



The "Unholy" Trinity: Homoeroticism, Catholicism, and Oscar Wilde

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The “Unholy” Trinity: Homoeroticism, Catholicism, and Oscar Wilde

Jill G. Calangian

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Abstract

This paper examines two bodies of work by Oscar Wilde deemed antithetical to one another by literary scholars. Through a comparative analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, said to represent Wilde's homosexuality, and *De Profundis*, said to represent his spirituality, I endeavor to reconcile Wilde's seemingly opposing halves and illuminate the truth of his identity. I hypothesize that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *De Profundis* do not represent conflicting versions of Wilde, but rather, serve as a continuum that charts Wilde's course as he grapples with his sexuality and relationship to Catholicism. Oscar Wilde's spiritual sincerity and authenticity of the self that he presents in these two works have long been questioned and debated. The questions I investigate are: How can Wilde's spiritual transformation be read as sincere in the face of Wilde's paradoxical language? Also, what does the language specific to Catholicism and homosexuality in these texts reveal about Wilde's identity, writing, and his relationships to Christ and beautiful young men? I intend to exhibit that the taboo nature of Catholicism juxtaposed with the taboo nature of homosexuality in late-Victorian England establish a commonality and congruity within two texts often seen as contradictory. Common language enables Wilde to express his sexuality through the veils of Catholicism and paradox; this semi-concealed revelation of self conveys neither shame nor unease, but the sincerity, suffering, and beauty intrinsic to Wilde's Catholic and homosexual experiences. This thesis finds that body and soul; sincerity and paradox; religion and sexuality cannot be separated, as the fragments that comprise Wilde's identity best reveal his truth when viewed as interlocking puzzle pieces.

Dedication

Thank you to my amazing family for believing I was strong enough to embark on this challenging and fulfilling adventure. Mom, Dad, Grace, and George: your never-ending supply of love and support throughout this entire process uplifted me and made me feel invincible; our many lunches together fed my soul, creativity, and resolve. I am so grateful.

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Chapter I

Introduction

*“I hope you have not been leading a double life,
pretending to be wicked and being really
good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.”*

-- Wilde, “The Importance of Being Ernest”

The case for, or as is more often the case, against Oscar Wilde’s (October 16, 1854 - November 30, 1900) spiritual sincerity arises from the author’s propensity for sarcasm, paradox, and witty epigrams; Wilde’s roundabout manner of self-expression prompts his readers and critics to piece together fragments of his identity in an attempt to glean motives, locate inconsistencies, and ultimately discover his truth. Despite a prolific literary oeuvre that, in one way or another, voices Wilde’s deepest inner thoughts, Wilde seemed to delight in being unknowable. This paper examines *The Picture of Dorian Gray (TPDG)* (1890/revised 1891), Wilde’s only novel written at what was arguably the height of his career and *De Profundis (DP)* (1905 and 1908 in part/1962 in full), dramatic monologue and correspondence to his then-lover Lord Alfred Douglas, written while Wilde was imprisoned, to analyze how the language that complicates our understanding of Wilde is the same language that illuminates truths about the enigmatic author.

Wilde’s literary success was curtailed and interrupted by a series of trials for “gross indecency,” the legal term used to criminalize homosexuality, which imbued his final years in

scandal. Until 1861, the laws governing late-nineteenth-century Victorian England during which Wilde lived and wrote considered homosexuality a criminal offense punishable by death. Wilde was convicted under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 and sentenced to a less harsh sentence of two years' hard labor in English prison Reading Gaol. Wilde, though married to Constance Lloyd and father to sons Cyril and Vyvyan, was known by his literary circle to engage in same-sex dalliances. Scholar Ellis Hanson says of Wilde in his article "Christ for Christ's Sake," "To advertise his sexuality, he mastered the open secret" (231). To further the "[...] genius for... public confession" (Hanson 231) Wilde possessed, he wore a green carnation in his buttonhole, which became emblematic of male homosexuality (Beckson 387). Additionally, *TPDG* was critically regarded as having homosexual undertones. Scholar Ari Adut writes that laws enforcing homosexual norms in Victorian England were inconsistent (213), and that transgressions that caused publicized scandals were harshly punished because the audience became contaminated by the newly-acquired details (216). Acknowledgement of Wilde's double life did not result in punishment until his transgressions became a public scandal via his trial and ensuing conviction.

Though Wilde was not persecuted for his fascination with Roman Catholicism, the social climate of Wilde's England viewed alignment with the religion a subversive act. Jerusha McCormack details the reasons siding with Catholicism was rebellious for Wilde, an Irish Protestant and denizen of England whose loyalties should have laid with the Anglican Church of England: Catholicism was an "alien" or "foreign" religion, as it was Roman rather than English (218). This phenomenon¹ of Wilde and his peers being entranced by and converting to Roman Catholicism was in McCormack's view a turning away "from the "right way of thinking,"

¹ Called the "Oxford Movement," McCormack says Oxford, England in the late 1840's

forsaking a “doctrine or system regarded as true for one esteemed false” (McCormack 212). Additionally, “Catholicism in England was becoming the focus of a new and emerging gay culture” (McCormack 212), which further solidified the religion as an incorrect, outsider way of thinking.

Catholic images and symbols found their way into Wilde’s writing. In *De Profundis*, Wilde recounts his Christ-like suffering in prison and quotes the Gospel to describe his spiritual transformation. It was Wilde’s friend, journalist Robert Ross, who named the book *De Profundis*, which has its origins in Psalm 130. Seen early in Wilde’s writing career, *TPDG* displays a multitude of passages that pay homage to the Catholic Church and its rituals. Wilde describes Dorian Gray’s attraction for the sacrament of communion (Wilde *TPDG* 135) and his collection of “ecclesiastical vestments,” one “figured with representations of the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ” (142-43). The beautiful and extravagant aspects of Catholicism appealed to Wilde, a fact best explained by his advocacy of Aestheticism, the literary and artistic movement which challenged Victorian morals and emphasized the appreciation of beauty above political or social meaning in art, and of the Decadent Movement, which valued excess, artificiality, and creativity over rationale. Wilde’s mother rechristened him into the Catholic religion as a child, but his fascination was ignited at Oxford with the help of critic and novelist Walter Pater. The religion’s influence is apparent in Wilde’s writing and his life choices that culminated in his controversial deathbed conversion.

Scholars tend to view Catholicism and homosexuality as seemingly contradictory ideas, wherein *TPDG* represents Wilde’s sexual self, while *De Profundis* is seen as encapsulating his transformation to Catholicism and denial of the identity presented in *TPDG*. Following this rubric, scholars tend to choose a side in an attempt to explain Wilde’s true identity – to see one

book as “true” and denying what the other book is expressing. One set of scholars takes Wilde’s transformation, his life-long fascination, and his conversion as his being a devout Catholic who perhaps is conflicted or ashamed of his sexuality². Another set of scholars takes the stance that Wilde’s transformation is insincere, and is simply paradoxical or an “Aesthetic pose³” for the sake of reinventing himself.

In this thesis, I will examine Wilde’s use of the Catholic motif in expressing homoeroticism as a means to elucidate Wilde’s identity. I will analyze how this imagery contributes to our understanding of Wilde’s truth as it pertains to his relationship with Catholicism. I intend to show how Wilde’s spiritual transformation is a fulfillment of ideas first introduced in his earlier work. By exploring the taboo nature of Catholicism, I endeavor to establish a commonality and congruity with the taboo nature of homosexuality of Wilde’s time.

The questions I will investigate are: what does a comparative reading of *TPDG* and *De Profundis* illuminate about Wilde’s spiritual transformation in *De Profundis*? How can Wilde’s spiritual transformation be read as sincere in the face of Wilde’s paradoxical language? How might Wilde’s use of Catholic imagery express his sexuality and identity, and what might we glean from his choice to embrace Catholicism – given that conversion to the religion was considered a seditious act in nineteenth-century Victorian England? Finally, what does the language around Catholicism and sexuality in these texts reveal about Wilde’s identity, writing, and his own feelings about his sexuality?

I argue that *TPDG* and *De Profundis* do not represent conflicting versions of Wilde’s identity but rather serve as a continuum that charts Wilde’s course as he grapples with his

² Joseph Carroll and H. Wendell Howard are examples of scholars who make these arguments.

³ This term is borrowed from Michael R. Doyle’s 1999 article entitled “Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis*: Homosexual Self-Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal.”

sexuality and religion. The two texts together provide a storyline for understanding where Wilde's spiritual transformation begins and create a trajectory that diagrams how Wilde arrives at explicitly identifying with Christ in *De Profundis*. Through close readings of each text, I argue that this amalgamation of Catholicism and homoeroticism share parallels where ideas such as the soul, the Holy Trinity, and even sincerity, itself, are redefined to accommodate and accurately express Wilde's unique perspective of a universal human experience. The historical issue of conversion to Roman Catholicism being a subversive act is overshadowed by the scandal and ultimate punishment of Wilde's prohibited sexual activities; I intend to illustrate that by employing one taboo to discuss another, Wilde is solidifying his identity as eternally "other," an outsider who does not fit neatly into any category. By investigating the fragments that make up Wilde's identity as communicated in *TPDG* and *De Profundis*, I hypothesize that a common language enables Oscar Wilde to express his sexuality through the veils of Catholicism and paradox; and that this semi-concealed revelation of self conveys not shame or unease, but the sincerity, suffering, and beauty intrinsic to both Wilde's Catholic and homosexual experiences.

Chapter II

Lifting the Veil on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

“I felt as if I had my hand upon Shakespeare’s heart,

and was counting each separate throb and pulse of passion.

I thought of the wonderful boy-actor, and saw his face in every line.”

-- Wilde, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H. ”

The Picture of Dorian Gray (TPDG) was first published in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* on June 20, 1890. Published the following year in April, the lengthier book version included seven more chapters. *TPDG* chronicles the downfall of eponymous character Dorian Gray, a young, impressionable socialite; his artist friend Basil Hallward who paints the fateful portrait of Dorian; and Basil’s friend, Lord Henry Wotton (sometimes called “Harry”) whose immoral influence proves attractive to Dorian. Whether considered a pact with the devil, scientific miracle, wish fulfillment, or supernatural interference, Dorian’s desire to stay beautiful and young while the portrait ages with the brunt of his sins comes to fruition. After seeing his image in the painting for the first time, Dorian realizes the weight of Lord Henry’s words that “When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you” (Wilde *TPDG* 24). In a fit of grief and desperation, Dorian cries out the spell that sets the novel in motion:

I shall grow old, and horrible and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the

picture that was to grow old! For that - for that - I would give everything!
Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give
my soul for that! (Wilde *TPDG* 28)

As the picture inexplicably alters in appearance with each misdeed, Dorian attempts to atone for his sins, several times, to no avail. He conceals the painting from prying eyes, and it is revealed only twice more in the story: once, to Basil who Dorian murders afterwards, and the final time when servants discover it after Dorian's death. Longing for his previous life, a life of innocence, and wishing to erase proof of his past, Dorian stabs the painting; the fatal blow simultaneously ends Dorian's life, returns the painted image to its former, unscathed likeness, and transfers the ravages of time and immorality onto Dorian.

Set in late-nineteenth century London, the novel's era and location matches those in which Wilde was writing. Wilde's connection with Aestheticism and France's Decadent Movement present themselves in the novel as descriptions of ornate décor, indulgent lifestyles, and discussions about the importance of art and beauty. However, some elements of the quintessential gothic novel come through in Dorian's intense fear of his secret being found out which leads to moments of suspense and madness; the supernatural aspect of the changing picture; and in passages containing death, decay, and horror. Read as a ghost story or a good vs. evil allegory, Oscar Wilde's only novel provides an insight into his life.

This chapter considers the scholarly conversation regarding Catholicism and homosexuality in *TPDG*, and consequently, Oscar Wilde's personal life. Biographer Richard Ellmann insists on viewing Wilde as a gay icon while Joseph Pearce argues for an inherently devout Catholic representation of Wilde, illustrating how some critics tend to see Wilde as one way or another. Scholars like Michael Buma allege that Wilde is embarrassed by his moralistic

and Catholic leanings that show themselves in the novel, while Joseph Carroll argues that *TPDG* contains homosexual undertones, but that Wilde has feelings of guilt and shame regarding his own homosexuality. Regarding the overlap of Wilde's Catholic beliefs and his homosexuality, scholar Martin Lockerd studies the factors that cause these two halves to be disharmonious in the novel, as well as in Wilde's life, while Ellis Hanson and Shushma Malik attempt to find commonalities without claiming they cause tension in the book and within Wilde's identity, however some of their arguments exist with an eye towards Aestheticism.

What I perceive is missing from the scholarly argument is flexibility in defining what constitutes as Catholic and what defines being a gay man. Many of the scholars mentioned critique Wilde and his novel through the lens of their rigid rendering of what it means to be Catholic and/or homosexual, but the belief and behavioral spectrum on which human beings fall is largely varied. Their criticism does not take into consideration that being Catholic or homosexual are not fixed points of identity that can be defined by an arbitrary set of rules. Interpretations of Wilde run the gamut from secretly devoutly Catholic to uncommitted Catholic, depending on what the particular scholar deems an acceptable way to practice religion; Wilde has been labeled bisexual, gay icon, and devoted husband depending on the which love interest is being discussed, as Wilde was indeed a loving husband and father, as well as a passionate lover of young men. My research resists defining Wilde by rigid, permanent terms in order to understand the complexities of his identity.

I hypothesize that Oscar Wilde's identity is elucidated when his sexuality is viewed through the lens of Catholicism in *TPDG*. My argument fills the gap in the existing scholarship by my assertion that Wilde methodically employs the veil of Catholicism to convey beauty and suffering in homosexuality without attributing this appreciation for beauty to Wilde's Aesthetic

leaning. In addition, my argument does not suggest that the veil of Catholicism exists to hide his sexuality due to shame or guilt; rather, Wilde utilizes the veil to assign an elevated, religious-like experience to the fragments of his life and work that involve love, fascination, and sexual desire. My interpretation of Wilde's novel and of Wilde's experience as being Catholic and gay may encompass struggle and inner turmoil, but never stemming from guilt. The language of Catholicism imposes profound meaning to homosexual desire that would not exist without the religion's passionate imagery.

Wilde's literary work, *TPDG*, in particular, has been said to mimic biographical aspects of Wilde's life; to analyze his written word and his personal data as intertwined and indistinguishable from one another is to unify disjointed puzzle pieces. Scholar Joseph Carroll agrees that Dorian is, in part, a representation of Wilde. In his article entitled "Aestheticism, Homoeroticism, and Christian Guilt in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Carroll says, "Wilde partially identifies with his own protagonist" (288), and "Dorian Gray embodies Wilde's own disposition to live in absorbed and egoistic delight at pure aesthetic sensation" (294). Ann W. Astell is another scholar who sites a similarity between Wilde and his character, Dorian. Astell says in her article "My Life is a Work of Art": Oscar Wilde's Novelistic and Religious Conversion" that "Wilde shared with his fictive alter ego a life-long attraction to Roman Catholicism as "the greatest and most romantic" of religions" (199). The idea for painter Basil, the handsome male focus, and even the fantasy of the painting growing old while its subject stays young is based on a real-life occurrence that took place six years prior to the book's publish, as told by Philippe Jullian⁴. In Jullian's essay, he says, "It is Oscar who often speaks through Dorian, and always through Lord Henry. That life of walks and conversations is a little

⁴ From *A Norton Critical Edition: The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Ed. By Donald L. Lawler, 1988.

reminiscent of Oxford” (407). In a letter to a friend, Wilde, himself, says the novel “contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry, what the world thinks of me: Dorian what I would like to be – in other ages perhaps” (Carroll 290). There are several instances where what is true of fiction is also true of Wilde’s controversial and colorful life.

Much of the criticism surrounding Wilde and his work refer to Wilde as a “Christian,” a word signifying a follower of Jesus Christ and the Catholic faith; for the purpose of this paper, I will treat the terms “Christian” and “Catholic” interchangeably unless the original text delineates a different meaning for “Christian.” Alternately, the term “pagan,” as Wilde is sometimes called in critical essays, will be treated to mean the opposite – someone who is not a follower of the Catholic religion, rather than someone who does not follow any main religion.

Although an overlap in religion and sexuality is an accepted concept for some critics, there are others who treat the two halves of Wilde’s identity and writing as disparate spheres. In an article called “The Importance of Being Pious,” literary critic Jeet Heer documents the biographers and scholars who take the “either/or” stance. Heer says, “One difficulty with religious treatments of Wilde is their tendency to treat his sexuality and his faith as mutually exclusive: Either Wilde was a gay icon or he was a poster boy for conversion” (Heer 22). Those writing about Wilde and his work claim Wilde for themselves as someone who fits in with their worldview. While biographer Richard Ellmann “encourages us to overlook Wilde’s conversion and not let it spoil our image of him as an icon of the gay lifestyle” (Heer 21), later biographers and critics vie for a more “Catholic interpretation” of Wilde. Biographer and Catholic convert Joseph Pearce argues for Wilde’s “latent Christianity” and editor Jeffrey Tucker writes that Jesus Christ was Wilde’s true “lifelong lover” while labeling him a “closet Catholic” (21). The term “closet” or “closeted” brings to mind someone whose homosexuality is not publicly known, so it

seems ironic that such a word is used to reference a religious hiding, of sorts. According to Heer, these critics view Wilde as a “deeply moral writer whose work is imbued with a Christian subtext” (21). Biographer Michael Coren denies Wilde’s homosexuality: “In fact Wilde was not really homosexual at all, and only ‘used’ young men [...] More than that, however, Wilde became a Catholic. The lion of decadence became the lamb of Christianity” (Heer 22). Though later there is some wavering, as Coren accepts the term “bisexual” rather than homosexual, and Tucker admits that Coren’s denial of Wilde’s homosexuality does not make Wilde less of a gay icon (Heer 22), there exists a natural inclination for some critics to disregard one side of Oscar Wilde. Reducing his identity to one or the other simplifies the task of defining Wilde, but this narrow view does not encompass all his complex sides, and therefore does not tell a complete story.

In Michael Buma’s article “*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or, The Embarrassing Orthodoxy of Oscar Wilde,” he takes the idea of Wilde being a “closet Catholic” one step farther by asserting that Wilde goes to great lengths to hide his religious devotion and the message of morality in the novel. Buma recalls Wilde’s defense of *TPDG* against critics who considered the 1890 story immoral. Wilde says the moral of the story is, “All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment” (Buma 19). However, when the book version was published one year later, it included the “Preface” where Wilde changes his stance to “there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book” (19). Buma claims the reasons Wilde retracts his statement admitting the novel has a moral lesson is two-fold: “to articulate Wilde’s version of the “art for art’s sake” credo” and to “obscure the fact that he had written a book with an ostensibly Christian moral” (19). Buma sides with Wilde’s earlier statement, arguing that Wilde “presents a universe in which God exists and offers human some capacity to know good and evil, as well as the “free

will' to choose whichever course of moral or immoral they see fit" (19). Wilde distances himself from the Christian interpretation of his novel to solidify his position as first and foremost Aesthete, but what else can be gleaned from Wilde's turnabout? Wilde's propensity to label the novel, and perhaps himself, one thing and then insist it be called another is a pattern Wilde exhibits both in his writing and in his personal life. As Wilde, his identity, and the meaning behind his words are not a fixed point, his definition of these entities shift and transform.

Though discussions of Wilde's sexuality and homosexual undertones are left out of Buma's study of *TPDG*, certain critics dedicate their articles to investigating the ways homoeroticism weaves itself into Wilde's novel, most without considering the "Christian allegory" argument. Scholar Noel Annan writes about the coded language used by homosexual authors in his article "The Cult of Homosexuality in England 1850-1950." He quotes Richard Ellmann as saying "that Wilde delighted in seeing how many subtle allusions he could make to the secret vice which could be read by the unsuspecting in a harmless way; and surely he meant the reader to infer that Lord Henry Wootton had seduced Dorian Gray" (Annan 197). Annan calls this literary technique of exposing a secret without fully revealing it an art, "the art of making the arcane explicit and yet not explicit" (97). My argument that Wilde utilizes the veil of Catholicism in *TPDG* to express his homosexuality, that he uses one aspect of his life to reveal another, is an example of the coded language Annan observes among gay writers in that particular time period. Of this desire to coyly express one's secret, Annan says, "Yet what strikes one today is how the determination to conceal was even stronger than the urge to name the unmentionable" (197). Though Wilde was on trial for "gross indecency," the term used to criminalize homosexual activity, Wilde denied that he was homosexual at his trial (Annan 197). Wilde's denial in court is reminiscent of his denial in a letter: "My position is curious: I am not a

Catholic: I am simply a violent Papist.”⁵ Even with evidence mounted against him, Wilde rebuffs lifestyles he once embraced. Wilde rejects labels, in this case homosexuality, when it is being used against him, or when others impose their expectations and definitions onto that label. Whether homosexual or Catholic, Wilde accepts these classifications only on his own terms.

In regards to *TPDG*, Joseph Carroll points out “there is no explicit homosexuality in the story” but that “the atmosphere of the story is saturated with homoerotic feeling and style” (295). He lists four elements that, when combined, imbue the story with homoeroticism: “images of luxuriant sensuality, an overriding preoccupation with male beauty, the depiction of effeminate mannerism along the characters, and a perpetual patter of snide remarks that are hostile to women, to marriage, and to sexual fidelity” (Carroll 295). Another critic who observes homosexual subtexts in the novel is Lawrence Danson. In Danson’s article entitled “Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves: Impermanence of Personality in Oscar Wilde,” he argues that the reader realizes Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry’s homosexual desire before the characters themselves do; self-revelation unravels for them slowly, as they are, at first, seemingly unaware of their same-sex attraction. The audience interprets knowing glances between Basil and Dorian as “a glance of homosexual recognition,” (Danson 88), however, “the homosexual personality that Basil supposedly recognizes in Dorian” is not recognized by Dorian until later when he is “enlightened” by Lord Henry’s advice that “the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it” (89). Realizing a homosexual personality in Dorian causes Basil “terror,” as he experiences “the homosexual panic of his self-discovery” (Danson 89.) Although male/female relationships

⁵ This quote is taken from page 125 of H. Wendell Howard’s article “Roman Catholicism in the Oscar Wilde-R-Ness,” in which he notes the origin of the quote to be from Wilde’s *The Complete Letters*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000, p. 1184.

exist in *TPDG* - those of Dorian and Sybil and Lord Henry and his wife, the rarely-seen Victoria Wotton - intense, romantic emotions are exclusive to same-sex relationships.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is rife with passages brimming with homoerotic appreciation and desire. Danson cites Lord Henry's affect on Dorian after Dorian realizes what is thought to be his own homosexual desire: Lord Henry's words "had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he now felt was vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses" (89). The term "secret chord" recalls the secret language exchanged between gay men discussed in Noel Annan's article; Lord Henry taps into an internal, private part to which no one else is privy. The literal meaning of Lord Henry "touching" Dorian refers to his influence over Dorian's thoughts and feelings, but the sentence evokes the intimate idea of physical touch. And finally, that Lord Henry provokes a visceral, physical response from Dorian in his "vibrating and throbbing" supposes a mutual attraction between the two male characters. Danson says, "Dorian's coming out is simultaneously a reading-in: his homosexual personality [...] exists first in the eyes of others" (89). Another instance when Lord Henry exhibits appreciation for Dorian that could be read as homosexual desire comes, ironically, when Dorian sings Sybil's praises. Lord Henry sees that Dorian's cheeks are flushed with excitement. Wilde says, "Lord Henry watched him with a subtle sense of pleasure [...] His nature had developed like a flower, had borne blossoms of scarlet flame. Out of its secret hiding-place had crept his Soul, and Desire had come to meet it on the way" (Wilde *TPDG* 59). What could be a passage about Dorian's sensual, romantic love for Sybil quickly turns to Lord Henry's almost lust-like preoccupation with Dorian. Referring once again to a "secret hiding-place," Lord Henry gains access to Dorian's innermost being, the depths of which Sybil never gets to see.

The phenomena of gay, Decadent writers converting to Catholicism inspired scholar Ellis Hanson to coin the term “Decadent Catholicism,” however the next set of scholars argue that the doctrine of Catholicism and homosexuality are disharmonious ideas within *TPDG* and for those within the gay Catholic community, which includes Oscar Wilde. Scholar Martin Lockerd examines the role the Catholic Church plays for Decadent Catholics in his essay “A Satirist of Vices and Follies: Beardsley, Eliot, and Images of Decadent Catholicism.” Lockerd discusses Ellis Hanson and other “scholars of late nineteenth-century literature” who acknowledge “the tension at the heart of the decadent movement between competing desires for hedonistic excess and the spiritual sanctuary offered by Rome” (143). Hanson observes “the Church provided a framework for understanding and interpreting the shame of internalized homophobia” (Lockerd 144). In his article that asks the question “Are Catholics Decadent or are Decadents Catholic?” critic Robert Whelan says a “popular explanation” for Decadents being attracted to the Catholic Church “has been that, as homosexuals living in a society in which their practices were illegal, they found in the Catholic Church’s firm moral teachings a means of getting their lives under control” (22). I argue that Wilde is attracted to the Catholic Church and utilizes Catholic imagery in his writing, not as a means for redemption for himself or his characters, but because these religious ideas help focus his identity, which includes his sexuality. The idea that homosexuals lack a moral compass or that discord consumes their lives, necessitating the Catholic Church to save them from themselves, so to speak, contradicts my argument.

Joseph Carroll expands on the tension between Catholicism and homosexuality, and argues that negative emotions associated with homosexuality, such as guilt, saturate the overall feeling of *TPDG*. Carroll says, “Wilde partially identifies with his own protagonist, and he is himself riven by the conflict between homoerotic aestheticism and Christian pathos. The

unresolved conflicts in the plot of the novel reflect deep divisions in his own personal identity” (Carroll 288). Although Dorian experiences moments of anguish when weighing morality versus immorality, the passages that exhibit the most raw emotion, intensity, and beauty are those that meld an appreciation for the male figure and Catholic imagery. In addition, Carroll says that to fully understand “the deep symbolic structure of Wilde’s novel, we must a recognition of deep human subjectivity with a recognition of Wilde’s own conflicted feelings about his homosexuality” (289) because those elements of “guilt and self-loathing” are “central to the meaning of the story” (288-89). My understanding of Wilde’s treatment of Catholic morality and the underlying erotic nature of the novel does not allow for the guilt narrative; rather, Wilde elevates his fascination for male beauty to a religious experience. Carroll argues that “the Christian ethos manifests itself only negatively, as guilt and anguish” in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (292), however I view the “Christian ethos” as the driving force behind some of the novel’s most passionate passages.

The theme of guilt and shame extends to both spheres of Wilde’s identity and to the two motifs present in his novel; Michael Buma claims Wilde is embarrassed to be viewed as devoutly Catholic and moralistic in the construction of the novel, just as Joseph Carroll claims Wilde feels negatively about his sexuality and that the book exposes an intrinsic Catholic guilt. To assert that Wilde is ashamed of either fascination is to ignore the suggestion that his identity is best elucidated when both Catholicism and homosexuality are viewed in a positive light; that each half, on its own, completes his identity, but when considered together, the clearest version of Oscar Wilde is seen.

An example of religion bringing into focus the depths of Basil’s obsession for Dorian comes in the form of Basil’s confession of his secret. Basil tells Dorian:

Wait till you hear what I have to say, Dorian. From the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you [...] I worshipped you. I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When you were away from me you were still present in my art [...] for in such mad worship there is peril, the peril of losing them, no less than the peril of keeping them.
(Wilde *TPDG* 117)

Basil uses the phrase “I worshipped you,” which glorifies Dorian, elevating him to the status of a god to be venerated. Basil’s soul is affected by the deep admiration he feels for Dorian. This confession describes same-sex fascination, but it is also reminiscent of a parishioner worshipping at the altar, their deep devotion influencing not just their mind, but also their soul. The word “confession” in this context does not only refer to the traditional meaning of an admission, it brings to mind the Catholic ritual of acknowledging sins. Basil’s tone here is particularly penitent, not because he possesses these feelings for Dorian, but because he had kept them concealed. Dorian, relieved to learn that Basil’s secret is his admiration and not that he is privy to Dorian’s changing, aging painting, calls it a “very disappointing confession” (119), and causes Basil to feel deflated. Basil says of the confession, “Now that I have made it, something seems to have gone out of me. Perhaps one should never put one’s worship into words” (119). These images that seemingly describe religious devotion continue with Dorian’s thoughts: “The painter’s absurd fits of jealousy, his wild devotion, his extravagant panegyrics, his curious reticences – he understood them now, and he felt sorry. There seemed to him to be something

tragic in a friendship so colored by romance” (20). This exchange between Basil and Dorian, indeed, has a romantic tone, as well as a religious one.

My argument most aligns with scholars who find a commonality between Catholicism and homoeroticism, and insist on the possibility that the two ideas can exist harmoniously in the novel and within Wilde’s universe. In Ellis Hanson’s article entitled “Christ for Christ’s Sake,” he says, “Wilde often spoke of Christ and the Church in the same way he spoke about beautiful objects and beautiful boys – in the language of fascination and seduction” (233). Is it simply the aesthetic and decadent facets of Catholicism that attracts Wilde? Or does the language surrounding the religion assist in expressing homoeroticism in a more refined, crystal clear way? While I tend to agree that the aesthetic and decadent aspects of Catholicism are attractive to Wilde, I don’t contend with its role in conveying a stronger articulation of Wilde’s sexuality. Shushma Malik gives an example of Hanson’s sentiment in her article “All Roads Lead to Rome?: Decadence, Paganism, Catholicism and the Later Life of Oscar Wilde.” Malik chronicles Wilde’s romantic encounters that take place on his way to Rome; the first with a fifteen-year old boy he meets at a stopover in Palermo who he repeatedly kisses “behind the high altar,” and the second is “another young boy named Dario, with whom he goes to see the Pope” (8). Malik says:

Wilde will not let Dario kiss him out of doors [...] Wilde does not deny himself such pleasures, but instead decodes to affect a form of separation between the decadent space in which he kisses, and the spiritual space in which he does not. In Rome, owing to the city’s unique ability to allow Roman pagan and Roman Catholic traditions to co-exist in a single space,

Wilde can find a balance between paganism, Catholicism and decadence.

(Malik 8)

On his way to the epicenter of Catholic religion, Wilde finds himself intertwining the spiritual and the sexual, religion and eroticism. This same meshing of seemingly conflicting ideas also makes itself known in the pages of *TPDG*.

The passage describing Lord Henry daydreaming about Dorian and their interactions illustrates Wilde utilizing the veil of Catholicism to express homoeroticism. Catholic images juxtaposed with homoerotic desire convey that two seemingly conflicting ideas can harmoniously coexist in a book and in life. Lord Henry says of Dorian:

The pulse and passion of youth were in him [...] It was delightful to watch him. With his beautiful face and his beautiful soul, he was a thing to wonder at [...] He was like one of those gracious figures in a pageant or a play, whose joys seem to be remote from one, but whose sorrows stir one's sense of beauty, and whose wounds are like red roses. (Wilde *TPDG* 62).

To confirm the religious nature of the phrase “wounds are like red roses,” a footnote in the novel states, “Christ’s wounds were traditionally described as such” (Wilde *TPDG* 62). Lord Henry’s preoccupation with Dorian’s youth and male beauty hints at male worship with a homosexual subtext. His minute attention to Dorian’s aesthetic inside and out can be read as homosexual desire, though it may not be explicitly stated. In this passage, Dorian is put on stage in a “pageant or play,” a pedestal of sorts. Christ’s wounds are used to describe Dorian’s figurative wounds; the brightly-colored and even grotesque “red roses” of Dorian’s wounds that signify his overt, beautiful vulnerabilities garners Lord Henry’s affection. This image of Christ’s wounds is again

referenced after Dorian stabs Basil to death. The painting bears evidence of Dorian's violent behavior, suggestive of stigmata, the Catholic manifestation of Jesus' wounds on others: "What was that loathsome red dew that gleamed, wet and glistening, on one of the hands, as though the canvas had sweated blood?" (177). Laying Christ's physical suffering next to Dorian's magnificent attractive qualities represents Wilde's own homosexual ache. Wilde uses the language of Catholicism and imagery so ingrained with religious heaviness and seriousness to communicate one man's appreciation for another.

Another concept evocative of the Catholic religion is the soul; Wilde often writes about the relationship between body and soul in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, however, it is the interconnectedness of the soul to homosexual desire that is most telling of Wilde's identity. He does not separate Catholicism from homoeroticism in the novel because in his world, they go hand-in-hand. While contemplating if Dorian likes him, Basil tells Lord Henry, "As a rule, he is charming to me [...] Now and then, however, he is horribly thoughtless, and seems to take a real delight in giving me pain. Then I feel, Harry, that I have given away my whole soul to some one who treats it as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity" (14). The "flower" Wilde mentions symbolizes the green carnation he and other gay writers would place into their coat's buttonhole to indicate homosexuality. If we are to read Basil's comments about Dorian as romantic interest, giving away one's heart would convey love, but Basil gives "away his whole soul." From a Catholic standpoint, after death, your soul ascends to Christ in heaven if you've lead a moral life; alternately, you can promise your soul to the devil in a Faustian deal (similar to the one Dorian makes, if we are to subscribe to that interpretation of what causes his eternal youth and beauty.) Basil's soul, his essence, belongs to a man instead of to a divine being.

Wilde details Dorian receiving Communion, a Catholic sacrament in which those who partake receive bread and wine meant to symbolize the body and blood of Christ, but the focus of the passage are the male figures performing the rituals. Wilde describes Dorian's intrigue:

It was rumored of him once that he was about to join the Roman Catholic Communion; and certainly the Roman ritual had always a great attraction for him [...] He loved to kneel down on the cold marble pavement, and watch the priest, in his stiff, flowered dalmatic, slowly and with white hands moving aside the veil of the tabernacle, or raising aloft the jeweled lantern-shaped monstrance with that pallid wafer that at times, one would fain think, is indeed the "panis coelestis," the bread of angels, or robed in the garments of the Passion of Christ, breaking the Host into the chalice, and smiting his breast for his sins. The fuming censers, that the grave boys, in their lace and scarlet, tossed into the air like great gilt flowers, had their subtle fascination for him. (Wilde *TPDG* 135-36)

Although this precise attention to a priest's hand movements and his vestment is not automatic proof of homosexual desire, in the context of the novel and Wilde's propensity to mingle the two lifestyles, this instance can, at least, be read as Dorian's appreciation for the same sex. Wilde's commentary on the grave boy's "lace and scarlet" religious garb mixes the vulnerability of lace with the bloody red color of Christ's wounds that we see earlier in the novel.

My study of Catholic images melding with homoerotic ones in *TPDG* takes the two fragments of Oscar Wilde's life and writing to form a cohesive understanding of "the love that dare not speak its name," a euphemism for homosexuality most associated with Wilde. Employing the Catholic veil to convey homosexuality or homoeroticism does not conceal the

desire, nor is it an admission of guilt or shame. In fact, the opposite effect occurs when Wilde envelops the idea of homoeroticism in Catholic lexicon in his novel; by expressing a homoerotic encounter as a religious experience, Wilde magnifies male beauty, elevates the language of desire, and intensifies emotions that would not have the same weight had Wilde written it plainly. Wilde reveals, and at the same time conceals when he uses the Catholic lens to communicate homosexual desire; this nuanced way of looking at *TPDG* gives us fresh insight into the identity of its enigmatic author.

Oscar Wilde's sincerity, conversion, seriousness about Catholicism, and even his homosexuality, have been questioned and debated. The next chapter focuses on the second half of my argument pertaining to the sincerity of Wilde's spiritual transformation in *De Profundis*. I delve into *De Profundis*' paradoxical language and argue that his contradictory manner of writing, illuminates, rather than complicates our understanding of Wilde's spiritual journey. Wilde's transformation begins in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and continues in *De Profundis* and when read together, diagrams how paradoxical language translates to religious sincerity.

Chapter III

The Sincerity of Paradox in *De Profundis*

“For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.”

-- Wilde, “The Truth of Masks”

Oscar Wilde penned *De Profundis*, a love letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, while imprisoned in Reading Gaol for “gross indecency.” Wilde’s initial court battle against Lord Alfred’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, brought about several more trials, which ultimately lands Wilde in prison for homosexual acts. Wilde was not allowed to send the letter from prison; rather he took it with him upon his release in 1897. Wilde gave the letter, at the time entitled *Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis (Letter: In Prison and in Chains)*, to former lover and friend Robert Ross (referred to as Robbie in *De Profundis*) who published a shortened version five years after Wilde’s death in 1905. Ross omitted any reference to Lord Alfred and his family and called the book *De Profundis*, meaning “from the depths,” a reference to biblical passage Psalm 130. Ross donated the letter to the British Museum with instructions that it should not be released in Lord Alfred’s lifetime, fifty years. The letter went through several publications and was published in its entirety in 1962, which is the version I refer to in this paper.

De Profundis begins with Wilde detailing his tumultuous relationship with Lord Alfred, whom he calls “Boise.” Wilde documents Lord Alfred’s part in the tragic events that occur leading up to and during his imprisonment. Wilde accuses Lord Alfred of inciting and perpetuating the battle between him and Lord Alfred’s father, which ends with all parties

unscathed with the exception of Wilde. Lord Alfred is also responsible for Wilde's financial ruin starting with the incredible sums of money Wilde spends on his luxurious lifestyle and ending with Wilde's bankruptcy, as productions of his plays are canceled and he struggles to pay for his court fees. Their relationship greatly affects Wilde's art; Wilde's time is spent providing constant attention and entertainment for his demanding companion, and his imagination and creative mood is halted in Lord Alfred's chaotic presence. Perhaps most painful is Lord Alfred's inability to recognize any wrongdoing on his part. Wilde says in the letter, "there will be much that will wound your vanity to the quick," and entreats Lord Alfred to "read the letter over and over again till it kills your vanity. If you find in it something of which you feel that you are unjustly accused, remember that one should be thankful that there is any fault of which one can be unjustly accused" (3). In spite of Lord Alfred's faults, Wilde blames himself for allowing such interferences to his art and life.

The second half of *De Profundis* focuses on Wilde's spiritual journey in prison, as the discussion turns away from Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred and shifts to Wilde's relationship with Christ, whom he calls the "Supreme artist." Wilde finds beauty in his own sorrow and suffering which he compares to the suffering of Jesus Christ. In this part of the letter, Wilde reveals the qualities he finds fascinating in Christ; his perception of Christ's message and beliefs helps to explain Wilde's own unique practice of the Catholic faith. This section chronicles Wilde's "new life," of sorts, as he details tasks that keep bitterness at bay while incarcerated and help to rebuild a sense of happiness upon his release. The last few pages eventually circle back to the original letter formula of Wilde addressing his grievances to Lord Alfred, however, many scholars notice a shift in mindset and priorities overtaking Wilde during his imprisonment and the writing of this document that have little to do with Lord Alfred. The

seemingly disjointed sections of *De Profundis*, the abrupt change of topics and tone, and the somewhat unexpected “spiritual transformation,” as some critics call his ruminations about Christ, suffering, sins, and the soul, lead to critics debating the foundation and validity of Wilde’s sincerity.

This chapter considers the scholarly debate regarding Wilde’s sincerity in *De Profundis*; whether this version of himself, which includes his spiritual transformation, marks a departure from his earlier work or if there is a congruity that can be identified; and the motives behind his moral growth and change in character. Scholars Helen F. Maxson and Mojtaba Jeyhouni concur that the sarcastic, paradoxical, and flamboyant version of Wilde from his earlier works, qualities that are seemingly antithetical to the spiritual Wilde presented in *De Profundis*, have disappeared. They agree that Wilde’s circumstances spark a sincere spiritual transformation, which reveals the true version of Wilde. Scholars Ann W. Astell and David Foster both proclaim that Wilde’s conversion and the temperament that we see in *De Profundis* start in Wilde’s earlier writing, but that Aestheticism, and not necessarily a religious connection, motivates his discourse on Christ and suffering. On the topic of insincerity, scholars Michael R. Doyle, Josephine M. Guy, and Ian Small argue that Wilde is writing in a fashion that appeals to his audience and that he constructs an identity that controls how he is viewed by current and future readers. Scholars William E. Buckler and Molly Robinson Kelly focus on the multifaceted aspects of Wilde’s spiritual identity. Buckler points out that while Wilde experiences religious events in secular ways, his motive of salvation is self-serving. Kelly argues that the spirituality we see in *De Profundis* is not new, however, Wilde’s concept of spiritual-based exercises, “practical spirituality,” as Kelly terms it, is born out of necessity as Wilde navigates his time in prison and

prepares for a life after his sentence. The last two scholars maintain that Wilde's religious beliefs are a means to an end, that in them, there is a usefulness from which Wilde benefits.

What many scholars have not taken in consideration in their critique of Wilde's sincerity in *De Profundis* is that change and growth is rarely a linear path, and one that is not easily measured in a concept as personal and intangible as religious devotion. It is far too simple to categorize Wilde as insincere should he fall outside of the parameters that determine sincerity as set forth by each individual scholar. The definition of "sincerity" and what determines Wilde's sincerity or, rather, insincerity, varies greatly from scholar to scholar. Dismissing Wilde's earlier identity, one characterized by paradox and flamboyance, misses the point that multiple fragments can and do exist in one human's makeup. Though I argue that the congruity between Wilde's earlier work *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (*TPDG*) and *De Profundis* tells a complete story of Wilde's spiritual and sensual halves, scholars who argue for Wilde's insincerity because they do not perceive the same connection see identity in black and white terms; Wilde resides and writes very much in grey areas. Ignoring those attributes that do not neatly mesh with the suffering and repentant version of Wilde in *De Profundis* supposes that spiritual growth can only occur when one is wholly devout and devoid of synthesis in their personality, which is absolutely not the case for Wilde.

I hypothesize that what some scholars call a "spiritual transformation" in *De Profundis* has its foundation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and that devotion to Christ and Catholicism, rather than an Aesthetic leaning, motivates his religious declarations in the second half of the book. While much of *De Profundis* focuses on Wilde's spiritual life, the traits that dominate in *TPDG* – the paradoxical way of speaking, thinly veiling his fascination for the same sex in religious undertones and secret code, and not conforming to a dogmatic way of practicing

Catholicism – are still present in *De Profundis*. Although some scholars perceive the former version of Wilde, the unapologetic figure with witty sayings at the ready, to be an opposing version of the self he presents in *De Profundis*, I argue that Wilde could not have arrived at such an impactful, heartfelt dedication to Christ without those traits still very much present in his character.

Understandably, it is difficult to argue for Wilde's sincerity in *De Profundis* if the critic has not seen evidence of such religiosity in Wilde's earlier work; however, it is precisely because of this perceived radical shift in identity that convinces certain scholars of Wilde's sincerity. Helen M. Maxson acknowledges various ways to define sincerity in her article "Sincerity and the Subject in Wilde's *De Profundis*." Repeatedly, she argues for Wilde's sincerity and suggests that if there are any inconsistencies within the text, it is not willful deceit on Wilde's part. Maxson analyzes the literary genres *De Profundis* take and says, "Since it is difficult to determine how conscious an autobiographer is of his own inaccuracy, it is equally difficult to judge his sincerity in traditional terms" (106). Maxson goes on to say that "regardless of how far a writer's chosen image lies from what is true, regardless of how aware the writer is that it is inaccurate or incomplete, the consistency between that chosen image and the forms through which it is portrayed might become an index of its sincerity" (106). *De Profundis* is an autobiography addressed to Wilde's lover, and of this, Maxson says, "the letter form enforced his sincere tone" (106). Maxson argues that Wilde "portrays himself" as the "tragic hero," Christ, and as Douglas because it takes those three masks for Wilde "to know and represent himself" (107). Maxson recognizes that Wilde's identity encompasses a multitude of layers and argues, "Masks though they are, Wilde does not use them playfully to misrepresent, as he often uses masks in his earlier writing. Rather, he uses these figures to depict what, for him, is real about himself" (104).

However, Maxson does not recognize Wilde's former characteristics and says of his prior work, "the earlier disjunctions of paradox seem unnatural and willful, a highly developed game that is amusing rather than convincing" (103). Maxson's understanding of Wilde's sincerity does not leave room for his former self in the newly-formed identity she views in *De Profundis*.

Mojtaba Jeihouni echoes some of Maxson's sentiment in his article "Oscar Wilde and the Call of the Other in *De Profundis* and 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol.'" He argues that "sorrow, and not pleasure" is what "triggers Wilde's most sincere humanity" (Jeihouni 48). Like Maxson, Jeihouni attributes this sincerity to a "mood of departure" that "reverberates strongly in *De Profundis*" (Jeihouni 49), saying that "[t]he egocentric and flamboyant gestures of the former days were no longer present in Wilde" (47). Jeihouni believes Wilde's new-found spirituality, "a symbolic sanctuary in Christianity" (49), as he calls it, evidenced in *De Profundis*, throws "doubt over the hedonism that Wilde thinks blunted his keener sensibilities before" (49). While I do agree that prison life causes Wilde to look inwards to connect with and express his sense of loss, sorrow, and suffering, I argue that publicizing Lord Alfred's misdeeds during their relationship which he simply refers to as a "friendship," and declaring a deep appreciation for Christ which has little to do with strict Catholic doctrine, brings Wilde much pleasure in its irony. Wilde's earlier work *TPDG* contains several passages regarding Dorian Gray, said to represent at least some part of Wilde's true nature, alternating between moods of hedonistic pleasure and repentance; this pattern continues in *De Profundis*, as Wilde's earlier egocentric mannerisms has not disappeared, nor is *De Profundis* the first text in which his spirituality surfaces.

I take a similar position to scholar Ann W. Astell who argues in her article entitled "My Life is a Work of Art': Oscar Wilde's Novelistic and Religious Conversion" that Wilde's remorseful, deeply religious demeanor in *De Profundis* starts with Dorian Gray in *TPDG*. Astell

sums up this idea by saying, “The conversion process that began with the novelistic conversion in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* transformed Wilde as a writer, but it also came to change him gradually as a man, he who sinned, suffered, and awaited Christ’s healing” (201). Astell gives examples of parallels between Wilde’s novel and his letter, and says that *De Profundis* “offers, as it were, an alternate conclusion to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – one in which the religious and the novelistic conversions of the author are even more closely identified with each other” (195). Astell says:

Wilde who has committed some of the crimes for which Dorian Gray is held suspect, has actually undergone arrest, humiliating public trial, and cruel punishment that Gray fears and from which he flees in the novel.

Wilde has contemplated and decided against the suicide that his alter ego commits (*DP* 159 [citation hers]). With greater hope than Gray, Wilde expresses his resolve to live a new life. In a passage obviously reminiscent of the climax of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde aspires to be a Godlike view of his own past, his own soul. (Astell 196)

Astell also cites the passage in *TPDG* in which Dorian unveils “the ugly portrait before Hallward’s eyes in order to torment the artist and to transfer to him the blame, the last responsibility, for what Gray has become” (193). Dorian blaming Basil Hallward for what he has become parallels with Wilde documenting Lord Alfred’s role in his downfall; Wilde utilizes *De Profundis* as a portrait, of sorts, to show Lord Alfred what has become of him due to Lord Alfred’s selfish actions. Astell’s argument differs from mine in her assertion that, Wilde, “[s]ensing that suffering has changed him and that he can no longer be the artist of pleasurable irony that he has been . . . turns to Christ as the model for his imitation as an artist” (197), as I

argue that Wilde does not need suffering to identify with Christ; his earlier work shows Christ-like motifs prevalent in Dorian and Basil's characters. Whether in a novel saturated with pleasure or a letter imbued with suffering, Wilde connects with Christ and Catholicism, in ways explicit and implicit.

While Astell does not make a judgment on Wilde's sincerity, scholar David Foster quotes several critics who question Wilde's motives in focusing on his religiosity. Foster says, "George Bernard Shaw ... will have none of the tragic or the Christ-like in his view of Wilde. For Shaw, Wilde appeared always as a knowing, acutely self-aware agent of his own appetites, able to cast himself in redemptive terms only because of gullible readers" (Foster 108). Foster quotes critic Avron Fleishman as saying, "Wilde's appropriation of religious language for his secular concerns cannot fail to seem bathetic ... such appropriation ... must seem another Wildean mask, another exercise in style" (105). Foster picks up on Wilde's habit of intertwining the sensual with the religious: "Wilde's motives are deeply implicated with irony ... by describing the Christ-story in the unmistakable terms of an aestheticized sensual satiety. The imagery is suffused with homoerotic overtones ... This erotic imagery shows Wilde's strategy of displacement at its most aggressive, as Christ is rendered something like a homoerotic pastoral" (Foster 104). Foster attributes Wilde's inconsistencies to the "sociocultural space" that demanded Wilde "displace and disguise his motives and actions even as he explained them ... In *De Profundis* Wilde was trying to demonstrate not so much that he was above the world, but that he had been – and still could be – an agent in a world that required duplicity and disguise for survival" (86-87). Foster argues that "strategies of disguise and displacement embedded in *De Profundis* had been years in preparation and use" in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (90), and that the novel "fully articulates the theme of aestheticized sensuality that later informs his self-

representation in *De Profundis*” (91). Foster uses the example of Wilde disguising his sexuality by hiding the erotic nature of his relationship with Lord Alfred. Wilde effectively refers to their involvement as a “friendship,” just as Wilde paints the sensual relationship of Basil and Dorian merely as a friendship. Foster says that *De Profundis* is “the best evidence we have of Wilde’s efforts to rescue himself for history” (87), and that “Throughout much of the text Wilde seems up to something but unwilling to declare what that might be” (86). It seems Foster considers *De Profundis* challenging to interpret, as homosexual elements are disguised and religious passages are filled with sensual connotations, much like the undertones that dominate *TPDG*.

In his article called “Oscar Wilde’s ‘De Profundis’: Homosexual Self-Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal,” Michael R. Doyle continues with this idea that Wilde is motivated by the desire to clear his name, as it were, and says that Wilde’s reinvention moves him away from his sexual identity. Doyle recognizes that *De Profundis* critics debate whether the text is “evidence of Wilde’s genuine contrition for his past transgressions or as yet another pose struck by an incorrigible aesthete,” but takes the position that *De Profundis* “signals not the end, but the elaboration in new directions for Wilde’s self-fashioning” (547). Doyle argues that Wilde attempts to interrupt and respond to society’s label of him as a “sexual pervert.” Instead of “affirming that his sexual passions and practices are key to understanding his most secret and authentic self,” Wilde “fashions a new self, one that certainly gives pride of place to his same-sex passions, but does not demand they speak the truth of his essential being” (550). Wilde does this “not to be true to his ‘authentic’ self, but to develop other ways of being in the world” (Doyle 553). Doyle sees Wilde trying to detach himself from his previous persona and earlier works: “Wilde means to save his name for literature and from its mythologization as the sign of sexual perversion. In *De Profundis*, he abandons the referential deniability that his previous

writings had maintained with respect to the explicit expression of same-sex passion” (554-55). Although Wilde reinvents himself in a way that may seem new to some critics, his desires are ever present: “*De Profundis* is Wilde’s effort to stylize his desires differently, to detach them from contexts that previously enabled but eventually limited their expression, and to discover new possibilities for their realization” (Doynen 558). Doynen quotes critic Jonathan Dollimore’s observation that “readers praised *De Profundis* as Wilde’s ‘most mature’ work because they interpreted it as indicating both Wilde’s rejection of his previous perversities and his submission to Victorian morality” (548). Doynen’s study of Wilde’s reinvention of self in *De Profundis* bolsters my argument that whatever transformation scholars view in Wilde, there remains much of the former self that they claim has gone out of his character; his same-sex desire and his thinly-veiled attempts at concealing while cleverly revealing this passion make itself known in the many versions of Wilde that scholars suppose have undergone a transformation.

Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small are scholars who argue vehemently against Wilde’s sincerity in *De Profundis* in their article called “Reading *De Profundis*.” The title brings to mind an instruction manual for, as it states, reading *De Profundis*. Guy and Small dissect the logistical process through which the original manuscript eventually becomes the published letter. They analyze the various parts of the manuscript and come to the conclusion that “it turns out that it is not at all clear whether the manuscript ever represents a single document, let alone possesses a single identity” (Guy and Small 124). The scholars say that the “image of Wilde” as “the lonely agonized prisoner pouring out his soul in a work of cathartic emotional and spiritual release, invites us to read the resulting document as a frank and sincere exploration of self” (Guy and Small 123), however, they interpret the manuscript, and therefore *De Profundis*, as far from an honest account. Guy and Small take issue with sincerity of the book. For one, “the manuscript is

chaotic, full of false starts and cancellations” while the “printed text gives the appearance of order, polish, and fluency” (126.) Another fault Guy and Small find with *De Profundis* is Robert Ross’ editing of it; Wilde entrusts the manuscript to friend Robert Ross rather than to Lord Alfred, to whom the letter is addressed, and “in this move, its identity as a ‘love letter’ was immediately compromised” (131). Guy and Small observe “that some of the aspects of the personality Wilde exhibits in the manuscript have a performative element to them” (130-31). They say “that the ‘personality’ he chose to exhibit in a private remonstrance with Douglas was very different from the more elevated sufferer he wished to construct for posterity. Moreover, both of these personas may have had an element of artifice to them and should not necessarily be taken as indications of the ‘real’ Wilde” (Guy and Small 130). Regarding Wilde’s suffering, Guy and Small claim that Wilde exhibits a “theatrical manner” because he is not concerned with the “‘reality’ of his own grieving” but rather the “theological intellectualization of the meaning of loss” (136). They also argue that the “traditions that inform his depiction of suffering,” that is, the “use of biblical language and biblical tropes” and “a reading of suffering in the work of previous writers” is unoriginal, and therefore, artificial (Guy and Small 145). From the structure of the book to the very manner in which it was written and edited, Guy and Small argue that Wilde’s expression of self in *De Profundis* cannot be relied on to provide accurate, truthful clues into his identity.

Salvation is the motivating factor that William E. Buckler discusses in his article “Oscar Wilde’s Aesthetic of the Self: Art as Imaginative Self-Realization in *De Profundis*.” Buckler takes the position that by writing *De Profundis*, Wilde turns his experience and punishment into art. He says that in Wilde’s darkest times, the author finds within himself the imagination and capacity to create, but that it “was not a religious experience except perhaps in some thoroughly

pagan, secular sense, and the social morality of the time had nothing to do with it” (Buckler 99). Wilde “was as intent upon revealing himself to himself as on revealing himself to the world” (96). Buckler says, “Paradoxically, however, it was the depth of his inner disgrace that made the salvation recorded in *De Profundis* possible ... disgrace and punishment to Wilde were only a means to a much more primary end. Wilde wanted to be saved” (103). It seems that the salvation that Buckler is referring to is not redemption for the soul, or some religious version, thereof; it is salvation in the eyes of Wilde’s readers and creating a legacy of Aestheticism that Buckler refers to when he claims, “the inward journey into language enabled Wilde to see that art and self-realization are one and the same thing” (114). Buckler argues that *De Profundis* is not about spiritual transformation, but rather a means for Wilde to connect with himself as artist of his own destiny. Buckler says:

De Profundis is not the story of how the protagonist found in pain and sorrow the way to build a bridge back to the “the garden of art” or “lost paradise” of his divinely favored youth. He discovers that he must remake himself in a more fundamental way ... His fall is fortunate in that it transforms his whole view of himself in relation to life and enables him to understand how all-inclusive and profound art, properly perceived, really is. (Buckler 104-05)

Wilde perpetuates his life as an artist and as an Aesthetic figure by turning his prison experience into art. Buckler’s interpretation of Wilde prioritizes his artistic passion over his genuine spiritual interest.

A contrary position to Buckler’s point of view regarding Wilde’s prison transformation comes from Molly Robinson Kelly in her article entitled “Reading Oscar Wilde’s Spirituality in

De Profundis.” Of Wilde’s relation to art, she says, “Wilde seems aware that his prison experience render insufficient, perhaps even invalid, his former vision of Art, associated with the Paterian search for pleasure, sensation, and beauty.” Kelly argues for Wilde’s spirituality, rather than his Aesthetic interest by saying, “*De Profundis* represents his first, and unfortunately only, attempt to formulate this new vision, which contains, as we have seen, an intensely spiritual dimension” (224). Kelly argues that “we have much to gain by engaging with the text as it is written” which requires the reader to “examine ... what Wilde openly says in *De Profundis* about his suffering and how he plans to overcome it in his ‘new life,’ without venturing into the ulterior, perhaps unconscious, motive he may have had in writing his letter” (212). Kelly believes that the “main purpose of his prison experience” is “spiritual development,” however, Kelly acknowledges that Wilde’s form of spirituality is not devoutly Catholic. Aware of Wilde’s fascination with several belief systems, Kelly says, “We cannot ... look to *De Profundis* for a well-organized, cohesive vision of Wilde’s spirituality. Such was not the text’s purpose. In these pages, Wilde develops a practical spirituality seemingly intended to help him conceptualize how he might live, and live well, into the future” (215). Kelly focuses on the tasks Wilde sets out for himself in order to prepare for life outside of his prison bars and to help him grapple with his sorrow and suffering. To describe Wilde’s complex identity we see in *De Profundis*, she proclaims:

In reading Wilde’s prison letter, we witness the age-old struggle of worldly and spiritual concerns; on one hand, one wishes to name injustice in order at least to try to redress it; on the other, one seeks the inner peace of detachment from those things that one cannot control. We are not dealing here with an individual who, overwhelmed with suffering, has

turned to spirituality as a means of escaping the cruel realities of the world. On the contrary, an acutely lucid Wilde seeks a third way – a “both/and” rather than “either/or” relation to both reality and spirituality. (Kelly 220)

Kelly closes her article by reiterating that spirituality was, and has been, a part of Wilde’s being: “*De Profundis* speaks best to the complex, multifaceted spirituality that was part of Oscar Wilde, along the way offering, arguably, a felicitous expression the spiritual diversity of his time” (225).

My interpretation of *De Profundis* supposes that the text as we know it today is a genuine, reliable source of Wilde’s innermost struggle, which opposes Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small’s view of the text as tainted and disharmonious; my reading of *De Profundis* falls slightly in line with Molly Robinson Kelly because I accept that much is gleaned by taking the text at face value. However, despite my confidence that the text leads us in the right direction of understanding Wilde’s authentic intentions and desires, analyzing Wilde’s rhetorical techniques proves that there is yet more to uncover. Just as Wilde veils homoerotic desire in language seemingly reserved for Catholic devotion in his earlier work, *TPDG*, Wilde again disguises the erotic nature of his relationship with Lord Alfred in *De Profundis*. Using coded phrases and images, Wilde expresses his and Lord Alfred’s homosexuality while excluding elements that reveal they were, in fact, lovers.

Wilde’s relationship with Lord Alfred unfolds through language meant to conceal while expressing the homosexual lifestyle and desires in *De Profundis*. Just as Wilde does not label Basil and Henry’s erotic desire for Dorian anything more than a friendship in *TPDG*, Wilde never refers to his involvement with Lord Alfred as anything more than a friendship in *De Profundis*. In the letter, Wilde calls what they share an “ill-fated and most lamentable friendship”

that “has ended in ruin and public infamy for me,” and admits, “Yet the memory of our ancient affection is often with me” (Wilde *DP* 3). The idea of a friendship between two males in both above-mentioned texts rings with homoerotic desire and is more reminiscent of Shakespeare’s “star-cross lovers” Romeo and Juliet than of strictly platonic friendships. Wilde says, “I have no doubt that in this letter in which I have to write of your life and mine, of the past and future, of sweet things changed to bitterness and of bitter things that may be turned into joy, there will be much that will wound your vanity to the quick” (Wilde *DP* 3), signaling that Wilde cannot tell his story without also telling Lord Alfred’s; their lives, past, present, and future, are intertwined. In writing his autobiography, Wilde is writing Lord Alfred’s biography, which vaguely resembles the idea behind “The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas” (1933) in which Gertrude Stein writes in the voice of her lesbian lover. Another example of Wilde using coded language to express his sexuality can be found within the passage in which Lord Alfred’s translation of Wilde’s play *Salome* does not meet Wilde’s standards. Wilde says, “I knew quite well that no translation, unless one done by a poet, could render the colour and cadence of my work in any adequate measure” (Wilde *DP* 15). The word “colour” is used by poet A.E. Housman in his poem “Oh Who is That Young Sinner?” written after Wilde is convicted; he uses the phrases “Oh they’re taking him to prison for the colour of his hair” and “For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair⁶” to signify Wilde was being punished for his natural homosexual instincts. Wilde signs off the letter as “Your affectionate friend,” (Wilde *DP* 118) which melds a romantic sentiment with the platonic idea of friendship. Even after detailing certain intimate events of their lives together, Wilde maintains, above all, the title he wishes to give to Lord Alfred is “friend.”

⁶ This line from A.E. Housman’s poem is mentioned in Noel Annan’s article “The Cult of Homosexuality in England 1850-1950.”

Considering that the green carnation became symbolic of homosexuality in Wilde's circle of friends and artists in his era, I ascribe this coded language to Lord Alfred's use of the pseudonym Prince Fleur-de-Lys when he sends a message to Wilde at his deposition that he "wishes to be remembered to you." (Wilde *DP* 41). Wilde writes to Lord Alfred, "... but the little things of life are symbols. We receive our bitter lessons most easily through them. Your seemingly casual choice of a feigned name was, and will remain symbolic. It reveals you" (Wilde *DP* 42). Not only does the flower motif "reveal" Lord Alfred, it also reveals the secret, erotic relationship between Wilde and Lord Alfred. In prison, Wilde learns that Lord Alfred is publishing a book of poems dedicated to him. Wilde advises that Lord Alfred should have published these poems anonymously and only when met with favorable response should he reveal to his audience that the poems are written about Wilde. Wilde says only then should Lord Alfred tell his readers, "These flowers that you admire are of my sowing, and now I offer them to one who you regard as a pariah and an outcast, as my tribute to what I love and reverence and admire in him" (Wilde *DP* 51). Using the symbol of flowers, Wilde provides Lord Alfred the words to reveal to the world their admiration for one another. In another passage in the letter, Wilde recounts Lord Alfred's mother warning him that Lord Alfred is guilty of vanity and to this, Wilde writes, "I thought vanity a sort of graceful flower for a young man to wear" (Wilde *DP* 7). Again, the proverbial flower coupled with a young man's vanity reminds us that Wilde's obsession with a young man's beauty is never far from his mind, even as he tries to conceal this desire.

My argument that Wilde's connection to Christ and Catholicism can be read as sincere in *De Profundis* differs from scholars David Foster and Michael R. Doylen, as they argue that Wilde's focus on religiosity have ulterior motives, that it salvages his sullied reputation for

posterity. If Wilde is, indeed, appealing to future readers, it is to diagram his belief system in a way that his unorthodoxy can be read as genuine Catholic devotion. Wilde seems to mimic Christ's personality, as he understood it. Wilde says of Christ: "He felt that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotypes into any form was death. He said that people should not be too serious over material, common interests: that to be unpractical was a great thing" (Wilde *DP* 82). Moreover, as if to describe his own thoughts on the strict practice and blind faith in Catholicism, Wilde says Christ finds faults in Philistines:

He would not hear of life being sacrificed to any system of thought or morals. He pointed out that forms and ceremonies were made for man, not man for forms and ceremonies. He took Sabbatarianism as a type of the things that should be set at nought ... To us, what is termed Orthodoxy is merely a facile unintelligent acquiescence, but to them, and in their hands, it was a terrible and paralyzing tyranny. Christ swept it aside. He showed that the spirit alone was of value. He took a keen pleasure in pointing out to them that though they were always reading Law and the Prophets they had not really the smallest idea of what either of them meant. (Wilde *DP* 84)

As an explanation for his religious free thinking, Wilde addresses those traits that he most admires in Christ; he paints a picture of a Christ that is neither stringent nor unforgiving, but rather one who values an intelligent follower who is genuine in spirit. For Wilde, in Christ "there were no laws: there were exceptions merely" (83). Wilde does "control the narrative" in *De Profundis*, "not by portraying himself as elevated through transformation or penitence, but by challenging those who question his sincerity of faith.

Wilde identifies with Christ and employs Catholic images to document his prison experience, but does so in a secular manner. Wilde brings to mind the image of Christ bearing His cross on the way to being crucified in writing to Lord Alfred, “I cannot allow you to go through life bearing in your heart the burden of having ruined a man like me. The thought might make you callously indifferent or morbidly sad. I must take the burden from you and put it on my own shoulders” (57). The idea that Christ is punished for the sins of others also echoes in this passage, as Wilde prefers to bear the weight of what should be Lord Alfred’s guilt in order to save him from the consequence of indifference or sadness. Wilde furthers his Christ-like persona by absolving Lord Alfred of his sins: “And the end of it all is that I have got to forgive you. I must do so. I don’t write this letter to put bitterness into your heart, but to pluck it out of mine. For my own sake I must forgive you” (56). While it benefits Wilde to forgive Lord Alfred, Wilde places the burden on himself and does so without Lord Alfred asking to be absolved. When Wilde proclaims, “Religion does not help me,” (60) and “the spirit of Christ ... is not in Churches” (88), he is revealing that his kind of Catholicism exists beyond what is written in the Bible and what is taught in church; his determination to live a Christ-like existence, both in and out of prison, stems from within rather than outside influences.

In response to David Foster and scholars who claim Wilde’s Aesthetic propagation is the motive behind the religious tone in *De Profundis*, I argue that Wilde connecting “the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist” (Wilde *DP* 71) is not merely an extension of Wilde’s Aesthetic endorsement, but rather sincere spiritual interest in Christ. Although I agree that Wilde appreciates the beauty behind Catholic ceremonies and its message, his fascination and discussion of Christ as the Supreme artist goes beyond Aesthetic appreciation. Wilde writes that he is acutely aware of his impact on art:

I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art. I altered the minds of men and the colours of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder: I took drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as a personal mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet, at the same time that I widened its range and enriched its characterization: drama, novel, poem in rhyme, poem in prose, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty. (Wilde *DP* 57)

Secure in his position within the Aesthetic movement and his literary contemporaries, Wilde attempts to garner confidence in his Catholic devotion in *De Profundis*; Wilde funnels his suffering and prison experience through the mode of spirituality so that readers and critics will have the same belief in his Catholicism as they have in his Aesthetic influence. Wilde finds beauty in his sorrow and suffering, and labels Christ the “true precursor to the romantic movement in life” (72), elements that seemingly belong to the Aesthetic movement; however, these modifications to doctrine serve the purpose of helping Wilde find meaning in a life-changing tragedy.

While sincere penitence and spirituality rather than an Aesthetic leaning motivate Wilde’s use of Catholic imagery, elements of his former self, as scholars Helen M. Maxson and Mojtaba Jeihouni might call an earlier version of Wilde defined by hedonism, paradox, irony, and witty sarcasm, are still very much present in the Wilde we see in *De Profundis*. Of the intrigue he created, Wilde says, “I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase and all existence in an epigram” (58). If we agree with the claim that Wilde wrote *De Profundis* for posterity, so that future

readers will have a favorable opinion of him, then his statement that “Christ’s great achievement was that he made himself as much loved after his death as he had been during his lifetime” (75) rings with some irony as it seems Wilde may have been trying to accomplish the same task. Wilde writes with the same wittiness and sarcasm that dots his earlier work. He says to Lord Alfred: “Had our life together been as the world fancied it to be, one simply of pleasure, profligacy, and laughter, I would not be able to recall a single passage in it.” Wilde recalls details of their relationship because it was marked by bitterness and violence (18-19). And finally, Wilde’s hedonism and sensuality come through in a letter meant to convey his tortured existence with Lord Alfred and the suffering associated with being imprisoned. Wilde says, “[T]he body absorbs things of all kinds, things common and unclean no less than those that the priest or a vision has cleansed, and converts them into swiftness and strength, into the play of beautiful muscles and the moulding of fair flesh, into the curves and colours of the hair, the lips, the eye” (62), a sentence that can be read as brimming with eroticism and homosexual desire. Wilde manages to express the topics at hand in *De Profundis* - penance, spirituality, identifying with Christ and religion, and suffering – in a voice dripping with sensuality and irony, among other traits thought long gone.

My argument that Wilde’s spirituality in *De Profundis* has its origins in *TPDG*, and that the version of Wilde we see in *De Profundis* is not newly transformed is evidenced by the similarities in both texts’ handling of Wilde’s criticism of the clergy; art revealing homoerotic desire; and a penitent mood that leads to the protagonist making a change. To illustrate his distrust of clergymen, Wilde says, “Clergymen, and people who use phrases without wisdom, sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation.” (67). Wilde also says, “I knew the Church condemned accidia, but the whole idea seemed to me quite fantastic, just the

sort of sin, I fancied, a priest who knew nothing about real life would invent” (65), a sentiment which is echoed in *TPDG* in Lord Henry saying, “[In] the Church they don’t think. A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen” (Wilde *TPDG* 5). The subject of art revealing the artist’s homoerotic desire shows itself in Basil’s trepidation that his portrait of Dorian Gray will reveal that he is enamored with the young socialite. After Basil’s confession, Dorian says, “My dear Basil . . . what have you told me? Simply that you felt that you admired me too much” (Wilde *TPDG* 119); Wilde learns of Lord Alfred’s intention to publish sections of Wilde’s love letter in a magazine, and to this Wilde asks, “For what was your article to show? That I had been too fond of you?” (Wilde *DP* 43). The wording in *De Profundis* mirrors Basil’s concern in *TPDG*, as each artist pours into their work the attraction and affection they feel for another male. The third motif that ties *De Profundis* to Wilde’s earlier work is spirituality and a penitent mood. After Dorian uncovers his portrait to show Basil what has become of his soul, Basil implores Dorian to pray (Wilde *TPDG* 162). Though some scholars view a new spiritual transformation in *De Profundis*, Dorian Gray’s declaration that he has “altered” following James Vane’s death (Wilde *TPDG* 214-16) marks evidence of soul searching and a spiritual transformation earlier in *TPDG*. Wilde’s penitent mood does not surface for the first time in *De Profundis*; Wilde writes about atonement and reconstructing one’s identity for the sake of renewing the soul to restore the parts that sin has ravaged in *TPDG*.

The next chapter focuses in depth on the connection between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *De Profundis*, and their collective role in creating and explaining the two halves of Oscar Wilde. The subversive nature of aligning with Catholicism and the scandal behind Wilde’s homosexuality that turns a lifestyle into an illegal, punishable act both serve to elucidate Wilde’s

identity as eternally “other.” What some scholars consider to be conflicting halves of Wilde’s identity are, paradoxically, two sides of the same coin. The similarities between a novel about pleasure and a love letter about pain further explain that both Wilde’s imprisonment and deathbed conversion were years in the making, and that his story could not have ended any other way.

Chapter IV

Interlocking the Puzzle Pieces of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *De Profundis*

“Tell me how I can send my Soul away from me,
for in truth I have no need of it. Of what value is my soul to me?
I cannot see it. I may not touch it. I do not know it.”

-- Wilde, “The Fisherman and His Soul”

This chapter analyzes the revelations that are gleaned from considering *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (*TPDG*) and *De Profundis* as two halves of a complete unit. I argue that the developments that unfold within *TPDG*, a story of pleasure tuned to horror, and *De Profundis*, a search for beauty in sorrow, reveal the ways in which paradox and genuine spirituality intersect. The books’ unified theme of silence, art exposing a hidden part of one’s identity, and the threat of scandal point to the similarities between the subversive nature of Wilde’s fascination with Catholicism and the sexual behavior that ultimately deprives Wilde of his freedom. Wilde’s treatment of the Catholic faith in his prison letter is often a reflection of attitudes from his earlier work, however, a change in tone regarding the topics of repentance and the human soul illuminate that Wilde becomes more himself – that is, a person who is invested in irony and aphorisms – the closer his proximity to harrowing circumstances that demand one’s truth. A modified version of The Holy Trinity exists in both *TPDG* and *De Profundis* with the purpose of expressing disparate, sometimes contradictory ideas, however Wilde’s voice emerges as clearer and stronger, ironically, not when he speaks as himself, but when he represents himself as “other.” Tying together the book’s similarities and tracing the evolution of Wilde’s identity from

one work to the other demonstrates that what we view as Wilde's sincerity coming full circle is, in essence, the irony that explains away that sincerity in the first place.

The idea that art, whether painting or poetry, has the power to reveal the artist's intention and innermost secret pervades both *TPDG* and *De Profundis*, which leads to themes of silence and silencing that medium which threatens privacy. The public's prying eyes are viewed as a threat several times in *TPDG*. Lord Henry insists that Basil exhibit his portrait of Dorian at an art gallery, but Basil explains, "The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul" (Wilde *TPDG* 7). Basil's refusal can be interpreted as worry that onlookers will be able to detect his homoerotic desire simply by viewing his rendering of Dorian. Basil goes on to tell Lord Henry, "When I like people immensely I never tell their name to any one. It is like surrendering a part of them. I have grown to love secrecy" (Wilde *TPDG* 6). Though Lord Henry eventually befriends Dorian, Basil wishes it were possible to keep not just the painting, but Dorian himself, a secret. Basil gifts Dorian the painting, and with it, he transfers to Dorian all the consternation that an outsider might view the painting and see his truth. After Dorian's image starts bearing the marks of his wrongdoings, Dorian hires a frame maker to haul away the painting to a secure room of his home to which only he has the key (Wilde *TPDG* 125), so that "No one would ever look upon the horrible thing. No eye but his would ever see his shame" (126). When the frame maker expresses an interest in seeing the portrait, Wilde writes that Dorian "felt ready to leap upon him and fling him to the ground if he dared lift the gorgeous hanging that concealed the secret of his life" (126). The portrait tells one truth about Basil and another about Dorian, and in both circumstances, each man will do everything within their power to keep their respective secret concealed.

This theme of art exposing the artist and/or the subject is seen in *De Profundis* in Lord Alfred's attempts at publishing first, an article which includes excerpts from Wilde's letters, and then later, a volume of poetry dedicated to Wilde. Though the details of the trials that brought Wilde to prison may have been public knowledge, had they been published, Lord Alfred's writing would have exposed intimate details that the public was not previously privy to. Wilde says those letters "should have been to you thing sacred and secret beyond anything in the whole world!" (Wilde *DP* 42). Wilde calls his fondness for Lord Alfred "a curious perversity of passion and desire," (43), a quality he attributes to his "genius." Lord Alfred's intention to publish private letters threatens the secrecy of the minute details of their relationship. Ironically, while Lord Alfred threatens to break his silence regarding their relationship, Wilde does not learn of these creative ventures first-hand; friends' letters contain his updates and inquiries, but Lord Alfred does not reach out to Wilde, personally. Wilde writes to Lord Alfred, "Your silence has been horrible" (54), as he does not receive a single letter from him while incarcerated. The lines of communication between the former lovers have been severed by Lord Alfred's silence, even as he threatens to expose the life they once shared.

Although much of *TPDG* and *De Profundis* seem to be about revealing secrets, the motif of breaking silence serves as a reminder that there are great consequences in doing so. Critic Antonio Sanna⁷ argues that "Silence and homosexuality could be seen as strictly interrelated in this text by Wilde" (31), and that the "sins committed by ... Dorian are conducted in a silent and secret way, far from the eyes and accusing words of the human community and its laws" (29). Although Basil hears rumors about Dorian's misdeed, his sins are done in secret, away from his friend. Basil tells Dorian about the stories he has heard: "...you have been seen creeping at dawn

⁷ In his article "Silent Homosexuality in Oscar Wilde's *Teleny* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*."

out of dreadful houses and slinking in disguise into the foulest dens in London ... What about your country-house, and the life that is lead there?" (Wilde *TPDG* 155-56). Sanna says that, while not explicit, these misdeeds perhaps allude to homosexual behavior (29). Basil pays with the hefty price of his life for confronting Dorian with his sins. A series of events that would eventually change Wilde's life begins when the feud between Wilde and the Marquess of Queensbury becomes public. Wilde recalls Lord Alfred's father in *De Profundis*, "So the next time he attacks me, no longer in a private letter and as your private friend, but in public and as a public man" (Wilde *DP* 33), signaling that the silence that once protected his taboo, and illegal, relationship with Lord Alfred had been broken. Wilde writes to Lord Alfred, "You scented the chance of a public scandal and flew to it" (33). That silence is at once protective and repressive figures in *TPDG* and *De Profundis* demonstrates that one's homosexuality is as dangerous when concealed as it is when publicized. Sanna sums up his article by arguing, "Homosexuality is not silenced in these narratives; rather it is given a voice and therefore manages to make, though indirectly, its demand for recognition" (37). Homosexuality makes itself known in numerous ways in *TPDG* and *De Profundis*, resulting in repercussions, but none as severe as when the public is stigmatized by the revelation.

Ari Adut's article entitled "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde" studies the roles that scandal and public knowledge play in Wilde's eventual incarceration. Adut says, "... Victorian authorities rarely and only reluctantly enforced homosexuality laws. Moreover, Wilde's sexual predilections had long been common knowledge in London before his trials ..." (213), and that Victorian England's enforcement of laws and norms regarding homosexuality was inconsistent. Adut goes on to say that, "Homosexuality was implied in some of his writings and was part and parcel of his public persona. Yet Wilde was the

darling of London society” (214). Although homosexuality was a punishable criminal offense and regarded as “repulsive” in Wilde’s time, Wilde’s offenses went overlooked. Adut questions why, after years of forgiving Wilde’s behavior, did “audiences and authorities” take a stance against Wilde. Adut describes this change of attitude towards Wilde:

Wilde was prosecuted and condemned to the fullest extent of the law even though the evidence against him was circumstantial, uncorroborated, and tainted. When Wilde’s first criminal trial terminated with a hung jury, the legal officials demonstrated fierce fervor in securing a conviction in a second trial. Wilde was vehemently vilified during his trials and was transformed into a pariah in the wake of his two-year prison-with-hard-labor sentence for gross indecency. (Adut 214)

Adut attributes this determination to punish Wilde to Wilde’s offenses being “publicized” rather than “simply known,” which “transform real or alleged transgressions into scandals” (215). The public becomes engulfed in the scandal and they are tainted by their knowledge of and proximity to Wilde’s transgressions. Adut argues that because the public has been “contaminated” by this information, they are required to distance themselves from the offense by displaying harsh disdain for Wilde and his impropriety. To cleanse themselves and their own reputation of Wilde’s scandal, the public turns against Wilde “to signal rectitude or resolve” (Adut 216). Wilde, a once beloved public figure, is punished because the collective audience to whom his sexual transgressions have been publicized is contaminated by the knowledge of it.

Displaying behavior offensive to the late-Victorian English public was not limited to sexual dalliances; Wilde’s fascination with the Roman Catholic Church and its religion was viewed as especially subversive by the Protestant nation in which he was living. Jerusha

McCormack's article called "Wilde the 'Pervert': Oscar and the Transnational (Roman Catholic) Religion" provides a succinct background for Wilde's history with Catholicism. Although Wilde's attraction to Catholicism is widely documented, so is his penchant for other religions, as well. Wilde's "divided spirit" may have found its roots in his mother's spiritual open-mindedness. Although Wilde was baptized "into the Anglican church," his mother "arranged for him (at approximately the age of eight or nine) to be instructed and re-christened as a Roman Catholic" (McCormack 213). The archaic use of the word "pervert" once "meant one who turned from the 'right way of thinking,' forsaking 'a doctrine or system regarded as true for one esteemed false'" (McCormack 212). McCormack argues that during Wilde's time, the Roman Catholic Church was considered "dangerous" because the religion was foreign, it belonged to another nation, and because "Catholicism in England was becoming the focus of a new and emerging gay culture" (212), which compounded the offense. Of this foreign influence, McCormack says:

... Wilde came to Catholicism as a Protestant, so perhaps it is not surprising that the rhetoric Wilde employs is that of the anti-Catholic Protestant; what is most feared is ... also the most desired – or, in Wilde's word, "fascinating." The word itself illustrates how desire is lit by seduction and a seduction by the radically other. His repeated use of the word serves to emphasize Catholicism's alien nature, and its appeal to the subliminal. And it is worth noting that in late Victorian discourse, the word "fascination" is often associated not with magic but with mesmerism: by which the hypnotic influence of a foreign presence asserts

complete control over an otherwise independent mind. (McCormack 217-18)

In late-Victorian England, a fascination with Catholicism was considered a subversive act, perhaps one as hostile and vulgar to the public as Wilde's homosexual behavior. Wilde's secular use of Catholic images in *TPDG* and *De Profundis* signals his commitment to connecting with the religion, albeit, on his own terms.

Wilde's rendering of the soul, one's spiritual essence, changes from an external entity in *TPDG* to an internal concept in *De Profundis*; however, throughout both works, Wilde's secularization of the Catholic idea of the soul remains an extension of his unorthodox practice of Catholicism. Whether in secular or Christian terms, the soul often points to a person's most sincere self. *TPDG* illustrates the concept of the soul as something outside of the person to whom it belongs, which cannot be reconciled in Christian terms, as the body and soul are one. Although Dorian believes that each person, indeed, possesses a soul, he says of it: "The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away" (Wilde *TPDG* 221). In this earlier work, Wilde writes of the soul almost as a tangible item that one can physically transfer in a transaction, from seller to buyer. A prevalent theme in the novel is that of giving away one's soul, suggesting that the body and soul are detached, separate entities: Basil gives away his "whole soul" to Dorian⁸; Lord Henry tells Dorian that, "... to influence a person is to give him one's own soul" (20); and Dorian proclaims that would give his soul for eternal youth and beauty⁹. Dorian's tragic love interest, stage actress Sybil Vane, sends "her soul to search for" Dorian, whom she idealistically refers to as "Prince Charming"¹⁰. This idea that Sybil

⁸ Page 14 of *TPDG*

⁹ Page 28 of *TPDG*

¹⁰ Page 65 of *TPDG*

disconnects from her soul, and the theme of giving away one's soul, may not be a literal, physical separation, however, the motif points to a disjointed concept of body and soul. If we accept the interpretation that the portrait contains Dorian's soul, which ages and decays in accordance to each of his sins, then Lord Henry furthers that separation of body and soul in his quip to Basil; regarding his sarcastic comment pertaining to sin, Basil tells Lord Henry, "You really must not say things like that before Dorian, Harry," to which Lord Henry responds, "Before which Dorian? The one who is pouring out tea for us, or the one in the picture?" (31). Later, Dorian mocks Basil's insistence that only God can see one's soul by bringing him to the locked room that harbors the truth of his ruined soul¹¹. That Dorian's soul has a physical manifestation rather than a place within his body for only God to see illustrates that in *TPDG*, the body and soul are divided. The soul's value is attached to what it is able to procure for the owner: homosexual love; a wealthy husband; influence over another; a bargaining chip in return for eternal youth. In *TPDG*, Dorian has quite literally lost his soul.

That the sincerity of Wilde's spiritual journey is widely debated indicates that scholars acknowledge the overtly religious nature of *De Profundis*. Of Wilde's attempt to find beauty in his sorrow, he says, "There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul" (Wilde *DP* 61). Wilde bridges body and soul in his endeavor to connect his physical pain to spiritual purpose. Wilde likens his sorrow to Art and says, "What the artist is always looking for is that mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward" (Wilde *DP* 67), which vastly differs from the disconnect in *TPDG*, in which Dorian's flawless external appearance betrays the soul. Wilde's more delicate treatment of the soul in *De Profundis*, an attitude that did not

¹¹ Page 159-60 of *TPDG*

previously exist in *TPDG*, perhaps marks a closer identification with Catholicism. Whereas the soul is marred by sin and external influence in *TPDG*, in *De Profundis*, Wilde understands that “... one only realises one’s soul by getting rid of all alien passions, all acquired culture, and all external possession be they good or evil.” And while Dorian mocks Basil for assuming only God can see one’s soul in *TPDG*, in *De Profundis*, Wilde proclaims that “It is man’s soul that Christ is always looking for” (Wilde *DP* 75). Through this spiritual transformation, the soul which Wilde once conveyed as a squandered, incidental external part, is now an integral part of one’s personhood that required constant care so that it may be revealed in the best light possible to Christ. Although Wilde’s literary and lifestyle choices, such as his illegal sexual behavior, subversive interest in Catholicism, and even his unorthodox belief in Catholicism can be regarded as rebellious, in finding humility and beauty in his circumstance, Wilde decides that “... the mood of rebellion closes up the channels of the soul, and shuts out the airs of heaven” (Wilde *DP* 69). Is Wilde finally turning his back on those things that no longer support his spiritual growth? The change evidenced in *De Profundis* certainly points to a sincere transformation. Wilde’s admission that “... to recognise that the soul of man is unknowable is the ultimate achievement of Wisdom. The final mystery is oneself” (Wilde *DP* 87) assigns a certain divinity to the soul, as Wilde accepts that, while it is an enigma to others and the self, the soul is accessible to Christ.

The theme of repentance, that is, remorse resulting from sinful behavior, might be a principal focus of Wilde’s spiritual transformation in *De Profundis*, but Dorian’s often-glossed over atonement in *TPDG* are harbingers of Wilde’s penitent mood in his prison letter. Lord Henry’s sarcastic and often-cynical ideas greatly influence Dorian and eventually lead him to a life of sin. Dorian describes Sybil’s affect on him: “When I am with her, I regret all that you

have taught me. I become different from what you have known me to be. I am changed, and the mere touch of Sybil Vane's hand makes me forget you and all your wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories" (Wilde *TPDG* 82). Dorian is determined to change, as Sybil inspires him to shun improper attitudes, but even as Dorian resists Lord Henry's influence, it is apparent that he is taken by the intoxicating pull of these theories. Dorian's fascination with Lord Henry's theories is reminiscent of Wilde's fascination with Catholicism, as described in Jerusha McCormack's article. After Dorian rebuffs Sybil for her uninspired acting, he vows to "try to love her again." Dorian would "... resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry anymore – would not ... listen to those subtle, poisonous theories that in Basil Hallward's garden had first stirred within him the passion for impossible things" (96). The garden where Dorian is first enchanted by Lord Henry's influence brings to mind the Garden of Eden, the site of Adam and Eve's Original Sin. This excerpt is also tinged with homosexual desire, if we accept that the "impossible things" Dorian refers to are ideas imbued with homoeroticism. Dorian does not vow to turn away from sin because it is the right thing to do; he is loathed to see the portrait's image alter in horrible ways and is hopeful resisting temptation will salvage the beauty of his picture. The novel concludes with Dorian stabbing the painting with the same knife he stabbed the painting's artist with. For Dorian, the act "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" (229). Dorian dies when he stabs the painting, all dreadful scars and signs of sin transfer from the painting onto the lifeless Dorian. It is unclear whether Dorian's violent act is an attempt to erase evidence of his soul or a suicide to end all his earthly sins, however, it is clear that, in this moment, Dorian and his sins are interconnected; he cannot kill his sins, or his soul, without killing himself. Several times in the novel, a penitent Dorian vows to resist temptation, however,

his intentions are rarely to cleanse his soul and turn away from sin, but rather to gain love and beauty in his life.

Just as Dorian's repentance in *TPDG* reads as insincere, scholars have regarded Wilde's contrition for his transgressions as insincere and as an Aesthetic pose in *De Profundis*. Although Wilde's penitent mood comes from a place of self-improvement rather than from the Catholic standpoint that repentance is salvation for one's soul, Wilde desires a sincerely spiritual connection with Christ and Catholicism. To illustrate the conception of newly-formed understandings regarding his sorrow and how to find beauty in it when formerly he had only known of pleasure, Wilde once again refers to the garden, the place where Adam and Eve came to know good and evil: "The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also" (Wilde *DP* 70). Wilde's approach to repenting requires that he find humility in order to live this new life in prison and afterwards, when he is released. Wilde says of this "fresh development": "It could not have come before, nor later. Had anyone told me of it, I would have rejected it ... It is only when one has lost all things, that one knows that one possesses it" (Wilde *DP* 59). Wilde could not have expressed a genuinely repentant mood in his earlier work, *TPDG*, as the novel prioritizes pleasure above pain. Furthermore, Wilde was at the height of his literary career; it was not until his trials and ensuing prison sentence did Wilde know the type of sorrow that would require contrition and humility. Of his punishment, Wilde says that "To reject one's own experience is to arrest one's development. To deny one's experience is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life" (Wilde *DP* 62). Genuine penitence and an acceptance of his circumstances, not an Aesthetic pose, are responsible for a side of Wilde that readers and scholars may not have been accustomed. Indeed, searching for beauty in sorrow may be an extension of Wilde's Art-for-Art's-Sake mantra, however, Wilde's rebirth, of sorts, can be seen as the Catholic sacrament of

Baptism. Wilde says, “This new life ... is, of course, no new life at all, but simply the continuance, by means of development, and evolution of my former life” (Wilde *DP* 70), which may refer to his life as an unorthodox follower of Christ.

In addition to images of the soul and the concept of repentance, the third Catholic image that develops between *TPDG* and *De Profundis* is the idea of The Holy Trinity, which, in the Catholic faith, symbolizes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a paradox in itself as the three entities are considered one and cannot be separated in Christian terms. Just as Wilde’s belief and practice in Catholicism is unique and modified, so is his characterization of the Holy Trinity in *TPDG*. The role of the father, of sorts, belongs to Basil, as Dorian’s picture, and therefore his struggle with his soul, is Basil’s creation; Dorian embodies the son, as he is molded by both Basil and Lord Henry; and Lord Henry is the spirit which influences Dorian’s thinking, and therefore, his immoral behavior. Basil says that the three men are punished for their positive attributes, which we later learn are, instead, detriments. Basil says, “Your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are – my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray’s good looks, we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly” (Wilde *TPDG* 6). Perhaps Wilde utilizes the concept of The Holy Trinity to express contrary ideas within himself. Dorian is the vessel that receives Lord Henry’s influence, but also Basil’s voice of reason. Upon meeting Lord Henry, Dorian thinks, “He was so unlike Basil. They made a delightful contrast. And he had such a beautiful voice” (19). Dorian is immediately taken with Lord Henry, the influence of the older aristocrat apparent, but later, Dorian tells Basil, “I am changed, but you must always be my friend. Of course, I am very fond of Harry. But I know you are better than he is. You are not stronger – you are too much afraid of life – but you are better” (114). Lord Henry’s advice to Dorian often takes the form of aphorisms or sarcasm, while Basil’s is sound

and cautious; Dorian acknowledges that Basil is more moral, which he labels “better,” however he cannot resist the pull of Lord Henry’s “spirit.” The concept of the Holy Trinity in the *TPDG* functions as the proverbial angel and devil on Dorian’s shoulders, which ultimately suggests that good outweighs evil, though Dorian learns this lesson too late.

The concept of the Holy Trinity manifests itself in three forms of suffering in *De Profundis* rather than the traditional Father, Son, and Holy Spirit interpretation. Wilde as the narrator suffers physically in prison; Wilde borrows Lord Alfred’s (whom he calls Boise in the letter) voice to further investigate the profundity of his own suffering; and Wilde identifies with Christ’s suffering. This collective trio of voices establishes that Wilde’s suffering is multifaceted and can only be understood from the point of view of various people separate from his own identity, but still tightly connected to him. Scholar Oliver S. Buckton says in his article¹² that “Wilde, renouncing both the traditional forms of Victorian autobiography and the fixities of sexual identity, used the prison letter to exploit the fluidity of roles ... that he had mastered as a dramatist” (174). Buckton argues that Wilde and Boise have a “shared subjectivity” (181), and that Boise serves as “the embodiment of all the mistakes that Wilde believed he had made” (177). Buckton also argues that in an effort to distance himself from the past, “Wilde’s letter springs into being ... an assault on another’s identity, rather than ... a revelation of his own” (178). I argue that in this time of Wilde’s life, his former lover and Christ were arguably the closest and dearest figures to him; Wilde embraces his past and his present suffering by identifying with not just Lord Alfred, but with Christ in *De Profundis*. Wilde mimics his earlier sentiment in *TPDG* when he tells Lord Alfred in *De Profundis*: “... the Gods are strange, and punish us for what is good and humane in us as much as for what is evil and perverse, I must

¹² Buckton’s article is called “Desire Without Limit: Dissident Confession in Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis*.”

accept the fact that one is punished for the good as well as for the evil that one does” (Wilde *DP* 63). This idea that men are punished for both the good and evil in them speaks to the duality in Wilde’s character which necessitates the Catholic concept of The Holy Trinity to be utilized in expressing Wilde’s many-sided, and sometimes contradictory, beliefs. In his prison letter, Wilde tells Lord Alfred, “Suffering ... is the means by which we exist ... and the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the warrant, the evidence, of our continued identity” (Wilde *DP* 18). The Catholic symbolic imagery of the Holy Trinity exists in both *TPDG* and *De Profundis* as an instrument to multiply Wilde’s voice while remaining sincere to each one. The Holy Trinity is utilized to illustrate the battle for Dorian’s soul in *TPDG*, while *De Profundis* puts a microscope on Wilde’s suffering by identifying it and voicing it through those who were simultaneously the cause, and cure, to said suffering.

The Picture of Dorian Gray and *De Profundis* map out Wilde’s genuine devotion to lifestyles considered offensive, and downright illegal, in late-Victorian England, signaling that his very being was always at odds with the public that at once embraced and rejected him. The sexual undertones, as well as the defiantly Catholic sentiments in both works convey that secrecy, however thinly veiled, became Wilde’s mode of preserving an enigmatic identity, a weapon of survival in a climate hostile to homosexuals and those siding with Catholicism rather than Protestantism. Wilde employs several voices, not to mask his own, but to magnify his identity, and to inject sincerity in a manner of speaking that may have been interpreted as paradoxical.

Chapter V

Conclusion

*“My nets gaped wide with many a break and flaw,
Nathless I threw them as my final cast
Into the sea, and waited for the end.
When lo! A sudden glory! And I saw
The argent splendor of white limbs ascend,
And in that joy forgot my tortured past.”*

-- Wilde, “Vita Nuova”

Proclaiming that defining Oscar Wilde is an impossibility is both an understatement and an oversimplification of the task at hand when attempting to define Oscar Wilde. However, my study of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (TPDG) and *De Profundis* has established that Wilde will not be characterized as one thing over another, but rather as wholly both deeply religious and lover of beautiful boys, and sincere and paradoxical in language. Emphasizing that man cannot be separated from his experience, trauma, and joys that are essentially forbidden pleasures, Wilde’s two works parallel fiction with factual events from his life. These parallels are an outward rendering of Wilde’s reflection of himself and allow readers insights into his most intimate truths. What Wilde sees within himself drives the adventures, or rather, misadventures of Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry in TPDG; Wilde’s own internal struggles with religion and homosexuality are resolved in his process of his relating to Lord Alfred, Christ, and Catholicism in *De Profundis*.

The moments that require Wilde to silence his true self are the moments in which his most genuine self appears loudest and most clear. While it may be tempting to dismiss Wilde's spiritual growth in prison as the only alternative to depression or suicide, Wilde's saving grace while incarcerated is his determination to hold firm to his identity. In his article¹³, critic Kirby Farrell argues "prison acts out a mock execution." (31). Prison is intended to kill any individuality and sense of self a person possesses. Farrell goes on to say, "It confiscated identity and the prisoner's sense of heroic purpose, substituting intentionally meaningless drudgery, infantile obedience, and brutally literal definitions of everything. Prison tolerates no ironies or multiple selves" (Farrell 31). In the face of devastating, crushing circumstances, Wilde maintains a part of himself; by penning a letter to his same-sex lover, by daring to hint at his own sexuality in *De Profundis*, Wilde's homosexual passion translates to passion for survival. The same desire and lust that Wilde displays in *De Profundis* is the same lust that propels him through his prison sentence and allows him to envision a new life going forward. Wilde's sincere spiritual growth comes at a high price, but the price to not be who he absolutely is, is even higher.

Wilde's many-sidedness in each body of work can be misconstrued as an eternal search for something to make him whole; however, *TPDG* and *DP* illuminate that each fragment in itself represents a whole portion of Wilde's identity. That there are seemingly two sides to every aspect of Wilde's life is reason to question his true identity, intentions, and authenticity. Acutely aware that Wilde is a complicated study, critic Terry Eagleton¹⁴ says of Wilde that "... most things about him were doubled, hybrid, ambivalent" (2), and that, "Perhaps in the end Wilde could find the wholeness of being he yearned for only in extinction. There's a purity about death which the aesthete is likely to find seductive" (6). It seems that for Eagleton, only death

¹³ Entitled "Wilde and the Penalties of Modernism."

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton's article is called "Doubleness of Oscar Wilde."

guarantees the finality and certainty Wilde craves, however, I argue the opposite, that death is too predictable, so Wilde chooses to live multiple lives, despite the ramifications. In George Levine's New York Times Book Review of Richard Ellmann's biography *Oscar Wilde*, Levine sums up Wilde's multifaceted identity: "Contradiction, even self-contradiction, was a condition of Wilde's continuing raid on predictability. His work, like his life, invariably denied what it had just affirmed, so that it was almost impossible to catch him out in consistency" (3).

The idea that body and soul cannot be separated, just as Catholic concept, the Holy Trinity, cannot be separated, comes full circle in *De Profundis* as Wilde is determined to nourish his body and soul equally. In *TPDG*, Wilde attempts to divide Dorian's physical body from his soul, which resides in the painting rather than within Dorian and the results are catastrophic. In the end, Dorian looks at the painting staring back at him and the narrator says: "For curiosity's sake, he had tried the denial of self" (Wilde *TPDG* 228). Dorian dies when he stabs the painting because the body and soul are paradoxically intertwined. In this moment, Wilde reiterates for his readers that denying any part of yourself is fatal to your entire self. Appearing devoutly Catholic may have had dangerous consequences in Wilde's social environment; Wilde introduces his religious beliefs in the middle of a letter meant for Lord Alfred which veils his Catholicism in much the same way that Catholicism veils his homosexuality in *TPDG*. The purpose of utilizing these veils is not to deny a part of Wilde's identity; they are put to use so that Wilde can authentically and accurately, albeit paradoxically, express his identity.

Though *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *De Profundis* ring with paradox and at times, contradiction, they are no less sincere because of these techniques that Wilde employs to convey his personhood. Delving into Wilde's two works and uncovering Wilde's identity is akin to gazing into a kaleidoscope; each individual looking through the lens would pinpoint and describe

a different detail, angle, or slant, though all variations would be as true as the next. Wilde's expression of himself encompasses many facets of his identity. He uses three voices in each work studied in this paper, and each is equally representative of Wilde's internal life. The beautiful paradox of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* focusing on earthly pleasures and misdeeds reveal that the soul alone cannot take the brunt of man's sins is as intriguing as the paradox of *De Profundis*' focus on the journey of cleansing the soul to reveal that Wilde's homosexual desire cannot be eradicated even in a place as dark and hopeless as prison. In fact and in fiction, Oscar Wilde intertwines body and soul; religion and sexuality; and sincerity and paradox in the most delightful ways.

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