CHAPTER 2: The Bible As A “Verbal Surface”

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the principal characters Basil Hallward, Lord Henry Wotton and young Dorian Gray bear close resemblance to the chief players of the Eden of Genesis—God, Adam and Eve, and the serpent. Basil is the artist and creator of the portrait upon which the entire novel is centred. Lord Henry appears to play the serpent’s part admirably. The youthful, beautiful and gullible Dorian Gray is as Oates describes him, “Adam-like” (Oates 423).

Traditional exegeses of Genesis render the roles clear-cut. God is the benevolent Creator, Adam and Eve are His innocent creations and the serpent is the intruding deceiver. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde shapes his characters to replay the story of the Fall of man in a contemporary setting. Camille Paglia charges Lord Henry with being “the serpent in the garden” as he infects Dorian with self-consciousness (514). The serpent of Eden, described as being “more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made” (Genesis 3:1) accomplished a similar feat with Adam and Eve. Paglia presents Dorian as a type of “the narcissistic beautiful boy” of Greek art who is “emotionally undeveloped and self-contained to the point of autism. His senses are solipsistically sealed. It is the apprehender, the aggressive eye, who brings him into existence. Dorian Gray is unconscious of his beauty, even while it is being painted” (514). Riquelme argues that Narcissus is not the primary mythic figure in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as the imitative style of Wilde’s narrative suggests that it is constructed around both Echo and Narcissus “whose stories constitute a single compound myth” (617). These multiple motifs—the Greek Echo and Narcissus and the biblical Adam and
Eve are again typical of Wilde’s tendency to marry elements from pagan art with Christian literature.

In Lord Henry, the apprehender, we note a genius for paradox and the same persuasive power the serpent had over Eve. It is after meeting Lord Henry and listening to his “strange panygyric on youth” that Dorian’s own imagination is stirred (*Dorian Gray* 27). When Lord Henry finds Dorian in the garden “burying his face in the great cool lilac-blossoms, feverishly drinking in their perfume as if it had been wine” he encourages him to indulge his senses: “Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul” (23). Most critical assessments of the principles of Lord Henry’s new Hedonism agree that it is a corrupting religion the older man introduces to the ingenuous Dorian who like a good disciple practices the courting of new sensations without moderation. The advice, however, is given upon seeing the young man enrapt by the scents and textures of nature, which in itself can suggest nothing evil. Lord Henry is serpent-like in the sense that he presents to Dorian new ideas which spur him onto a new mode of living, of the double life by which he gratifies desires of the flesh. Dorian appears never to have considered these ideas before yet he does say later with regard to Lord Henry’s views on Sybil’s suicide, “I felt all that you have said, but somehow I was afraid of it, and I could not express it to myself” (100). Prior to the conversation, Dorian (not yet aware that Sybil was dead) had purposed to give rein to his better self. He says to Lord Henry, “I know what conscience is, [...]. It is not what you told me it was. It is the divinest thing in us. [...] I want to be good. I can’t bear the idea of my soul being hideous” (94). Dorian’s thoughts and speech prove that he is able to divide the truth, and know what is right or wrong but his flesh too easily leans away from the
inclinations of conscience. This is significant because Wilde is here attesting to the fact that even the innocent and inexperienced are not without an inner guiding voice that is able to guide them along level paths. What thwarts the wisdom of that voice is free will. Dorian purposes to live a morally upright life but never gets round to it. This cycle is repeated throughout his life. Lord Henry, by contrast, as Basil reports in Chapter 1, is a man who “never say[s] a moral thing, and [who] never [does] a wrong thing” (8). As Jean D’Alessandro asserts “Lord Henry’s ideas as expounded to Dorian are purely intellectual cogitations, aired for the sake of experiment, and not with regard to sincerity” (63). When at the novel’s close Lord Henry himself says to Dorian, “One should never do anything that one cannot talk about after dinner” (Dorian Gray 203), he is acknowledging moral boundaries expected of a Victorian gentleman. Simon Joyce succinctly argues with respect to Dorian’s murder of Basil Hallward that Wilde is in fact saying through Lord Henry that “since he has the wealth, leisure, and cultural training which are necessary for finding enjoyment in the aesthetic, an aristocrat really has no business committing crimes which can be supported only as a response to material need and suffering” (507). Like Eve’s biting of the forbidden fruit, the responsibility for turning ideas into action is all Dorian’s. He was no more forced to lead a debauched existence than Eve was force-fed forbidden fruit. In his analysis of disobedience in the account of the Fall, Dennis Bratcher asserts that the focus of the Genesis text is not on the serpent and his trickery but on the man and the woman. To shift focus onto the serpent is “to shift the story away from the responsibility of the couple and place it on the serpent” (“The ‘Fall’—A Second Look”). The Picture of Dorian Gray parallels the account of the Fall in the temptation we as
readers face to lay the blame for Dorian’s downfall on Lord Henry. In fact, the burden of responsibility is Dorian’s.

One reason Lord Henry is often seen in negative light is that he is instrumental in disseminating values closer to pagan rather than Christian tradition. For instance, he makes Dorian conscious of his own beauty and fearful of losing it with age when he tells him, “Yes, Mr. Gray the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away” (Dorian Gray 24). Wilde repeats this notion of many gods that bestow various gifts to man in De Profundis: “The gods had given me almost everything” (Complete Works 912). Equally pagan in character is the notion that the gods speedily revoke their gifts, which rather than building faith in them, tends to cool the reader/hearer’s religious fervour. In De Profundis Wilde testifies to having lived his life by casting his lot with these pagan deities when he laments, “The gods are strange. It is not of our vices only they make instruments to scourge us. They bring us to ruin through what in us is good, gentle, humane, loving” (889). By contrast, the apostle James wrote “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). Paul wrote to the Roman believers, “[...] God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29). To suppose that Wilde’s readers would have been unaware of the implications is in effect to make the assumption that they did not know the scriptures and therefore were ignorant of the steadfast character of the God of the Bible. An oft-repeated refrain of the psalmist was “Give thanks to the LORD for He is good. His love endures for ever” (Psalm 136). That contemporary reviewers failed to reflect on the ungenerous, inconstant character that Wilde attributed to pagan gods in the novel (even though at this point he is silent about
Yahweh and His steadfast nature) and focused merely on the immoral life of Dorian Gray suggests their tendency to be outraged with subjects unsuitable for polite society to be reading by the family hearth.

In his notes on Chapter III, Robert Mighall lists the many forms of influence in the novel: the influence Dorian has on Basil’s art, Lord Henry’s upon Dorian, Dorian’s fatal influence upon young men, that of “heredity and ‘race-instinct’ [...] on various individuals”, real-life on Sybil’s acting, Dorian’s actions upon his portrait and books on certain readers (Dorian Gray 236). Contemporary critical reviews suggest that much of the anxiety surrounding The Picture of Dorian Gray stemmed from the influence that Lord Henry, an older more experienced man exerts on Dorian Gray, a youth standing on the threshold of life. Lord Henry’s unconventional ideas alter Dorian and inspire the strange wish that the portrait bear all the marks of sin, age and ugliness that he himself will bear in time. Christopher Nassaar’s perspective is that “the devil Dorian sells his soul to is Lord Henry Wotton, who exists not only as something external to Dorian but also as a voice within him (38). However, before we ever see Dorian Gray, Basil ascribes innocence to his “dearest friend” who “has a simple and a beautiful nature” (Dorian Gray 16). Certainly, Dorian Gray is first presented as beautiful and unsullied. In Lord Henry’s own estimation: “There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world” (19). In appearance, Dorian shares something of the innocence and purity of the first man and woman in Eden. He is “Adam-like” (Oates 423) but not quite the Adam of Eden before the Fall, for Basil does admit that “Now and then, however, he is horribly thoughtless, and seems to take a real delight in
giving me pain” *Dorian Gray* 14). This indication that inwardly Dorian is flawed makes him resemble more closely the reader (who is also the post-Fall human being in search of redemption). An imperfect Dorian’s temptations, fears, desires and aspirations thus becomes more personal and the moral purport of his story far more significant to us than if he had been made perfectly innocent as Adam and Eve were.

Discussing influence, Lord Henry warns Dorian “[t]here is no such thing as a good influence, Mr Gray. All influence is immoral—immoral from a scientific point of view” 3 (20). The irony is that Dorian misses the warning note and succumbs instead to Lord Henry’s influence or rather he uses his new friend’s aphorisms to indulge in excesses that hurt not just himself but also others. Nassaar asserts that the evil is inherent in Dorian. Lord Henry’s sermon “begs the evil in Dorian to blossom forth, and he responds splendidly” (Nassaar 43).

Basil presents the conventional, biblical view that influence can tend towards good or evil. The difficulty with this view is that it requires judgment of what is good and what is evil and so is often open to debate. Although Wilde’s creeds were controversial, he did have fixed ideas of what constituted good and evil, decency and vulgarity, naturalness and artificiality.

We have Basil’s testimony that Dorian’s unconscious influence upon him motivates him to realize his artistic genius. It inspires him “to recreate life in a way that was hidden to [him] before” *Dorian Gray* 13. Basil then attempts to persuade Lord Henry not to influence Dorian. Basil’s concern is that Lord Henry would “spoil” his young friend. He says pointedly, “Your influence would be bad” (16). Before he is killed, Basil says to Dorian, “You have a wonderful influence. Let it be for good, not for evil” (145). Wilde
appears to hold a man culpable for the nature of the influence he exercises upon another, while maintaining at the same time that each man is responsible for the way that he responds to external influence. Lord Henry’s contrary opinions exert no detrimental influence upon Basil. Basil allows himself to be absorbed by what is positive in Dorian—what G. Wilson Knight calls “the loveliness of youth” (284). In Chapter XII Dorian argues with Basil when his behaviour is questioned and manages a convincing defense that the young men he has influenced to ruin were responsible for themselves. In the following chapter, he refuses to be steered toward repentance exercising his freedom to choose between one course of action and another. Like the young men, he too is responsible for his own actions.

Wilde explores the theme of influence not merely in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* but in many of his other writings as well. In “The Happy Prince”, the Prince influences the little Swallow to stay with him longer than the bird had intended, much to its detriment. Unless one accepts the religious view that God sits on His throne in heaven and will reward such sacrifices as Wilde shows us in the tale, the fact of the matter is that the bird loses its life by giving in to the Prince. While it is true that after delivering the Prince’s sapphire eyes to the poor the Swallow is free to leave, the time he has since spent in the Prince’s company alters him and we find him fallen too deeply under the thrall of the Prince for any natural instinct for survival to operate. The Happy Prince’s own compassionate self-sacrificing nature does little to diminish Lord Henry’s view that “All influence is immoral” (*Dorian Gray* 20). Our sense of tragedy is enhanced by the fact that there are no grateful beneficiaries to acknowledge the Swallow’s sacrifice4. Neither the poor seamstress nor the young playwright are watching when the Swallow brings the
Prince’s gifts. Their stupor is symbolic of the frequent inability of man to recognize sacrifice and repay it with gratitude. “The world takes little note of these sacrifices, for it is indifferent if not hostile to selflessness” (Quintus 712). The Swallow, of course, does not stand alone as the unsung hero of the tale. Guy Willoughby observes that “In an act of self-annihilation the Happy Prince distributes his body literally among his subjects, as Jesus did symbolically at the last supper” (25) and also that “[t]he true significance of his selflessness is not only unperceived by his various beneficiaries—the young playwright thinks of the Prince’s sapphires as a present ‘from some great admirer,’” while the match-girl mistakes the other one for a ‘lovely bit of glass’[...]—but in concrete terms, is quite futile” (26). While both these benefactors are unnoticed by the people they have served, the Happy Prince at least had a duty towards the less fortunate among his subjects whom he had neglected in his lifetime because his own vision had been blind to their suffering. No such duty rests with the Swallow who was merely a passer-by on his way to Egypt. However, through self-sacrifice the Swallow is prevented from returning to Egypt, which from a biblical perspective represents a land of bondage to slavery. Had the Swallow kept his appointment with his fellows, he would have sold himself as a slave to sensual pleasures, as Dorian Gray willfully does to the detriment of his soul. The little bird’s love for the Prince, though it ends in a sacrificial Christ-like death, is rewarded by God’s receiving him into his garden of Paradise where he shall “sing for evermore” (Complete Works 291). Again, a reader can only rejoice if he does indeed believe that there is a God in heaven Whose heart is tender towards those who spread themselves out for others.

In “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime,” Arthur Savile attempts murder and finally succeeds in the crime, after his palm is read and murder ironically forecast by his victim, the
chiromantist, Septimus Podgers. Here, again, is the conflict of the older, more experienced man against the younger. Podgers is sixty-five and studied in an occult art while Lord Arthur Savile is a young man who had lived "a life exquisite in its freedom from sordid care, its beautiful boyish insouciance" (173). While the comic strain does subdue much of the horror of the narrative, it is still essentially a story in which a young man whose life had been idyllic, whose very name, as Christopher Nassaar argues, suggests purity, is driven to commit a heinous crime as a result of the influence of another. Arthur Savile breaks not only the law of the land but also the laws of God.

There are serious consequences to teaching or imbibing unconventional philosophies. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, as in "The Devoted Friend", the agents of influence live, while the innocents they have influenced or profited from, as in the latter case of little Hans, perish miserably. On the other hand, Lord Arthur Savile's happiness is restored, and he can marry his fiancée Sybil once he has destroyed Podgers. In "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" Wilde hints that even imposing one's knowledge upon another can bring destruction upon one's self. Nassaar reasons that Podgers is "an embodiment of Arthur's baser nature, existing within as well as outside him" (5-6) while Arthur's fiancée Sybil "is a symbol incarnate of all that is pure within Arthur, and his devotion to her is a symbolic devotion to an ideal of purity within himself" (4). Lord Arthur must murder Podgers before his marriage because "Podgers exists within Arthur and will destroy the marriage if it occurs: the principle of good cannot be totally possessed until the principle of evil is faced and destroyed within the self" (5). Another viewpoint would be that once the agent of influence is removed, an individual is free to live out the natural course of his life, even indeed, to prosper.
Lord Henry's view that under influence a man "does not think his natural thoughts" and that people, to their own undoing, forget "the duty that one owes to one's self" is illustrated in "The Devoted Friend" (Dorian Gray 20). Little Hans has reason enough to suspect the Miller's friendship but his judgment is flawed because he seeks the Miller's "good opinion" (Complete Works 305). This must be a foolish thing to do by the standards of a man who wrote without intending to please neither the British public nor the British child.

At the onset of spring, Hans has his own sensible plan for redeeming the valuables he has had to sell in order to survive the lean, harsh winter months. His garden has begun to flourish with primroses for which there is a market. With a bit of wisdom, which the Bible declares "will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse" (Proverbs 2:12), Hans had every chance of prospering that year. The Miller functions as a man whose words are perverse. His unsolicited visits to Hans' garden parallel the serpent's destructive presence in Eden. Hans is as innocent as Eve; his pitfalls are hers. A combination of his effusiveness, another trait he shares with Eve, who met her doom through dialogue, and the Miller's "perverse" persuasion, costs the little gardener his plank of wood and the flowers in his garden. He should not have made mention of the first, nor assured the Miller that he was "welcome to all the flowers in [his] garden" (Complete Works 305). Han's folly recalls Solomon's admonition that "[... ] a chattering fool comes to ruin" (Proverbs 10:8). His inability to say no when pressed for favours he cannot grant without serious detriment to his finances, robs him of some of our sympathy. After such a hard winter as he has endured, he should know better than to neglect his work for the Miller's increasingly selfish demands. What is significant is that the Miller
conscripts Hans on a gradual day-to-day basis, exerting his influence in increasingly rapacious doses. Hans’ instinct to refuse and his suspicions that the Miller’s demands are unreasonable, fade in proportion to the ground he grants the Miller. Consequently, when the Miller sends Hans on that fatal journey to the doctor’s, without benefit of his lantern, Hans no longer has any intimation in his mind that the Miller’s refusal to lend him that lantern is utterly selfish. What Wilde succeeds in showing us here is the very grave danger an individual places himself in when he courts too keenly or allows himself to imbibe regularly without discernment, the opinions and philosophies of another. Hans, who has made notes and read over at night, the Miller’s “beautiful” sayings on friendship, resembles Dorian Gray, who would not shake off the influence of the yellow book Lord Henry gave him.

What is altogether unusual, however, is that one often feels a reluctance to draw moral judgments on many of Wilde’s characters. G. Wilson Knight suggests in *The Christian Renaissance*:

> The human plight will not be resolved by reiterations of the loveliness of youth or the beauty of love. The balances are delicate; the highest and the lowest are in all such matters blood-brethren in joint alliance against the middle ways of respectability or convention; and aspiration and crucifixion are natural correlatives.

> We are not here concerned with morality. [...] In more religious terms, true righteousness can never be defined by writing down certain actions as always good and others as always bad, since everything even murder, depends on the context and the individual. (284)

As I’ve said earlier in this study, in Wilde’s works no one is totally what they seem to be. For instance, Wilde does not dress Arthur Savile as a ruthless villain, though he does
commit murder, and suggests instead that he is being merely drawn along an evil path by fate. Even Septimus Podgers although finally maligned by Lady Windermere with whom he had been a favourite, gains some sympathy as the drowned man with apparently no relations to mourn him. We can hardly indict the Happy Prince for endangering the Swallow’s life, moved as he was by pity for the city’s poor. The Prince, it might even be said, commissioned the Swallow as God commissioned Christ to bring deliverance to humanity. Willoughby says of the Swallow that “[h]e becomes, in fact, a kind of disciple, distributing the alms of the master in much the same way […] that Christ’s apostles did in the Gospel stories” (24). Little Hans, though severely abused by the Miller, loses much sympathy, engaging instead our impatience for his myopic inability to see that the Miller is an enemy, not a friend. The Miller’s caricature as the classic hypocrite, who never practices what he preaches, is necessary to expose Hans’ folly and to serve as a warning against ignoring the voice of one’s own conscience.

Wilde demonstrates that it is not possible to pass through life completely unaffected by outside influences. That is an ideality not available to man. He does not take Lord Henry’s view that all influence is immoral. Outside influences will always be present but an individual must choose, and choose well, which influences he will admit into his mind and heart. He must shake off what is bad, refuse to “set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evil men” (Proverbs 4:14) or face the possibility of death. In Christian terms love motivated sacrifices that lead to death result in divine favour; we see this in “The Happy Prince” but significantly not in “The Devoted Friend”. As Hans’ sacrifices are made to please a rich, unworthy man, he gains the very poor reward of having the hypocritical Miller as his chief mourner.
A common trait that Lord Henry, the Miller and even the Happy Prince share is oratorical skill. In Eden, the serpent’s work was merely to persuade Eve into a single conscious act of disobedience. Persuasion requires the use of rhetoric, of words. The serpent began its work by drawing Eve into a discussion. His question, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” was craftily worded (Genesis 3:1). It drew Eve’s attention to the tree in the middle of the garden, which God had expressly forbidden her and Adam to eat. A seemingly innocent conversation as to the merits of the fruit of the tree tempted Eve to look at the fruit and judge that it was “desirable for gaining wisdom” (Genesis 3:6). Won over by the serpent’s arguments, Eve ate the fruit and offered Adam a bite (Genesis 3: 6). In The Picture of Dorian Gray, Dorian himself reflects, “The few words that Basil’s friend had said to him—words spoken by chance, no doubt, and with willful paradox in them—had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses” (Dorian Gray 21). Hart says of Lord Henry, “His words have the force of creation” (3). Dorian like Eve falls prey to persuasion. Nassaar points out that it is the sermon that “begs the evil in Dorian to blossom forth” (43). Dorian is partaker of words, which Wilde describes as terrible, clear, vivid and cruel (Dorian Gray 22). He eats to his fill the fruit of Lord Henry’s words and every desire for new sensations and experiences is indulged.

Scriptural teaching places great weight on words. Proverbs 18: 21 states that “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit”. In Genesis, the creative process was achieved with, to borrow from Wilde “mere words”: “God said” is repeated eight times (Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). The same weight is given to words in Wilde’s novel. When forced by circumstance to introduce
Lord Henry to Dorian, Basil's caution "Don't try to influence him. Your influence would be bad" is powerfully prophetic (Dorian Gray 16). Lord Henry does influence Dorian to lead a double life. Norbert Kohl writes, "Dorian feels himself strongly attracted to [Lord Henry's] ideas, and fervently wishes that his portrait might age while he himself might keep his youthful appearance" (143). It is Dorian's wish expressed in words that gives the portrait its inner life. Such is the power of the tongue, that Basil's worship of Dorian by means of his art does not have the appalling effects that Lord Henry's words do. Dorian presumably would have seen every painting of himself done by Basil. However, Basil celebrated the young man's beauty without drawing attention to its brevity. Lord Henry on the other hand, praises Dorian's youthful good looks and instills both pride and fear in Dorian. He not only makes him aware of his personal beauty but also places a higher value on that beauty than is perhaps wise. When the painting is finished, Dorian stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before. [...] Then had come Lord Henry Wotton with his strange panegyric on youth, his terrible warning of its brevity. That had stirred him at the time, and now, as he stood gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness, the full reality of the description flashed across him. (Dorian Gray 27)

Dorian's eyes are opened as were Adam's and Eve's. He is infected with self-consciousness (Paglia 514) as Adam and Eve were infected with sin and the attendant consciousness of their vulnerability. Both Dorian and Eve are infected by dialogue. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not something that had sprung up of a sudden on the day of the Fall, anymore than Dorian's beauty was something that came into being.
when his portrait was painted. The tree stood where it had always stood. Dorian would have seen his own reflection in looking glasses some twenty years since. Words wrought a change in Dorian’s behaviour as they did for Adam and Eve.

Another connection between Wilde’s works and the Bible is that in both gardens figure as sites of struggle. The serpent of Genesis chose the Garden of Eden for his work of deception. Christ struggled for strength to do the Father’s will in the Garden of Gethsemane. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry’s serpentine charm completely beguiles Dorian in Basil’s garden. Also, quite significantly, the main thrust of Lord Henry’s arguments was delivered in the garden in Basil’s absence. As Nassaar neatly sums it, “Wotton’s demonic sermon destroys Dorian’s state of innocence and plunges him into a state of experience” (43). Lord Henry drives home his counsel while Basil is in his studio still working on the painting. When he calls for them the damage has been done. When the serpent beguiled Eve, God was not physically present in the garden. He appears after the Fall: “And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8, KJV).

In Wilde’s fairy tales and short stories gardens also figure significantly as places of refuge or repose. The Canterville Ghost yearns to be allowed to rest in the Garden of Death, which is denied him because of his sin. Finding sympathy in young Virginia Otis, the Ghost tells her the old prophecy on the library window means that “you must weep for me for my sins, because I have no tears, and pray with me for my soul, because I have no faith, and then if you have always been sweet, and good, and gentle, the Angel of Death will have mercy on me” (*Complete Works* 208). The Ghost is in fact asking
Virginia to stand in the gap for him. The apostle James wrote “[...] The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). He finished his letter by saying in verse 19 of Chapter 5 “My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins”. The undead Ghost remained in turmoil until Virginia turned him from his erroneous ways. Her role in effecting his release fits the biblical pattern of atonement, which requires a substitute of blameless record to pay the price a sinner can never himself settle. Her act of praying with the Ghost—although Wilde does not record the prayer, we do have Virginia’s agreement that she “will ask the Angel to have mercy on you” (Complete Works 208) accords with Jesus’ promise that “[...] if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (Matthew18:19). With Virginia’s aid, the Ghost’s sins are forgiven and he is finally laid to rest. “The Canterville Ghost” illustrates the futility of penance, for although the Ghost had been deprived of his freedom and starved to death, his sufferings and death did not redeem him. In spite of the role reversal he underwent from murderer to the murdered, he was denied entry into the Garden until prayer and faith absolved him of sin. In the Eden account, expulsion from the garden was a consequence of sin. It brought on a life of hardship, toil and heartbreak for Adam and Eve, which incidentally did run over a few centuries—the ghost likewise hadn’t slept for 300 years. The time factor seems to suggest the interminably serious consequences of crossing boundaries. The messianic atonement of Christ secures for Adam’s race fresh rights to Paradise, a reinstatement into the garden.
One of the significant aspects of Christian atonement and redemption is that it is initiated by God, not by man. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde exemplifies the divine initiative through Basil’s friendship and interest in Dorian, which might be compared with the intimacy between Adam, Eve and God in the days when Adam tended the garden in which God had placed him. In discussing the portrait, Basil declares that he will not show the portrait to anyone because “There is too much of myself in the thing” (*Dorian Gray* 14). The portrait is Basil’s creation in which he has unintentionally “put into it some expression of all [his] curious artistic idolatry” (14). Basil acknowledges to Lord Henry, “As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me” (15). Basil’s obsession with Dorian is similar to that of Yahweh’s for man. Man is said to be the only creation cast in the image of the Creator God of the Bible. The likeness of the divine Creator is in man, his creation.

Christopher Nassaar sees Basil as “painting and worshipping Dorian as the sensuous manifestation of his largely pure but tainted soul—the painting contains a tinge of evil” (63). What Nassaar is suggesting is that Basil worships what he sees of himself in Dorian—that Dorian is a projection of Basil’s own soul. Basil has in a sense also created Dorian by painting him for before the portrait is shown to him Dorian is unaware of his remarkable beauty. If we interpret Basil’s worship to stem from his love and obsessive devotion, then there is a parallel one may draw with Yahweh’s relationship with man. The entire Bible is hinged on the disconnected relationship between God and man. Consider, for instance, Yahweh’s lament in the book of Isaiah: “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast, and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!” (Isaiah 49:15). Isaiah’s writings picture the divine cry for
the attention of man. That cry is motivated by deep love and passion. Grieved by man’s
defection, God, out of love more intense than that which a mother can have for her baby,
desperately seeks reconciliation with man. Yahweh is more than just a Creator here. He is
the Lover of His creation, just as Basil was the lover of the young Dorian Gray. Isaiah
1:18 suggests Yahweh’s desire to discuss man’s sinful state which separates him from
his Creator. God initiates the discussion, not to condemn man, but rather, considering
man’s condition, desires man’s acknowledgement of his sins—which must include
confession and repentance—and acceptance of the divine provision of forgiveness and
mercy. This is what Basil attempts when he goes in search of Dorian in the hope of
advising him to change his ways. Basil does not condemn Dorian. Even when he has seen
the portrait and its hideous changes, he tries to persuade Dorian to repent. Basil is killed,
just as the Messiah was killed and all the prophets before him, who attempted to show
sinful men the path towards righteousness. As the painter of the portrait that took on
Dorian’s sin and degradation, Basil is also unknowingly, the giver of a significant gift to
Dorian. He gives to Dorian what God gave to man—a scapegoat to stand in the place of
the guilty.

The Messianic gift was first announced in the Garden of Eden after the Fall and
identified as the seed or offspring of woman which would crush the head of the serpent
(Genesis 3:15). The motif of the serpent, which Paglia and other critics recognize as
originating with the story of Eden recurs in Wilde’s novel predominantly associated with
Lord Henry Wotton. Wilde ascribes to Lord Henry a “low, musical voice” and a
“graceful wave of the hand” (Dorian Gray 21). To Dorian, Lord Henry’s very hands
“seemed to have a language of their own (23). Lord Henry’s art is “his conversation” (Nassar 39).

The serpent in the garden was described as “more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made” (Genesis 3:1, KJV). The NIV translates ‘subtil’ as crafty, which is at once negative in its connotation. However, ‘subtil’ or ‘subtle’ carries several other meanings. It denotes something “hard to detect or describe, fine or delicate (a subtle distinction, flavour); ingenious, clever” (Oxford Dictionary of Current English 751). The prophet Ezekiel’s description links the serpent to Satan:

Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, [...] Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness [...]. (Ezekiel 28:13,17 KJV)

The description also suggests Lord Henry, whose corrupting form of wisdom is appealing to Dorian because of his personal charms. What the older aristocrat possesses in abundance is the serpentine charm in both biblical texts (Genesis 3:1. KJV and Ezekiel 28:13,17 KJV): the low musical voice, graceful movements, and moving eloquence, all facets of beauty that command influence. Dorian’s murder of Basil parallels Genesis 3:15—he is the seed of Lord Henry’s serpentine wisdom striking at the Messianic exhortations of the painter. Although Basil is murdered, he succeeds in crushing the serpent’s head, in so far as Dorian is instilled with a conscience that as Wilde saw it, “dogged his steps from year to year” until it finally drove him to destroy his picture and so kill himself (Artist As Critic 246).

There are other serpent figures in The Picture of Dorian Gray. Women take on the image of the snake, not surprisingly as Eve is blamed for having the greater share in the
Fall of man. Deceived by the serpent, she is equated with him and seen as his agent, tempting man to sin. At the bar of the opium den, with Adrian Singleton, women sidle up to Dorian and Singleton, taking on this role of tempter. When Dorian turns his back to the women, we can readily sympathise with him. Serpentine characteristics make these women repugnant: “A crooked smile, like a Malay crease, writhed across the face of one of the women. [...] Two red sparks flashed for a moment in the woman’s sodden eyes, then flickered out, and left them dull and glazed” (Dorian Gray 180). The red sparks in the woman’s eyes are at least demonic if not exactly snake-like. When James Vane almost kills Dorian then desists because Dorian is cunning enough to deceive him by insisting Vane looks closely at the youthful face which cannot belong to Sibyl’s destroyer, a man who must be almost forty, the serpentine qualities of the woman who sets Vane right about Dorian are unmistakable. “After a little while a black shadow that had been creeping along the dripping wall, moved out into the light and came close to him with stealthy footsteps. [...] ‘Why didn’t you kill him?’ she hissed out” (italics mine, 183). Even flower-like Sibyl Vane is not spared the reptilian association. When we last see her with Dorian she is prostrate, weeping and creeping towards Dorian. “She [...] crept nearer” writes Wilde (86).

The serpent of Genesis is traditionally seen as the deceiver of man, the agent by which man sets himself on a course of destruction. The disobedience of the first man and woman brought fear into their hearts because they became conscious that their act of eating the forbidden fruit had altered them. Their first instinct to hide from God suggests that they expected punishment and rejection; they had after all been forewarned. Jan B. Gordon writes of Wilde’s short stories that his heroes are “men of integral egotism which
allows them to transform all defects into tastes. These stories abound with dwarfs, giants, fishermen who sever their souls from their hearts, and other defects that collectively assume rejection that would perhaps be more democratically shared” (284).

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sybil and Dorian were greatly deceived by each other. Both manifest an outward appearance of perfection, although in truth, each is marred in his/her own way. Sybil’s perceptions are flawed. She imagines that Dorian loves her when in truth it is her acting which “stir[red] his imagination” (*Dorian Gray* 85). Trusting Dorian, she is like Eve who believed the serpent when it said that the fruit forbidden them would make her and Adam like God (Genesis 3:4). When Sybil divests herself of the innocence which made her acting remarkable, for the “knowledge” that “[she] knew nothing but shadows, and [...] thought them real” (*Dorian Gray* 84), she becomes “shallow and stupid” to Dorian, a woman he can no longer love (85). The irony is that it is Dorian who is the shallow and faithless lover. Later, as a friend of the many who are drawn to the brightness of his personality, he proves treacherous. Charmed by Lord Henry, Dorian himself begins to charm and beguile others. Dorian’s dazzling personality recalls Ezekiel’s description of the serpent in Eden. Wilde suggests that sin has a contaminating, rippling effect on men.

Dorian’s great sin in the novel is misrepresentation of his true nature. He practices the old brand of foolproof deception that the serpent of Eden did. He begins his career by deceiving Sybil and progresses by deceiving and corrupting other impressionable people. Gordon proposes a motive for his behaviour by asserting that “[Dorian’s] love for the artist aspect of Sybil protects himself in that her multitude of roles disallows a central self who might reject him. He curses and abandons her when her real passion has terminated
her simulated passion” (284). While a motive that is rooted in fear and rejection may garner sympathy for Dorian’s human frailty, it cannot blind us from his willful alignment with evil.

Linked as it is to the narrative in Genesis 2:4-3:24, the serpent motif recalls the theological communication suggested by the biblical text. Like the Garden of Eden, this text has itself been a site of struggle for theologians intent on proving theories and “various formulations of a doctrine of original sin or inherent depravity” (Bratcher, “The ‘Fall’—A Second Look”). Stripped of theological gloss, the Genesis text quite simply presents man as a creature possessed of the ability to exercise his own will in an environment within which he had been granted much, though not unlimited, freedom and power. His choices were between keeping within the boundaries set by God or breaching them. The serpent in Genesis draws man’s attention to the alternative choice he has, that of not abiding by the boundaries imposed upon him by the formal authority that he knows, but escaping them and thereby asserting his individuality. By using this well-known template, Wilde investigates Dorian’s conscious choices in life. Conscience, Basil and society struggle to exert their influence upon Dorian as much as Lord Henry and Dorian’s own impulses to rebel do. The broader implications of the Genesis text as Bratcher suggests is that it is

a story about the human condition. Ultimately it is a story about us [...] that confronts us with who we are in relation to God [...] if we allow ourselves to be caught up into the story, we begin to see ourselves standing before the forbidden tree, torn between obedience to God and our freedom to choose our own way. (“The ‘Fall’—A Second Look”)
Wilde's model of Dorian Gray makes a similar demand of the reader of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* enabling that reader to consider the contradictory impulses within his own soul. As Wilde himself said in his letter to the editor of the *Scots Observer*, "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray" (*Artist As Critic* 248). The novel is not an easy read because the consequences of breach within this seemingly modern text are as severe as they are in the Genesis chronicle and the reader's attention is therewith forced upon biblical concepts of sin and its terrible condemnation for every man without exception. With the reader thus engaged, Dorian's consequent struggle for redemption becomes a personal question he or she can identify with.

Notes

1 The phrase is borrowed from Joyce Carol Oates' article "*The Picture of Dorian Gray: Wilde's Parable of the Fall*".

2 "[...](Lord Henry's conquest of Dorian, and Dorian's of Campbell, are described with many hints of the seduction of a younger by an older man) [...]" (Poteet 245).

3 In his notes, Robert Mighall explains Lord Henry's reflection "There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence" (*Dorian Gray* 37) as Wilde "reflecting concerns that were conspicuous at the time. The quasi-scientific tenor of Henry's musings, and the idea that a person's 'soul' could be projected into another individual, points to ideas of 'mesmeric' influence and metempsychosis which were then preoccupying such bodies as the Institute for Psychic Research and which found their way into sensational fictions such as H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1886), Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Parasite* (1894), George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897)" (236).

4 "The tales of sacrifice and love, "The Happy Prince" and "The Nightingale and The Rose," depict characters who give their lives for others, in the former instance for the poor and in the latter for love" (Quintus 712).

5 Nassaar suggests, "Lord Arthur Savile [...] possesses two opposing strains in his character. The pure strain is reflected in his name. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, *The Idylls of the King* was an extremely well-known and very popular work, and
the name Arthur in a literary work tended to associate its possessor with Tennyson’s noble and totally pure King Arthur. Wilde makes this association more explicit by elevating his Arthur to the rank of lord” (3-4).

6 In “Intellectual Wordplay In Wilde’s Characterization of Henry Wotton” Jean D’Alessandro recognizes Wilde’s “use of rhetoric, that instrument of deceit in Wotton’s conversation” (61).

7 In his Introduction to the novel, Robert Mighall writes, “The theme of a double life of outward respectability, or at least of caring about one’s reputation, while secretly transgressing society’s moral codes is central to the plot of Dorian Gray” (Dorian Gray xi).

8 “Lord Henry... outlines his philosophy of life which he summarises as ‘new Hedonism’. The purpose of life is uninhibited ‘self-development’ and beauty and youth are among the highest values” (Kohl 143).

9 “[...] When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God” (Genesis 5:1).

10 “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (Isaiah 1:18).

11 The book of Isaiah contains many of the prophecies relating to the Messiah’s coming and his work of atonement for all mankind, Jew and Gentile.

12 Bratcher asserts that “The story itself, with which we are so familiar, has lost its freshness and vitality; and so it has lost its ability to grip us with its marvelously simple message about God that is especially relevant for those who see human freedom and responsibility as a major factor in relationship with God” (“The ‘Fall’ —A Second Look”).