gardener" when they "want change of air," it isn't Christian morality under indictment for a warped sense of respectability (241). What Wilde skewers is the arrogant consciousness of class, wealth and power that the human race as a whole, whatever its religious convictions, is frequently guilty of.

André Gide suggests that Wilde was the staunch unbeliever who was ironically obsessed by the Christian creed, and, though unable to reject it out of hand, looked for ways by which he might tear down its strongholds. "The Gospel," writes Gide,

> disturbed and tormented the pagan Wilde. He did not forgive it its miracles. The pagan miracle is the work of art: Christianity was encroaching. All robust artistic unreality requires an earnest realism in life.

> His most ingenious apologues, his most disturbing ironies were designed to bring the two ethics face to face with one another, I mean pagan naturalism and Christian idealism, and to put the latter out of countenance. (Ellmann, *Critical Essays* 29)

It would seem unwise to argue with Gide, for he knew Wilde personally. Wilde certainly said many things that would bring a man to that conclusion. Yet the paradoxical nature of
his life and art thwarts attempts to decisively conclude whether Wilde was either pagan or Christian in belief. But we can perhaps say that he saw value in both.

Samuel Henry Jeyes, critic for the *St James Gazette*, protested against “the ‘frank paganism’ [...] which delights in dirtiness and confesses its delight” and suggested that Wilde’s motive in writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* must have been that “he derives pleasure from treating a subject merely because it is disgusting” (Beckson 71). An unsigned review in *Punch* (19th July 1890, xcix, 25) by “The Baron de Book-Worms” saw a reprehensible moral in the work: “If Oscar intended an allegory, the finish is dreadfully wrong. Does he mean that, by sacrificing his earthly life, Dorian Gray atones for his infernal sins, and so purifies his soul by suicide?” (76). An earlier review in the *Daily Chronicle* (30th June 1890, p.7) described the work as

a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French Décadents—a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction—a gloating study of the mental and physical corruption of a fresh, fair and golden youth [...] 

Mr Wilde says his book has ‘a moral’. The ‘moral,’ so far as we can collect it, is that man’s chief end is to develop his nature to the fullest by ‘always searching for new sensations,’ [...] Man is half-angel and half ape, and Mr Wilde’s book has no real use if it be not to inculcate the ‘moral’ that when you feel yourself becoming too angelic you cannot do better than rush out and make a beast of yourself. There is not a single good and holy impulse of human nature, scarcely a fine feeling or instinct that civilization, art, and religion have developed throughout the ages as part of the barriers between Humanity and Animalism that is not held up to ridicule and contempt in *Dorian Gray*, if indeed, such strong words can be fitly applied to the actual effect of Mr Wilde’s airy levity and fluent impudence. (72-3)
The reviewer’s protests betray his preoccupation with the debate occasioned by Darwin’s book. Upset by the beastly nature of man that has been allowed to surface in young Dorian Gray, he cannot appreciate the moral Wilde himself insisted as true of the novel: "[...] 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 whose minds are healthy" (Artist As Critic 240-41). He felt that the moral strain in the novel was "an artistic error" (241). But artistic aims apart, like the mother Duck in "The Devoted Friend", Wilde also knew by instinct that telling "a story with a moral [...] is always a very dangerous thing to do" (Complete Works 309).

Walter Pater, who, by Richard Ellmann’s estimation⁶, wrote "the most perceptive of the early reviews [...] in its grasp of Wilde’s intentions" (Beckson 83) saw the story as "a vivid, though carefully considered, exposure of the corruption of a soul, with a very plain moral, pushed home, to the effect that vice and crime make people coarse and ugly" (Beckson 85). Most contemporary reviewers, myopically saw in The Picture of Dorian Gray only that which offended their sensibilities. An unsigned review in Punch by 'The Baron de Book-Worms' recommended the novel to "anybody who revels in diablerie" (76). John Addington Symonds called it "an odd and very audacious production, unwholesome in tone," but allowed at the same time that it was also "artistically and psychologically interesting". However, his remark⁷—"I resent the unhealthy, scented, mystic, congested touch which a man of this sort has on moral problems" (78)—is evidence that some of the objections against The Picture of Dorian Gray were more on account of Wilde’s personality, his sexuality and beliefs. While Symonds termed the
work "audacious" Julian Hawthorne applied it to Wilde himself: Mr Wilde [...] is a gentleman of an original and audacious turn of mind" (79). As Michael Gillespie notes in his book *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, Wilde had by the mid-1880's "established in London a widely recognized public persona that gave him an aura of eminence (or, at the very least, notoriety)" (22).

Moral considerations aside, many literary critics, especially in Wilde's day, disparaged his style of writing. A review in *Theatre* dated 1 June 1891 called *The Picture of Dorian Gray* "the very genius of affectation crystalised in a syrup of words" (Beckson 81). André Gide, struck by the brilliance of Wilde's conversation, lamented the "intrusion of literature" in Wilde's tales saying that "Wilde works on his phrases, and goes about pointing them up, he does so by a prodigious overloading of concetti, of trivial inventions, which are pleasing and curious, in which emotion stops, with the result that the glittering of the surface makes our mind lose sight of the deep central emotion" (Ellmann, *Critical Essays* 34). Closer to our time, Epifanio San Juan, Jr. writes in the "Introduction" to his book *The Art of Oscar Wilde* that "Wilde's 'baroque' exercises, his melodramatic and extravagant posings, easily arouse censure for emptiness and vulgarity" (3). Oates makes a similar observation regarding Wilde's style and responses to his novel:

> Wilde’s genius was disfigured by his talent: he always sounds much more flippant, far more superficial, than he really is. [...] Beneath the entertaining and often distracting glitter of Wilde’s verbal surfaces, however one does discover another work—if not another work, precisely, then another tone, and another Wilde. (420)
The opening scene of The Picture of Dorian Gray illustrates the validity of Oates’ comments:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

[...] Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore silk curtains [...]. (Dorian Gray 5)

On first reading this scene one is likely to dismiss Wilde’s “verbal surfaces” as typical of his tendency to be elaborate and opulent, the weaving in of beauty and colour and sensuousness simply because that was his style and, because he believed that “The artist is the creator of beautiful things” (3). On the surface, therefore, we have in this introductory scene an artist whose domain is described as a magnificent garden of sight, sound and scent. It is a scene typically Wildean in its offerings of beauty and its invitation to enjoy the artistry of that beauty without going beyond the Paterian injunction to make “sensory experience, not morality, [...] the goal of life” (Wood 163). However, there is as Oates suggests “another work” and “another tone” (420).

Wilde’s habit of illustrating his ideas by adapting scripture is well known. He does so in a letter to William Ward dated Wednesday, 26th July, 1876: “Faith is, I think, a bright lantern for the feet”. In a footnote to that letter, Rupert Hart Davies identifies “Thy word is a lantern unto my feet” as “the opening words of the portion of the Psalm (CXIX, verse 105) for Morning Prayer on the twenty sixth day of the month” and suggests the
possibility that Wilde "had either been to Matins or had read the Prayer-book for the day" (Letters 20). In writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde borrowed from and adapted scripture, a habit dangerous from a scriptural point of view with injunctions issued by Christ himself.

The story begins in Basil Hallward's studio, but it is the garden, which intrudes upon the imagination its scents, shadows and sounds. Hart aptly terms Wilde's setting "the studio-garden" (4) while Camille Paglia observes that the novel "opens with the 'rich odour of roses,' followed by a hypnotic Paterian description of a blooming garden" (514). John J. Pappas sees the passage as being "conventional enough" where "nature functions in a traditional way as a lovely and satisfying context for man" (40). This "blooming garden" and Hallward's studio are in fact suggestive of the colour, scents and ambience of Eden—the context in which the Creator God of the Bible placed the first man. Wilde's use of the phrase "the trees of the garden" is evocative because the trouble in Eden began over a tree in the garden. The serpent's first enquiry was whether the man and woman were forbidden to eat from any tree in the garden. "Did God really say [...]?" he queries (Genesis 3:1). Eve replies, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die' " (Genesis 3:2); and that, of course, opened the way for the discussion which led to the Fall. The artist's garden, its trees and even the characters present within it suggest Eden, itself an Artist's domain with characters that played to a script reworked in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde's novel is replete with images that subtly introduce biblical notions of salvation, atonement and redemption.
Wilde was, as Goodenough fittingly terms, a “verbal wizard” (337). He was well read in the Classics and the Scriptures, “a man of letters” as he himself often asserted, and as many critics have noted also influenced by contemporary writers most notably Walter Pater (Artist As Critic 238). His habitual borrowings exposed him to criticism. James Whistler openly charged Wilde with plagiarism, chiding The Truth for not including in “your late tilt at that arch-imposter and pest of the period—the all-pervading plagiarist [...] that fattest of offenders—our own Oscar” (Beckson 63). In his analysis of Pater’s influence on The Picture of Dorian Gray, John Riquelme builds a convincing case against the charges of imitation, and states emphatically that Wilde “does not imitate a British writer; he echoes his writing [...] for the same reason the mythological figure Echo repeats already existing language: in order to say something quite different” (612). Riquelme demonstrates that Wilde echoes Pater “as a way to evoke, refuse, and transform what he finds in the earlier writer” (617). He also aids our recognition of the “modernist, anti-Romantic” character of such borrowings “which challenge Romantic views of the artist’s originality” and which are furthermore “intentional, motivated, and because of the new implications of the repeated language, creative” (621). Riquelme’s arguments weight Oates’ suggestion that looking beneath the gloss in Wilde will repay the effort. Returning to the introductory passage in The Picture of Dorian Gray, and indeed to the novel as a whole, one begins to seriously doubt, in the light of these fresh opinions, that Wilde’s borrowings of Scripture were merely because the poetry of biblical language settles so sweetly on the ear, or that it was just easier to plagiarise than to create anew.

Pappas draws our attention to the images of flowers one character uses to describe another character in the novel: “when Dorian first describes the young actress, Sibyl
Vane, to Lord Henry, he speaks of her ‘flower-like face’ and describes her eyes as ‘violet wells of passion’ and her throat as ‘reedlike’”(40). If we look beneath the verbal surfaces, Pappas’ discovery lends itself to some modification. The flower images of Wilde’s opening scene do more than describe characters within the novel itself. The “more delicate perfume of the pink flowering thorn” subtly reminds us of Christ, more particularly the image of the crucified Christ upon whose head thorns were pressed before he was nailed to the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the world²(Dorian Gray 5). The perfume of the flowers is also in keeping with the image of the sacrifice—acceptable offerings and sacrifices make “a sweet savour unto the LORD” (Numbers 15:3, KJV). The New International Version translates this phrase as “an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” In Leviticus 1, Moses is given strict instructions regarding the burnt offering and the manner in which it is presented. Anyone making such an offering “is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him” (Leviticus 1:4). Sacrifices for atonement instituted in Moses’ time suggested the final sacrifice of the Messiah—whom John the Baptist referred to as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

The blossoms of the laburnum are described as “honey-sweet and honey-coloured” and their beauty is “flame-like”. The repeated use of honey is suggestive. Honey is the symbol of luxuriant provision in the Bible and it also relates to the exodus out of Egypt and to the Passover feast, which was instituted at the time. When God called Moses to be the deliverer of the children of Israel, He declared that He, God, had come down to rescue the Hebrew slaves from Egyptian bondage and to “bring them up out of [Egypt] into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). The
path the Hebrew slaves took out of Egyptian bondage into the luxuriant freedom they had in Canaan is a foreshadowing of the path a sinner takes out of bondage from sin to salvation and justification by faith in the Messiah whose blood was shed in his place. God’s rescue plan included the first Passover sacrifice—a lamb without blemish, sacrificed and its blood sprinkled over the door posts of the homes of the Israelites to prevent the Angel of Death from smiting their first-born sons. M.G. Easton calls the Passover “a type of the great deliverance wrought by the Messiah for all his people from the doom of death on account of sin, and from the bondage of sin itself, a worse than Egyptian bondage” (524). The ultimate luxury for fallen man, quite apart from material provision, would be this brand of redemption—one that costs him virtually nothing besides belief. This painless acceptance of the divine gift puts an end to the terrible struggle to regain innocence, to be in possession once again of Eden, the soul’s garden of peaceful repose, and to reconcile man with Maker.

That these considerations were somewhere in Wilde’s mind is reinforced by the use of the phrase “flame-like beauty” to describe the laburnum branches in the narrative. Fire recalls images of the divine presence in the Bible. “Flame of fire is the chosen symbol of the holiness of God (Ex.3:2, Rev. 2:18), as indicating ‘the intense, all-consuming operation of his holiness in relation to sin’ ” (Easton 261). Exodus 3:2 states that “the angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in flames of fire from within a bush”, while Revelation 2:18 describes “the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire [...]”. Psalm 104:4 records that God “makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants”. Paul quoting Deuteronomy 4:24\(^{10}\) reminds his Hebrew converts “God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29).
Taken as a sum, the "light summer wind [stirring] amidst the trees of the garden", the comparison with honey, and the "flame-like" beauty of the laburnum are subtle reminders of the tragedy that occurred in Eden, Yahweh’s provision for the redemption of mankind and His continual presence and involvement in Man’s life.

In “The Wilde Child”: Structure and Origin in The Fin-De-Siècle Short Story”, Jan B. Gordon writes that “[t]he quest for origins would seem to have been almost a compulsion of the nineteenth-century mind” and suggests, like Burrow and Breese have done, that this may have had something to do with "the strength of the attack upon Genesis by higher critics of scripture" and also the reception of a "theory of uniformitarianism that saw process replace origin" (278). Wilde was a nineteenth century mind. Ellmann shows in his biography that Wilde came close to converting to Roman Catholicism after he contracted syphilis\(^{(11)}\) in 1878 (88) but that he changed his mind and perhaps soon after "exhibited the obverse of his penitence" (91). On being refused membership in the Crabbet Club on the grounds that as a Magdalen Demy he had read the lessons in a surplice, Wilde admitted the offense but pleaded to having read the lessons "with an air of skepticism" and "being reproved by the President after Divine Service, for ‘levity at the lecturn’" (91). Quoting the final lines of Wilde’s poem “The Sphinx”\(^{(12)}\) Ellmann suggests that Wilde like the speaker of the poem “was still having difficulties accepting the doctrine of the Atonement\(^{(13)}\), and it throws doubt on the speaker’s devotion to the religion he is professing” (87). The poem as a whole celebrates pagan beauty, pagan loves and pagan gods and the Sphinx's relation to these. However, there is mention of Mary and the infant Jesus in “the Jewish maid who wandered with the Holy Child” (Complete Works 834) and also of the crucified Christ in the lines “[…] Only one God
has ever died. / Only one God has let His side be wounded by a soldier’s spear” (839). These show Wilde’s recognition of Christ’s deity while drawing our attention to the divine sacrifice allowed by God, who “has let His side” to be injured by human hands, “a soldier’s spear”. This image of divinity making itself vulnerable to human frailty is, in fact, far more beautiful, despite the gruesome nature of the sacrifice than the images of the jeweled, gilded beauty of paganism. The very brevity of the references to Christ in stark contrast to the seemingly unending images of the pagan traditions are suggestive so that when the last verses of the poem read like an injunction against the Sphinx, now seen not as “beautiful and silent” as it did at the beginning of the poem but as a “loathsome mystery” and “hideous animal”, the reader is not surprised. The conclusion of the poem suggests that the poet is aware of the negative influences of pagan traditions—they arouse his “bestial sense” and encourage “foul dreams”—and he feels a detrimental pull away from his Christian creed. The act of weeping for souls “in vain” is not necessarily signification of doubt regarding the Atonement. In Christian terms, weeping is vain, because atonement is certain. Mary Magdalene, weeping at the tomb of Jesus, was asked by two angels seated in the tomb “Woman, why are you crying” and the question repeated by her resurrected Lord (John 20:11-15). The question was asked for Mary’s benefit—that she would see that there was no need for tears.

If Wilde had difficulties with Christianity, the trouble lay not in difficulties with doctrine but in exercising and remaining true to the faith expounded in the Bible, which to a man of Wilde’s intelligence and capabilities is a book simple enough to understand. Wilde knew that Christianity requires turning away from certain sensual pleasures. When the demoniac and the tax collector met Jesus, they responded to his love by putting away
their old way of life. Mary Magdalene was delivered of seven demons and in gratitude helped support Jesus’ ministry and Zacchaeus made fourfold restoration to those he had cheated\textsuperscript{14}. Wilde could not strike a compromise between the brand of aestheticism promoted by Pater, nor the one of his own making, and the Christian creed. If atonement was desired, then repentance was necessary. Repentance required renunciation of paganism. The struggle with Wilde was that of choice—of choosing one over the other. His life suggests that he loved both. His writings on the other hand testify that he felt a plaguing consciousness that it were safer to be a sheep in the fold than wandering out where the wolves roamed.

Notes

\textsuperscript{1} “The Hebrew \textit{elohim} and the English “God” are really titles, not names, indicating the role or position of deity, not the deity’s identity. The only thing that makes the word “God” at all exclusive is the capital “G”; but even with the capital in place, much depends on the religious frame of reference within which the word is found, or who is using it.

There is, however, a word in the Hebrew Bible that has no ambiguity about it at all, because it is the personal name of the deity of Israel. That is the word we represent [...] as ‘Yahweh”’ (Gabel and Wheeler 268-9).

\textsuperscript{2} Summers observes, “Although [Wilde] had flirted with homosexuality for many years and had aroused the suspicions and gossip of many (and later came to regard himself as having always been homosexual), he seems to have begun the sustained practice of homosexuality in 1886,” (30) and that his decision to prosecute the Marquess of Queensberry for libel reflected “both his ambivalence toward homosexuality and his desire to appear to conform to the Victorian standards that he so often ridiculed” (31).

\textsuperscript{3} “German scholarship, and particularly that of the Tubingen school of biblical critics in the 1830’s, was fundamental to the nineteenth-century historical reappraisal of the Scriptures, which is one reason for the relative slowness of its reception in England; a major landmark in the process was the anonymous translation in 1846 of David Friedrich Strauss’s \textit{Life of Jesus} by Marian Evans, not yet calling herself George Eliot” (Burrow 163).
4 Walter Pater reviewing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the Bookman (November 1891) wrote, “[Lord Henry Wotton] becomes the spoiler of the fair young man, whose bodily form remains un-aged; while his picture, the *chef d’oeuvre* of the artist Hallward, changes miraculously with the gradual corruption of his soul” (Beckson 85).

5 George Levine says of Matthew Arnold who accepted science but resisted “emphasizing scientific education over the classics” that Arnold “argues not that science is wrong but that its representations of the world fail to minister to human spiritual needs” (9).

6 John Paul Riquelme suggests however in “Oscar Wilde’s Aesthetic Gothic: Walter Pater, Dark Enlightenment, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” that Ellmann was mistaken in the view that Pater was delighted with the novel, and missed “the irony of Pater’s response, which is defensive, prejudicial, and patronizing” (611).

7 Symonds addressed a letter dated 22 July 1890 to Horatio Brown (Beckson 78).

8 Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18).

9 “The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on [Christ’s] head” (John 19:2). The apostle Paul writing to the Hebrews declared, “so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; […]” (Hebrews 9:28).

10 “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:24).

11 Ellmann believes that Wilde contracted syphilis but allows in a footnote that “some authorities do not share [his] view of Wilde’s medical history” (88).

12 The lines Ellmann refers to are: “False Sphinx! False Sphinx! By reedy Charon, leaning on his oar, / Waits for my coin. Go thou before, and leave me to my crucifix, / Whose pallid burden, sick with pain, watches the world with wearied eyes, / And weeps for every soul that dies, and weeps for every soul in vain” (87).

13 In a letter to William Ward dated Wednesday [26 July 1876. Postmark 27 July 1876], Wilde writes, “I wonder you don’t see the beauty and necessity for the *incarnation* of God into man to help us to grasp at the skirts of the Infinite. The atonement is I admit hard to grasp. But I think since Christ the dead world has woke up from sleep” (Letters 20). While Ellmann may be right in that Wilde had doubts regarding the doctrine of the Atonement, Wilde’s written testimony often does seem to veer more towards belief than not.