CHAPTER 4: The "Terrible Moral In Dorian Gray" (Conclusion)

Although The Picture of Dorian Gray is modelled on biblical ideas of redemption there are significant departures from the biblical pattern that explain why Dorian comes to the end he does. It is the biblical witness that a man's acknowledgement of his own sins and his response to the call to repent determine his standing with the Almighty. The apostle Paul explains it clearly in his second letter to the Corinthian church, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). When Dorian is confronted with allegations against his conduct and character, he responds quite differently. His first instinct is to attack his accusers, and cast doubt on their moral standing:

The middle-classes air their moral prejudices over their gross dinner-tables, and whisper about what they call the profligacies of their betters in order to try to pretend that they are in smart society, and on intimate terms with the people they slander. [...] And what sort of lives do these people, who pose as being moral, lead themselves? My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite. (Dorian Gray 144)

Dorian completely sidesteps the issue of his own sins and chooses instead to question the credibility of the people who have found fault in him. Many elements in The Picture of Dorian Gray are imaginative Art, but here is evidence that even Wilde could not resist a mimetic rendering of Victorian society. Whether one takes a secular or religious perspective, Dorian is perfectly right in questioning the integrity of his accusers. If the middle classes are guilty of moral prejudices and slander, when they accuse their "betters" they are also guilty of a devilish pastime, aligning themselves with "the accuser
of [their] brothers” (Revelation 12:10). Jesus taught, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” and addressed the one who “look[s] at the speck of sawdust in [his] brother’s eye” offering to remove it as “[y]ou hypocrite” because we are, none of us, without blinding “planks” in our own eyes (Matthew 7:1;3-4). What Wilde manages through Dorian’s diatribe is to point out what hypocrites miss: that before one can cast the first stone one must be sure to be without sin.

In discrediting his witnesses Dorian takes advantage of a commonly used defense tactic in legal tradition, which often hides a man’s guilt as effectively as the cloth of purple covers his portrait in the locked schoolroom. Dorian does, in fact, escape human justice on account of loopholes in the legal and social systems under which he lives. However, the schoolroom, being correspondent to the biblical Holy of Holies, functions like the judgment chamber of the Almighty omniscient God from whom, the biblical witness insists, no man hides. Playing Balaam’s donkey, society merely voices what the portrait “like conscience”³ reminds him, that his course is without divine sanction.

In Chapter XII we are given two varying perspectives of Dorian’s conduct and influence. Aristocrats like the Duke of Berwick and Lord Stavely and “many gentlemen in London” ascertain Dorian’s character, in biblically correct fashion, by the fruit of his conduct³. His influence upon young nobly born men—lives of promise like Sir Henry Ashton, Lord Kent’s only son, Adrian Singleton, the young Duke of Perth—has been evil (Dorian Gray 144). Basil, who compromises his role as spokesman for Victorian morality with that of the artist and lover of beauty, judges by outward physical appearances and accordingly finds no fault in Dorian and sees no trace of sin. It is no surprise that Basil does not survive the novel for the unequal yoking he manifests of
Christian moralist and aesthete. He cannot be both at the same time and he acknowledges this later when he asserts to Dorian, upon sight of the portrait, that they are both punished. Compromise blinds Basil so that his initial conviction is,

Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even. (143)

However, he divines that in order to ascertain if the allegations are indeed true he would have to see Dorian's soul. As that would uncover the truth, Dorian turns "almost white with fear"; but his next reactions show him very far from repentance: "A bitter laugh of mockery [breaks] from [his] lips", and his speech is marked with "the madness of pride" (146). Dorian is the accused but it is Basil who displays "deep-toned sorrow in his voice", who is pained, and who feels pity and compassion for what he imagines must be Dorian's sufferings should the allegations prove true. It is Basil again who earnestly desires that Dorian should deny the charges leveled against him (147). Dorian feels not a shred of the repentance that would bring him the redemption he inwardly craves.

J. E. Chamberlin describes the age in which Wilde lived as "a period of pervasive ideological commitments" especially to "political imperialism, social liberalism and religious evangelicalism" where the emphasis was "upon conduct, upon national or ethical or moral 'salvation' by works" (3). From a social perspective Dorian is a transgressor because his conduct has been ill. Of greater import is the fact that these transgressions are recognized because they are wrought against members of the higher classes. Wilde thus reveals the moral failure of Victorian society toward the
underprivileged. Sybil Vane’s death had by contrast no effect upon Dorian’s standing in society. She was merely the illegitimate daughter of a gentleman, a nameless girl, in other words, besides being, an unknown actress working in a seedy theatre. James Vane’s botched attempts at avenging his sister’s death achieve a two-fold objective. They highlight the powerless state of the poor against the rich but also suggest the divine imperative that vengeance belongs to the Almighty God. Wilde’s treatment of James Vane does hint that divine laws apply to all without reservation. Vane though grievously injured in the loss of a beloved sister cannot in turn injure that sister’s destroyer. The divine right of judgment will not be usurped by human hands. In the novel, God, one must admit, does repay Dorian. His continual refusal to repent is finally met with divine retribution.

In his own private moments Dorian deals with his guilt by attempting to block his consciousness of it. After he has killed Basil, “[h]e did not even glance at the murdered man. He felt that the secret of the whole thing was not to realize the situation” (Dorian Gray 152). This is a pitiful, futile attempt to return to his previous state of innocence, when he was not conscious of the charms of his youth and beauty and had none of the fears of losing the golden wonder of it. Despite his outward efforts to “not [...] realize the situation” Dorian is unable to effectively deal with his guilt. Epifanio San Juan, Jr notes that Basil’s murder “leads to dissipation, opium dens, and the infernal labyrinth of the concluding chapters” (51). Robert Fleissner suggests the negative nature of the powerful influence of the new religion of Hedonism upon Dorian: “The epigram serves as an ‘excuse’ for Gray when he turns toward decadence and drugs after the murder of Basil Hallward” (58). From a religious, and especially a Christian standpoint, Dorian has
committed a terrible sin. He is caught in the same quandary as Adam and Eve but the severity of his offense is Cain’s and, like Cain, he becomes “a restless wanderer” (Genesis 4:12) in London’s nether world. New Hedonism promotes new experiences and frees the follower from moral restraint. It does not require acknowledgement of sin. One needs only to “cure the soul by means of the senses” (Dorian Gray 23). The old religion demands propitiation of sins, without which there is no returning to that first state of innocence. However, there can be no propitiation without confession and repentance. Dorian does not acknowledge his sins, nor repents, and makes no confession to any one, save Basil and even then we are told:

He felt a terrible joy at the thought that someone else was to share his secret, and that the man who had painted the portrait that was the origin of all his shame was to be burdened for the rest of his life with the hideous memory of what he had done. (146)

As he was when confronted with his cruel treatment of Sybil Vane⁴, Dorian is once again motivated by a desire to shift blame onto someone else. He blames Basil for the existence of the accusing portrait. His concern is not that he himself has sinned, but that there exists a portrait, an earthly counterpart of the heavenly record suggested in Jesus’ warning that on the day of judgment men will give an account of every careless word spoken, and that things that are hidden will be revealed⁵ (Matthew 12:36; Luke 8:17). The portrait details every wicked thought, desire and deed: “It held the secret of his life, and told his story” (Dorian Gray 89). Dorian cannot rest on any sense of forgiveness even by private contemplation of, and remorse for his sins. Forgiveness and absolution are not what the portrait purchases for him. Being an accurate register of his sins, its marring only
succeeds in accusing him of them. When he first noticed the remarkable change in its face he recognized that the portrait was something that "taught him to love his own beauty" (89). At that time, Dorian also wondered if it would "teach him to loathe his own soul" (89). We are told that "It had made him conscious how unjust, how cruel, he had been to Sibyl Vane" (93). He recognized that his love for her had been "unreal" and "selfish", that the portrait would "be a guide to him through life, would be to him what holiness is to some, and conscience to others, and the fear of God to us all" (93). In laying bare his sin against Sibyl, the portrait spurred Dorian to write a passionate letter of repentance. Wilde explains that there is "a luxury in self-reproach," claiming that "it is the confession, not the priest that gives us absolution" (93). But the fact of the matter is that the absolution that Dorian experiences in this manner is as short-lived as his fleeting state of repentance. From this time hence, he views every change in the picture as cruel and taunting. It's influence over him to "not sin" being as it is "the visible emblem of conscience" is brief (89). His conscience functions like "the law of sin and death" that Paul speaks about in his letter to the Romans (8:2). It becomes "weakened by the sinful nature" (Romans 8:3). Dorian never frees himself from it. He desires to be good but never succeeds in satisfying the demands of his conscience. Paul writes, "[...] I would not have known what sin was except through the law" (Romans 7:7) and Dorian illustrates such an awareness when he views the ugly alterations in his portrait. The portrait exposes sins that Dorian is oblivious of. It knows before he does of his culpability for Sybil's suicide, records the slaying of Basil as a brutal murder, and exposes the hypocrisy of his dealings with Hetty Merton. John the Baptist and Jesus both preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2,4:17). Repentance is necessary
to Christian freedom from sin. John Pappas in examining antithetical attitudes in images of flowers and beasts in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* points out “[Dorian’s] insistence up to the end of his life on blaming Basil Hallward’s picture of him rather than his own conduct for destroying his life”. Pappas sees this as a confirmation of Dorian’s “ultimate failure of understanding” (Pappas 46). Dorian’s failure, without any doubt, is the inability to come to a true state of repentance. The fictional character does not exhibit the moral integrity of its creator, who faced his own fall with the admission, “I must say to myself [...]: that I ruined myself: and that nobody, great or small, can be ruined except by his own hand. [...] Terrible as what [Lord Alfred Douglas] did to me was, what I did to myself was far more terrible still” (*Complete Works* 912). Instead, as the novel progresses, Dorian’s heart becomes more and more calloused. We see him wanting to escape censure. He is relieved to escape judgment for Basil’s death, and is glad when Sibyl Vane’s brother is dead. With most of his enemies taken care of he never heeds the call for repentance. His motives for wanting to be good are mainly to appease a conscience, under the weight of which he wilts with condemnation. He is not sorry he has done wrong but is wretched only because the portrait reveals his sins. After he has left Hetty Merton, he runs to see if the portrait is looking any better—and is horribly disappointed when it looks worse. He is a type of Narcissus, “the oblivious beautiful boy, [who] can fall in love with no one—except himself. What fills him with a ‘strange idolatry’ is his own mirror-image” (Paglia 525). Dorian wants the looking glass to reflect beauty but this portrait tells a very ugly story.

The portrait, though very much the scapegoat, lacks the power to forgive which was something Jesus did to the consternation of the Pharisees who came to observe him⁶ as he
ministered to people. Being only, as Wilde sums it up in Chapter VIII, “a visible symbol of the degradation of sin”, it does not have this authority (Dorian Gray 93). In Mark’s gospel, Jesus is straightforward about the power he could exercise over sin and disease. After his death, his apostles carried that conviction with them when they presented the message of the new covenant available to sinful man. “Christ,” states the apostle Paul, “loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:4). The biblical Lamb’s task was to make his church perfect in holiness. The cost was his very own life and blood as Paul testifies earlier in Ephesians 1:7 “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding”. This leaves the believer in Christ in a plum position for his salvation is the work of grace—unmerited favour. He does not need, or more accurately, cannot rely on good works, though good works are requisite for his walk with God. He has forgiveness of sins merely by believing that the shed blood of Christ wipes away all his sins. Chamberlin’s assessment of Victorian ideological commitments to ethical or moral ‘salvation’ by works suggests that they missed the whole point of the Cross. Works are a necessary part of Christian living but works do not save a man. In Dorian Gray’s vain attempts to receive grace by works and the portrait’s absolute refusal to countenance his efforts—the portrait, in fact, indignantly responds with changes remarkably for the worse—Wilde upholds the prophet’s contention that “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). The
next part of that verse “we all shrivel up like a leaf” is not too dissimilar an image from the withered heap that is left of Dorian Gray at the novel’s end.

When Jesus spoke of his impending death as the atonement for sin he said, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13, KJV). Love was certainly the motivating factor behind his sacrifice. John 3:16 imputes the sacrifice of the Son of God as an action of love on the part of God the Father: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”. Wilde takes the edge off the horror of Sibyl Vane’s suicide by borrowing this concept of love-motivated sacrifice. Sibyl Vane “had died for love of him”, Dorian tells himself. When Dorian reflects, “[Sybil] had atoned for everything, by the sacrifice she had made of her life. [...] When he thought of her, it would be as a wonderful tragic figure sent on to the world’s stage to show the supreme reality of Love” (Dorian Gray 102), he is seeing her as a saviour-figure. When James Vane betrays his intention to kill Dorian for wrecking Sybil’s life, Dorian denies he ever knew her as Peter did Jesus, while he was on trial before the Sanhedrin. “‘I never knew her,’ he stammered. I never heard of her. You are mad” (182).

Sybil’s death is, however, significantly different from the death of Christ. Hers was rooted in disappointment and despair, whereas Christ had already foretold his betrayal and his steadfast determination to do the will of God. González parallels Sybil’s tragedy with that of Echo, for Sybil like Echo is “equally doomed by Tiresias’ si se non noverit. When she knows what she is—or what she is told she is, as she is reflected in others from a Lacanian point of view—the girl commits suicide” (6). He also points out that “[t]he process of acquiring knowledge for Sybil—and now that he has learned from Lord
Henry, Dorian is Tiresias—is punished with death, being thus the first victim of the vampire ‘Prince Charming’ ” (7). Knowledge brings on a consciousness or awakening and it wrecks Sybil’s life in the same way that it marred Adam and Eve.

Dorian’s reflections on the atoning power of Sybil’s death are motivated by selfishness. His concerns are for his own feelings and experiences and thus there can be no redemption arising from Sybil’s suicide. Her death “gives rise to the first changes in the picture, stressing Dorian’s malignity” (González 7). As the novel unfolds it becomes clear that Sybil’s death atones neither for anything she had done nor for Dorian’s own sins. Her suicide merely signaled the start of a new life for Dorian, which is progressively consecrated towards all that is evil and vile. Sybil’s death, if it parallels Christ’s at all, has only one thing in common with the sacrifice offered at Golgotha—Sybil died for a man whose heart was cold and cruel towards her. Jesus was crucified for the crowds who cried out for his death. They had no mercy to show to the man whom they had before gathered to listen to, from whose hand they had received miracles, no more than Dorian had for the girl whose genius for acting had once stirred him. Lord Henry tells Dorian that Sybil was “less real” than Shakespeare’s heroines. Dorian’s response is “You have explained me to myself, Harry, [...] I felt all that you have said, but somehow I was afraid of it, and I could not express it to myself” (Dorian Gray 100). Wotton and Dorian Gray resemble sinful man. Like the crowds that cried, “Crucify! Crucify!” in response to Pilate’s verdict that he could “find no basis for a charge against [Jesus]” (John 19:4-6), they are men with a callous conscience, who cannot see beyond themselves to recognize the worth of—or show mercy to—another human being. If we thrust theological concerns aside in Jesus’ case, and aesthetic demands in Sybil’s, and consider only the
literal context of each story, the identity and worth of the human being concerned is immaterial. Whether Jesus was indeed the Son of God, and Sybil a divine actress, is of no import. Strip both texts of these considerations and what we are left with is two corresponding accounts of the destructive nature within man—his capacity for mindless, absolute cruelty to another of his kind. For, at the very least, Jesus and Sybil Vane were human beings.

The failure of Sybil’s death to make atonement for Dorian suggests how futile any human attempt towards redemption is. Like many of Wilde’s short stories and fairy tales, the entire novel is dotted with sacrificial death. Basil’s murder, for instance, is as Paglia asserts, “a propitiatory blood-sacrifice before an objet de culte” (526). These sacrifices rescue Dorian from myriad forms of danger. Sybil’s death prevents Dorian’s marriage to her, which would have been social suicide for a young gentleman of Dorian’s “birth, and position, and wealth” (Dorian Gray 71). Basil’s death prevents Dorian’s secret soul life from exposure while James Vane’s death saves him from social disgrace and the danger of being murdered by the irate brother of the girl he destroyed. But none of these sacrifices save Dorian from the demands of his conscience to lead a pure and morally upright life.

When Yahweh speaks of redemption, he lays down in no uncertain terms what he expects of the sinner. “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (Isaiah 66:2). Biblical redemption requires humility of heart and a reverent fear of God. A man cannot trust in his own good works, but he must acknowledge the cleansing, atoning power of the blood of Christ. He must be a grateful recipient of God’s redeeming grace because any pride in his own worth or that of his
works will meet with divine resistance: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). Anticipating human resistance to the divine imperative, Isaiah foretold that Christ would be “ despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3). Dorian’s aversion to the portrait is like the unrepentant sinner’s view of the Messiah sent to redeem him from his sins. The sinner “esteem[s] him not”—he disregards the sacrifice made for his redemption. Dorian grows to hate and despise his portrait. As it continues to bear the marks of his sin and transgressions, he is repulsed by it, forgetting that it is its very ugliness and horror that preserve his youth, beauty and sin-free countenance. He is unable to receive the trade off in a spirit of humility, contrition or gratitude.

Unlike the biblical Messiah, the portrait lacks the ability to redeem; as I have mentioned earlier, it has no authority to forgive. It cannot make Dorian acceptable in his own sight, as the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God does the believing man in the eyes of his creator. It fails to achieve the perfection of the Biblical ideal and is not a perfect correspondent of the sacrifice of Christ. It does not wash Dorian’s sins away. In the Biblical plan the man who believes in God and receives his son is justified by his faith. He has only to confess his sins to God and then he receives and accepts forgiveness. He becomes a new person. Dorian’s portrait is man-made and, like all things that men may devise, is not able to ‘save’ him from damnation. The sacrifice of the biblical Lamb of God is said to give spiritual and eternal life. Paul states emphatically that “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to
bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:27-8). The sacrifice of Christ then bought eternal life for all who believe. Clearly, in the Biblical bargain, man receives salvation by accepting the gift of God. Otherwise he is doomed because of his sins. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23) writes Paul. Rejection of the Lamb, the gift of God, leads to eternal death. There were many who wanted Jesus dead but we chiefly remember Judas, the disciple who betrayed his master with a kiss and afterwards hanged himself (Matthew 27:3-5). Judas, though “seized with remorse” when seeing that Jesus was condemned to die, did not repent but took his own life (Matthew 27:3). His death was no simple hanging, for the book of Acts records that “[w]ith the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out” (Acts 1:18). Similarly, Dorian’s attempt to destroy his portrait results in his own destruction. In the final chapter of The Picture of Dorian Gray, he recognizes the portrait “had been like conscience to him” and determines to destroy it (Dorian Gray 212). He sees

the knife that had stabbed Basil Hallward. [...] As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter’s work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace. (212)

What motivates Dorian is the mistaken belief that the knife would kill his monstrous soul-life reflected by the painting. What he fails to take into account is that that very soul-life is tied up with his own physical well-being. He cannot live apart from it.
When Dorian reaches for the knife he rejects Basil’s gift and is reduced to a “dead man, [...] withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage” (213). As the portrait was Dorian’s scapegoat, Dorian’s end suggests the fate of the sinner who rejects the Biblical Lamb of God, the scapegoat for the sins of man. Rejection of the Lamb brings judgment upon the sinner. The apostle Peter addressing the rulers and elders of his day said of the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom they had crucified that “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). In Wilde’s novel, Dorian represents the sinner whose salvation depends on his acceptance of the gift of God. Dorian rejects Basil’s gift, and his end is death. Dorian one may assume would have lived on through eternity had he not thrust the knife through his portrait. Thus, the portrait, like the Lamb, gave life and averted judgment. Just as, according to Christian tenets, a sinner is said to lose eternal life when he rejects the sacrifice of Christ, so Dorian lost his youth and his life when he rejected the portrait.

As eternal life is life beyond the grave, it is the welfare of a man’s soul that is at stake when he decides on the path of life he takes. In the fairy tale “The Fisherman and His Soul”, the young fisherman, who is at first rejected by the little mermaid because he has a human soul asks “Of what use is my soul to me?”—and so goes to seek the help of a priest to whom he complains “[M]y Soul hindereth me from having my desire” and desires earnestly of the priest, “Tell me how I can send my Soul away from me, for in truth I have no need of it” (Complete Works 250). This young fisherman is representative of “[t]he one who sows to please his sinful nature”. Paul’s stern warning is that such a
person “from that nature will reap destruction” (Galatians 6:8). In Wilde’s tale the priest beats his breast in response and says,

the Soul is the noblest part of man, and was given to us by God that we should nobly use it. There is no thing more precious than a human soul, nor any earthly thing that can be weighed with it. It is worth all the gold that is in the world, and is more precious than the rubies of the kings. Therefore, my son, think not any more of this matter, for it is a sin that may not be forgiven.” (Complete Works 250)

Both in this tale and in The Picture of Dorian Gray Wilde asserts the value of the human soul from the divine perspective. It is the priest who tells the fisherman that there is “no thing more precious” than it. The merchants tell him otherwise. “It is not worth a clipped piece of silver” (251). They are servants of mammon, which Jesus said one cannot serve if one desires to serve God. The soul is precious to God, not to men. Wilde also suggests that God and his servants understand the effect of choices we make upon the soul’s well being better than most of us do. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, the unrepentant, hypocritical state of Dorian’s heart is reflected in the portrait. Dorian’s soul-life tells the unvarnished truth of its integrity. When the fisherman sends his soul away it is through the aid of “a Satanic ritual” (Quintus 713), obviously suggesting that such an act is diabolical. The priest will not help him. He then seeks a young witch, who confidently boasts, “Tell me thy desire, and I will give it thee, and thou shalt pay me a price, pretty boy, thou shalt pay me a price” (Complete Works 252). The witch’s repetitive reminder that there is a price makes her a surprising mouthpiece for a reiteration of Paul’s warning that the wages of sin is death. The young fisherman’s soul suffers greatly for being without a heart. Quintus asserts that, “Wilde usually held that the body and soul must live
in harmony with one another, or, more precisely, that one’s soul is finally the unity of one’s mind and body” (714). The perils of a disunity of mind and body are vividly depicted in both the novel and the tale although as Quintus notes the stories differ in that in the fisherman’s tale it is the soul which “brings the body to ruin” (714). At Gethsemane, Jesus recognized the struggles between body and spirit and told his disciples to watch and pray (Matthew 26:41). This divine prescription is offered to Dorian Gray whose adamant refusal to comply is a sin of omission that finally costs him much misery and destruction. In the final chapter when Dorian contemplates his portrait, he feels “a wild longing for the unstained purity of his boyhood”, and wonders if there was no hope for him (Dorian Gray 209). Though he remembers his prayer of pride and how it had been answered, he does not attempt a corrective prayer of repentance.

The question remains—what is the “terrible moral in Dorian Gray”? While Wilde’s succinct assertion that “the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment” (Artist As Critic 240) does answer the question to an extent, more is implied by his extensive use of biblical motifs and patterns of redemption and the presence of theological ideas in The Picture of Dorian Gray.

The “Fall” motif in The Picture of Dorian Gray encourages a study of the issues at stake in Eden. The struggle in Eden was for power. Man had dominion over every creature in the Garden, the right to abide in the Garden and rule over it within limits laid down by God. As Dennis Bratcher states in his literary analysis of verses 16 and 17 of Genesis 2:

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humanity is given freedom to live in God’s world, to carry on the activities necessary to maintain life. But this freedom is not absolute. There is a limit placed on the man [...] the idea of boundaries [...] comes to the foreground. Just
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as boundaries exist to define the physical word, so boundaries exist to define human existence in God's world. ("The 'Fall'—A Second Look")

In Eden the humans cross the boundaries "lured by the promise of absolute freedom, the ability to become gods" but "the promise is empty and false, a product of human selfishness and a destructive desire for independence and autonomy" ("The 'Fall'—A Second Look"). Man's struggle to assert his autonomy against the prohibitions laid down by God—who, as Bratcher points out provides no justification for his command—provide Wilde with a blueprint with which to evaluate the contemporary struggle for artistic and personal autonomy against established modes of thought and behaviour.

In The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde retells the Edenic story within his own cultural setting and context. His principal characters are Victorian gentlemen, representative of differing camps—the moralizing conformists, also viewed as hypocrites, the artistic advocates of change, and the innocent who do and do not break out of the Victorian mould. Basil belongs to the first order. He is the moralizing voice of the church but like an errant churchman closeted within his priestly vestments he is at once keeper and transgressor of God's laws. Basil's struggle to retain influence over Dorian is fuelled by an instinctive fear that strange influences—which he knows will inevitably be brought on by Lord Henry—will destroy the boy. The irony is, of course, that he fails to see that his own influence upon Dorian is also something to be feared. Hence, we see Dorian feeling "strangely calm" upon his death, and satisfied that Basil, to whom he attributes all his misery "had gone out of his life (Dorian Gray 152). When Lord Henry seizes the opportunity of an introduction to Dorian, Basil's fear is realized and Dorian is destroyed progressively. Outwardly he retains all his personal beauty and charm. In much the same
way the cry for artistic freedom retains its charm over didactic control. Basil could not prevent the meeting with Lord Henry anymore than Victorian society could stop its aesthetes and decadents from disseminating amongst the impressionable, a new, biblically rebellious code of freedom by which to live. Basil’s death at the hand of the boy he had grown to love and aspired to influence for good is symbolic of the end of the power of the Victorian moralist over a new generation of thinkers determined to shake off the restraints of a religiously moralistic society. Dorian’s own death, conversely, suggests that a total lack of restraint will injure a man rather than enrich his life. What after all is Dorian’s wealth of sensational experiences worth when at last he is reduced, rather prematurely, into an unrecognizable “loathsome” heap (213)? To believe that his soul has been saved because the portrait is returned to its original state takes too great a leap of faith. The degraded state of Dorian’s body vividly pictures horrific divine retribution rather than salvation. It is retribution meted out in response to the sinful man’s rejection of the scapegoat sent in his place.

Divine compassion in “The Fisherman and His Soul” overrules rigid human observation of the law. The priest in the tale changes his mind when white flowers blossom on the grave of the fisherman and the mermaid. Although the union was of a man with a creature not of his kind, God chooses to countenance the love of the pair. In most of the short stories and fairy tales, Wilde suggests the overriding compassion of God for creatures who dare to sacrifice all for love. Wilde understood the heart of the biblical God, the Father who runs to receive the prodigal who would return to him. The return journey all prodigals make is a sacrifice of love unto God for it requires a putting away of the former ways that brought about separation in the first place.
Dorian Gray does not receive redemption because he fails to make this return. When Dorian tells Basil it is too late to pray, he submits to an unbelief that stands in the way of his salvation throughout the course of his life. The New Testament premise is that it is unbelief and not our sins that separate man from God. God took the sins of the world upon himself in the sacrifice of his Son. Man’s part is merely to believe.

In conclusion, while Wilde’s biographers and those who might claim that they knew him personally agree that Wilde struggled between pagan joys and Christian morality, and he himself lived his life (by Christian standards, at least) sowing as it were to the weakness of the flesh rather than the will of the spirit, his art, as reviewed in this study, despite its bold paradoxes and ostensible rebellion against biblical doctrine, reveal in fact a keen and sensitive understanding of the nature of biblical redemption. Whatever the Higher Critics might have managed with the rest of the formerly believing world, they failed with Wilde. The Picture of Dorian Gray marries pagan myth with biblical textures and both put forth the possibility of the miraculous. Wildean art insists on the magical joys of life that neither cold-nosed science nor fearsome, misleading interpretations of the Bible can put out. Science might appear for a time to discredit God and while it does its work the self-righteous aid it in its way by frowning upon the prodigal or dancing with joy upon his downfall, and thus discouraging his faith in the grace and mercy of a loving, forgiving God. Wilde understood the depth of God’s love for the prodigal and his joy over the one who comes to his senses. Many of his works hint that an individual must make amends for his sins and that he is not to expect his reward from human hands but to look to God who does recompense every sincere sacrifice.
Dorian Gray reminds us of our own frailties and our spiritual needs. His life suggests that we will profit nothing if we gain the whole world, but lose our own souls as he did. Dorian's strong inclinations to indulge the senses, his tendency to deceive others and himself, his utter selfishness, his failure of understanding, and his ultimate failure to repent stand as a terrible warning to us all. His portrait in so far as it resembles the Passover sacrifice and Christ encourages us to reconsider the biblical witness that there is a God who seeks reconciliation with man, and that the depth of his love for man caused him to make atonement for man's sin. The unattractive nature of the sin-stained portrait parallels the Messianic sacrifice of Christ laid down in the biblical covenant. Perhaps because it is a sacrifice of innocent blood, it is unpalatable to many on the grounds that a man ought to earn his own redemption rather than rely on a scapegoat to pay the price for his transgressions. Hence we've seen Dorian seeking improvement in the portrait's visage once he has, in his mind, refrained from evil and being sorely disappointed because a divine force exposes his efforts as hypocritical, self-serving and missing the mark. The stern warning in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that a man cannot flout social, moral and religious codes without detriment to his own well-being, that any prolonged continuation in wrongdoing will harden a man's conscience, blind his vision, and render him incapable of repentance, that essential act that secures his redemption. While Wilde's fairy tales suggest that individual sacrifices atone for transgressions, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* veers towards the biblical position that man's efforts to pay the price for his own redemption are futile because they are inevitably flecked by his sinful nature, and he must therefore humbly rely on the saving power of God. The portrait kept Dorian youthful, unblemished and alive. His outward perfection suggests the flawless condition of a soul
whose sins have been washed away by the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God. As Dorian’s ultimate rejection of the portrait resulted in his being turned into a dead and decayed heap, with the corruption of his soul exposed to those from whom he had sought jealously to hide, the novel supports rather than challenges the biblical witness that redemption is available to any man who will believe in the atoning power of Jesus’ blood and that those who reject the gift of God imperil their very souls.

Notes

1 Upbraided for some wrongs in a previous letter, the believers in Corinth felt “a deep sorrow” (2 Corinthians 7:7) and had been quick to repent, so Paul commended them.

2 Guy Willoughby writes that “[...] the portrait images Dorian’s own stifled sense of inner conflict—what Wilde called in one of his newspaper defenses “an exaggerated sense of conscience”” (65).

3 Jesus said, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matthew 7:15-16).

4 In Chapter 7, Dorian contemplating the touch of cruelty on the portrait reflects, “Cruelty! Had he been cruel?” as if unsure that he had indeed been cruel to Sybil. He then blames her for that act of cruelty. “It was the girl’s fault, not his. [...] she had disappointed him. She had been shallow and unworthy” (Dorian Gray 88).

5 Jesus warns his disciples “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Matthew 12:36) and said also “For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open” (Luke 8:17).
6 When a paralytic whose friends, believing that he could be healed, had brought the man to him by digging through an opening in the roof, Jesus marvelling at their faith, said to the infirm man, "Son, your sins are forgiven". For the benefit of some teachers of the law who were incensed by what they considered to be his boldfaced blasphemy, he then healed the man "that [they] may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:1-12).

7 There are several meanings for the word and what I mean here, is a combination of what Easton defines as "[... ] (2.) Favour, kindness, friendship (Gen. 6:8; 18:3; 19:19; 2 Tim. 1:9). (3.) God's forgiving mercy (Rom. 11:6; Eph. 2:5). (4.) The gospel as distinguished from the law (John 1:17; Rom. 6:14; 1 Pet. 5:12)" (298).

8 The theological emphasis of the gospels is on man's need and God's provision of a Redeemer.

9 "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him " (Romans 4: 4-8).

10 Dennis Bratcher writes, "There is only the fact of God's boundaries" ("The 'Fall'—A Second Look"). The writer of the Genesis text does not give an explanation or justification for these boundaries—why they exist—but presents God as Creator and man as creature dependent on Creator, bound to live within the order determined in creation.