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# Identity-Construction and Development in the Modernist Bildungsroman

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### I.

Is it possible for a subject to ‘become’? The Bildungsroman emphasizes the importance of self-cultivation and self-directed education in the subject’s development. The Bildungsroman’s protagonist takes on these tasks with the hopes of forming, from the chaotic and fragmented world of childhood, a clear sense of his self and purpose.<sup>1</sup> If the protagonist is to be “successful” in his development and self-cultivation, like Goethe’s Wilhelm or Dickens’s David Copperfield, he is able to establish unity with society and within his own mind. He emerges as a mature, enlightened adult with an understanding of who he is and an appreciation for his intersubjective position. This narrative pattern dominates the traditional Bildungsroman from its conception in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, with Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1795-6), well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with English novels such as Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Dicken’s *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and *Great Expectations* (1860-61), and Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). Near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of modernist modes of creation and thinking, there is a perceptible shift in the narrative of the Bildungsroman. This essay focuses on the shift in perception of the self and self-development in the modernist

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<sup>1</sup> The essay examines the development of male protagonists within the modernist Bildungsroman. For the sake of clarity and consistency, this essay uses male singular pronouns to discuss the subject of the Bildungsroman. In no way does this imply that the process of development portrayed in the Bildungsroman only applies to male figures.

Bildungsroman by performing a psychoanalytic reading of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Whether traditional or modernist, the Bildungsroman is a narrative of self-development and cultivation. Buckley says that the Bildungsroman, in its "pure form" has been defined "novel of all-around development or self-culture" (13). The term "development" connotes a temporal process of change. Thus, the protagonist of the Bildungsroman is dynamic; his skills, faculties, and philosophies are developed over the course of the narrative. Jeffers notes, "The hero [of the Bildungsroman] is not 'ready-made...' He is what Bakhtin calls 'the image of man in the process of becoming'" (2). It is this 'process' that is the narrative focus of the Bildungsroman.

Through an extended period of experimentation, rebellion, and (typically informal) education the protagonist of the Bildungsroman dialectically resolves conflicting ideas of who he is and what he desires. Though the specific process and results vary from text to text, critic Jerome Buckley notes that the plot of the traditional Bildungsroman can be distilled into specific tropes that are characteristic of the genre (17). In these works, the protagonist grows up, typically in a provincial setting, finding familial relations (particularly those with the paternal figure) antagonistic and repressive. Additionally, his formal education proves unfulfilling, stifling his creativity and ambitions. At some point, he journeys to the city where his "real education" begins.<sup>2</sup> Working from Buckley's paradigm, critic Paul Sheehan summarizes the following process as the self's struggle "to take shape, to become fully integrated under the pressure of urban encounter both physical (sexual) and mental (philosophical)" (3). Following the trajectory of the Bildungsroman, it seems only reasonable to ask when or how this process concludes. How

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<sup>2</sup> See Jerome Hamilton Buckley's *Season of Youth* for an in-depth analysis of the narrative pattern of the Bildungsroman.

is subject portrayed when is no longer in process? When he has ‘become’? In order to answer these questions, it is important to briefly discuss the Bildungsroman in a socio-historical context to examine this portrayal and how it evolves over time.

The origin of the Bildungsroman is surprisingly easy to pinpoint. In *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, Gregory Castle notes that, as a literary genre, the Bildungsroman is unique because its initial conception can be neatly tied into a particular moment in history and culture (34). The idea of *Bildung*, or self-cultivation, was first formulated in Germany during the late 18th century. The concept was primarily shaped by Weimar intellectuals, such as Friedrich von Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as well as the Prussian philosopher, Wilhelm von Humboldt.<sup>3</sup> *Bildung* was borne out of both Enlightenment humanism (Jeffers 3), which emphasized human rationality, human progress, and the importance of individual liberty in development. Influenced by these aspects of Enlightenment humanism, these German intellectuals began to see *Bildung* as a critical spiritual undertaking. They believed that, through self-cultivation, the subject could create an aesthetico-moral balance, achieving *intra-* and *inter-*personal harmony. With Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, widely considered to be the prototype of the Bildungsroman (see Castle 9, Jeffers 9, Buckley 12), the project of self-cultivation was streamlined into narrative form. Over the course of the plot, Wilhelm chooses “his sexual partners, his aesthetic interests, his career and companions, all with a view to giving his life the shape that pleases... himself” (Jeffers 28). All the while, his development is aided by the beneficent influence of the Society of the Tower. After this period of formation, he is ready to serve others, becoming a “citizen” and “master” (Jeffers 28).

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<sup>3</sup> See Gregory Castle’s *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* for a more in-depth analysis of these intellectuals’ specific contributions to the concept.

From the ideals of German humanism and the tropes established in this archetypal work, the Bildungsroman continued to evolve through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in England. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century English Bildungsroman, the development of the individual self is important; however, how the individual relates to his social context is equally (if not more) important. Jeffers notes that the protagonist of the English Bildungsroman is “decidedly part of his social milieu, and his social milieu is part of him. Intersubjectivity – life with, for, and through other people – is an inextinguishable determinant of his identity... the question of his responsibility to them isn’t sidestepped” (36). For this reason, the protagonist of the English Bildungsroman is even more committed to finding a suitable vocation (Castle 21). Doing so shows that he and society have established a mutually beneficial relationship. Additionally, finding a suitable partner to marry (such as Agnes for David in *David Copperfield*) is an important sign of stable maturity in the English Bildungsroman. It signals that the protagonist is done with his youthful gallivanting and is ready to be productive in a domestic setting. In the English Bildungsroman, harmony of self is largely achieved through harmonious relations with the mechanisms of society and others living in it.

In spite of their differences, the aim of the Bildungsroman from the German conception to the English adaptation is unity for the subject. Castle succinctly establishes the two-fold nature of this goal by explaining it as “the harmony of one’s intellectual, moral, spiritual, and artistic faculties,” and “harmony of self and society” (7). The protagonist of the traditional Bildungsroman, on the one hand, searches for inner coherence and a clear sense of self. At the conclusion of the Bildungsroman, the protagonist’s use of the pronoun “I” should reference a stable inner reality. In addition, the protagonist of the Bildungsroman is also supposed to have aligned his internal values in such a way that they are deemed acceptable – even beneficial – to

society. The core analysis of this essay focuses on how the modernist Bildungsroman disrupts the ideas of unity of the self and of the self with this society, as established in this tradition.

Near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of modernism, the narrative of the traditional Bildungsroman starts to be overturned. Castle notes, "... elements that demanded stability and predictable development in the classical Bildungsroman – harmonious identity-formation, aesthetic education, meaningful and rewarding social relations, a vocation – become problematic in the 20<sup>th</sup> century." (24). This, in part, can be attributed to developments in various fields of knowledge making the understanding of "human" decidedly more complex. Sheehan notes that various branches of scientific theory, notably Freud in psychology and Darwin in biology, had begun to overturn the notion of man as the center of his own world (6). These theories started to call into question the ideals of Enlightenment humanism and progress that had shaped the themes and plots of the traditional Bildungsroman. Sheehan notes that humanism "possesses a certain unwavering confidence, which licenses it to enact schemas of mastery" (20). It is precisely those 'schemas of mastery' that the modernist Bildungsroman overturns in its narrative.

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* provide compelling examples of the modernist Bildungsroman's resistance to the traditions established in earlier forms of the genre.<sup>4</sup> In spite of their desire for self-cultivation, neither Joyce's Stephen nor Wilde's Dorian is able to achieve the same unity of self and society as their predecessors within the genre. The psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan provide this essay with a theoretical framework for understanding how Joyce and Wilde deconstruct the

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<sup>4</sup> Though Oscar Wilde is often grouped with Victorian writers and this novel has decidedly Gothic elements, this analysis views *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an early modernist Bildungsroman because of its complex, skeptical portrayal of self-cultivation.

conception of the “fully developed” self in the traditional Bildungsroman. This framework is used to discuss pivotal moments in each subject psychosexual development that impact the subject’s perception of the self. Through this framework, the reader can understand the conflicts occurring between the protagonists and their outer worlds, as well as the internal conflicts that precipitate their behaviors and actions. Dorian, unable to resolve the confusing triadic relationship between his ideal-I, the punishing “real” image of his soul in the portrait, and the demands of the inverted symbolic order constructed by Lord Henry, fails at self-cultivation and self-destructs. Stephen, in contrast, seems to achieve a balance between his self-perception, his desire, and societal expectations; however, previous oscillations in the narrative between epiphany and bathos undercut the notion that he has triumphantly concluded his development.

The contention of this essay is that Wilde’s and Joyce’s representations of subjectivity demonstrate that consciousness is not the manifestation of any essential, central self. Instead, through their psychologically complex portrayals of Dorian and Stephen, they show the self as a product of varied, internal and external sources that are not within the subject’s control. With *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the modernist Bildungsroman and its protagonists appear stuck in a recursive pattern of self-doubt and self-awareness that eliminate the possibility of ‘becoming.’

## II.

Freud’s theory of the tripartite psyche provides a basis for discussing the subject’s mind divided. This is particularly important to discussion of the Bildungsroman, because it is precisely this division that the narrative of development attempts to overcome. Freud’s topographical imagining of the psyche splits it into three operating agencies: the id, the ego, and the superego.

In order to understand how they affect the subject, it is important to examine them and their relationship with the subject and society individually.

The id is bound up with the instinctual drives, which Freud divides into two categories: Eros and the death-drive. Eros, Freud says, is “the uninhibited sexual instinct proper and the instinctual impulses of aim-inhibited love... [and] also the self-preservation instinct” (*The Ego and the Id* 37). On the seemingly opposite end the spectrum, Freud classifies the death instinct, a category of destructive impulses. Whereas Eros seeks to perpetuate and unify life, Freud claims that the death drive seeks to “lead organic life back to its inanimate state” (*The Ego and the Id* 38). Though evidence of Eros abounds in sexual desire and narcissism, the death instinct is more difficult to realize. It is most clearly seen in aggression; Freud describes aggression as “the derivative and the mean representative of the death instinct” (*Civilization* 69). Both instincts are simultaneously present in the subject, creating tension. In accordance with the pleasure-principle, the id constantly attempts to alleviate this tension through satisfying the demands of the drives. Thus, the id prioritizes wish-fulfillment, aiming at uninhibited gratification in spite of external demands (Wright 17). However, though the id does not prioritize these external demands, the subject cannot ignore their presence.

Society and its substructures (nation, community, school, family, etc.) demand that the subject regulate his instincts from the onset. They enforce these demands through threats (loss of love, physical harm, punishment, etc.). One of the first examples of these demands is seen in the drama of the Oedipus complex, in which the child wishes to possess his mother and kill his father (his rival for her affection). Through the threat of castration, the child learns to reform this, and other transgressive impulses (Wright 20). For fear of the father, who is capable of castrating the child, the child must repress both sexual and aggressive instincts in order to protect himself.



This allows him to assume his appropriate “place” in the family structure. In order to prevent him from losing his place in this structure, the subject begins to internalize its expectations; however, he is also frustrated by these expectations because they restrict his ability to gratify his instinctual demands. The frustration the subject experiences as he tries to align his own will with the will of society, as previously discussed, is one of the primary conflicts of the Bildungsroman. Additionally, it explains one of the important divisions in the psyche.

The external pressure for the subject to align his values and behavior with society further divides the subject’s psyche, creating the superego. Freud declares that “man’s sense of guilt springs from the Oedipus complex” (*Civilization* 78), asserting the complex’s pivotal importance in the development of the superego. As seen in the Oedipus complex, guilt plays an important role in keeping the subject in line with familial and societal expectations. Freud says that the family structure and civilization rely on the “reinforcement of the sense of guilt” within the subject (*Civilization* 80). The superego is employed to inflict this guilt and remorse on the subject, keeping him in line with external demands. It is a transformation of the external parental, religious, and societal expectations into an internal representative (Wright 16). The superego redirects the instinctual aggression of the subject inwardly, demanding that the subject act in accordance with parental and societal law, and punishing him when he transgresses these laws. Freud characterizes the superego as a sadistic, punishing agency, saying it “torments the sinful ego with ... anxiety and is on the watch for opportunities of getting it punished by the external world” (*Civilization* 72). The superego and the id (discussed previously) thus place a great deal of tension on the subject, who experiences this tension through the conscious ego.

The ego, which is the seat of consciousness for the subject, is tasked with balancing the demands of the id, the superego, and society. The ego is locked into a constant struggle with

these three entities as it tries to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. Freudian theory states that the ego is influenced by the erotic drive of self-preservation (Wright 16). Thus, the ego, in fear of rejection, harm, and punishment from the superego and society, must place restrictions on the pleasure-seeking id.

Importantly, as consciousness, the ego also establishes a subject's feeling of identity and autonomy. The ego part of the subject that he most readily identifies as "himself." Freud, though he notes this as a deception, claims, "there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our self, of our own ego" (*Civilization* 12). This strong feeling of identity connects with the subject's conscious thought to create his "I." This fusion provides him with a sense of autonomy – it is the "I" that acts and the "I" that speaks. However, Freud undermines the certainty of this feeling in the subject, noting,

the ego appears to us as something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctly from everything else... such an appearance is deceptive...on the contrary the ego is continued inwards without any sharp delimitation into the unconscious mental entity which we designate as the id and for which it serves as kind of a façade... even the feeling of our own ego is subject to disturbance and the boundaries are not constant. (*Civilization* 13)

Here, Freud creates a dilemma with the notions of autonomy and identity, which are critical concepts in the discussion of the Bildungsroman. Freud links the ego, the "self" to feelings of 'autonomy' and 'unity' (which is interpreted in this analysis as a feeling of stable identity), notes that these feelings are illusory. Though it is separate from consciousness, the id is attached to the ego and influences conscious thought. The ego is not and cannot be independent of the drives.

Ego-psychology, an offshoot of Freudian theory, suggests that it is this part of the ego that should be strengthened because this is the part of the psyche capable of social integration. This theory suggests that the goal of development is for ego to achieve mastery over the id and become a publicly adjusted identity (Wright 57). This seems to almost mirror aims of the traditional Bildungsroman, in which the subject must modify his behavior and sense of social identity in order to find his appropriate “place” in the societal structure. However, Freud’s own theory, with its assertion that the ego is not autonomous, but rather attached to the id, questions this possibility.

Freud’s conception of the tripartite human mind splits the subject and shows it as driven by multiple internal forces. This severely complicates the idea that a subject can find a stable, autonomous identity. Instead, with Freud’s conception of the mind, the subject appears constituted of the id, ego, and the superego – three entities that seek to dominate one another. The subject, according to Freudian theory, is thus unstable and decentered.

Lacan’s theories expand on Freud’s initial schemas to demonstrate how language becomes instrumental in the socialization and the development of the subject. Though Freud does address the illusory nature of the ego’s control, he does not address the reasons for this. Lacan further undermines the idea that the ego can control the subject by explaining that the subject is barred, through language, from understanding and representing himself. Consciousness operates in both language (which comes from without) and images (which can only be discussed or understood in language/through symbols). Neither images nor language are capable of explaining the complex functions of the body and drives to the individual. Barred from the complexities of its own body and internal mechanisms, Freud’s ego, as the center of the consciousness, is unable to fully understand what it is, what it needs, and what it desires. Lacan’s

theory, with its emphasis on language, suggests that the subject cannot reach a terminus in development seen in the traditional Bildungsroman. Instead, the subject will continuously struggle with a desire, forever anticipating a unity it cannot achieve.

According to Lacan, the subject is constituted of three interconnected psychological orders: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. Lacan's three orders are largely based on a thorough revision of Freud's theories of the psyche and psychosexual development. As the reader shall discern, aspects of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic correspond with Freud's id, ego, and superego, respectively. However, whereas the id, ego, and superego are separate agents contained within the subject, the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic are systems that govern the aspects of subjectivity. These systems dictate what the subject can and cannot control in himself, and what the subject can and cannot understand about himself. In this analysis, Lacan's theory is used to show the illusory nature of the subject's sense of "self," and to demonstrate the subject's inability to understand his own desire and exercise autonomy. By applying Lacan's theory to the modernist Bildungsroman, the essay aims to show how the conflicting and interrelated aspects of subjectivity prevent their protagonists from reaching that unity of the self that is displayed in earlier novels of the tradition.

Though Lacan's three orders cannot be unified or assimilated within the subject to create a singular "self," they are undoubtedly intertwined. Lacan explains the relationship between the three orders through comparison with the Borromean knot. He explains that no order is preeminent, and, if one is cut, the whole system will fall apart (Wright 115). In other words, there is no singular aspect of Lacan's organization that corresponds more closely than the other with the subject. In discussing the subject then, it is nearly impossible to separate discussion of one order and its corollaries from another. The account that follows tries to distinguish each of

the orders' characteristics, and the components of experience and subjectivity that each establishes.

The unified sense of self is directly undermined by Lacan's initial order, the Real. The Real, in one sense, is a state of being linked to a specific time in development (before the subject anticipates the "self" in the mirror stage, and before he assimilates language). In his seminar on "The Topic of the Imaginary," Lacan describes the Real as "not delimited by anything, [the Real is that] which cannot yet be the object of any definition... neither good, nor bad, but is all at the same time chaotic and absolute" (*Seminar II* 79). The Real is 'absolute' because it has yet to be differentiated or divided by language, and 'chaotic' because of the subject's inability to express or meet his own needs. In the Real, the subject has the experience of being in an amorphous state (Wright 110) in which its own need, senses, lack, and satisfaction have no boundaries. He must rely on others to interpret signs of his needs (i.e., crying) and provide satisfaction. This state of existence starts to end when the subject begins to distinguish between himself and the external world in the Mirror Stage. The subject is completely barred from the Real when he assimilates language.

For this analysis, the Real as a state of existence has no bearing (though an explanation this state is necessary in order for the reader to contextualize the Imaginary and Symbolic). The reason for this is that, in every iteration of the form, the protagonist of the Bildungsroman has already differentiated the boundaries of self and other, and been assimilated into language. The Real factors into this discussion as it appears as disruptions to the sense of self and structures set up in the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Real can be described as both what has not yet been symbolized and what cannot be symbolized. Some aspect of it always persists alongside the Imaginary and the Symbolic (Fink 25-27). Slavoj Žižek, a contemporary philosopher and expert

in Lacanian psychoanalysis, characterizes the Real as “traumatic,” saying that ‘reality’ (which in Lacanian terms signifies the Symbolic and the Imaginary - those orders through which the consciousness can conceptualize and identify) functions “*as an escape from encountering the Real*” (57). This analysis explores anxiety, disruptions in language, and doubt of the “self” as evidence of the Real. The purpose of this is to demonstrate that the notions of identity constructed and sustained in the Imaginary and Symbolic are subject to disturbance. In order to explore how identity or “self” is disturbed, however, it is first necessary to understand how it is established, as well as its effects and implications.

For Lacan, the ego (the self) is not the subject; it is rather an object created in a process that he terms the Mirror Stage. During the Mirror Stage, an infant (6-18 mos.) sees his image in the mirror. It is a jubilant moment of recognition, and he bestows this image with special significance through his identification with it. Lacan describes this as the moment in which “the *I* is precipitated in primordial form” (“The Mirror Stage” 76). In other words, the Mirror Stage ‘causes’ the sense of self, ‘the *I*,’ even before the subject assimilates language. In the Real, this sense of self did not exist; the infant subject did not perceive any boundaries between the internal and external. Jane Gallop notes that the image apprehended in the Mirror Stage “becomes a totalizing ideal that organizes and orients the self...” (79). This totalizing process is what allows the individual to distinguish between the internal and the external.

The notion of self, established in the Mirror Stage, does not correspond with the whole subject in actuality. This is central to Lacan’s theorization of the Mirror Stage - he says that the “important point” is that the totalizing form of the image “situates the agency known as the ego... in a fictional direction” (“The Mirror Stage as Formative” 76). He calls this fictionalized ego the “ideal-I” or “ideal-ego” which which Žižek explains as “the way I would like to be, the

way I would like others to see me” (80). There is, however, according to Lacan, an ineradicable gap between this ideal-ego and the subject. The union between the subject and his image is a moment of *méconnaissance*, of misrecognition. Lacan says that this is because image is given to him as a “total form” or “gestalt,” and that it is through this totalizing form that “the subject anticipates the maturation of his power” (76). The image appears as an unbroken union of inner and outer, promising the self-mastery that allows immediate satisfaction of desire (Wright 110). Such a union is illusory, however; there can be no such guarantee. The subject is thus alienated from the self. In Lacanian terms, the self is an other.

Through the Mirror Stage, with the acknowledgement of the “self,” the subject is initiated into the Imaginary. Discussion of the Imaginary is critical to the Bildungsroman in this framework because it, in large, part determines how the subject relates to himself and others. In Lacanian theory, the Imaginary is the realm of object relations. The ego, the sense of self, is the foremost Imaginary object which attracts the subject’s libidinal investment (Fink 84). Lacan notes that this object is “the rootstock of secondary identifications” (“The Mirror Stage as Formative” 76). The formation of the ego is what allows the subject to form relationships with others in the Imaginary. These relationships are relationships between egos, determined by the opposition between likeness, which incites love, and difference, which incites hatred (Fink 84). The relationship between the self and others is further determined by the subject’s assimilation of language.

Lacan states that once the subject assimilates language and enters the Symbolic, “the specular *I* turns into the social *I*” (“The Mirror Stage” 79). Once the subject enters into language, he is situated into society and governed by his rules. The Symbolic attempts to control the Real aspect of the subject that threatens its organization (Wright 112). Lacan notes that entry into the

Symbolic “turns the *I* into the apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process” (“The Mirror Stage” 79). The subject is now expected to obey social imperatives, which demand that the subject place restrictions on himself. The subject is also expected to express needs and demands in ways that are acceptable, or at least recognizable to the Other.

The Other is the virtual entity that governs the Symbolic Order. The Other has multiple faces. In one sense, it is language itself. It is also the abstract structures and ideas put into place, attributed power, and sustained through language: knowledge, law, ideals, morals, History, Nature (see Fink 87, Žižek 9, 41). The Other has power insofar as humans attribute it with meaning. Žižek says, “it is the substance of the individuals who recognize themselves in it, the ground their whole existence, the point of reference that provides the ultimate horizon of meaning” (10). The main idea captured here is that the Other holds a privileged place in the subject’s existence.

Lacan’s formula that man’s desire is “the Other’s desire” (qtd. in Žižek 41) captures the critical effect of Symbolic initiation. This effect is multi-faceted; this formula contains multiple meanings. One shade of meaning can be determined by looking at the Other as language itself. In this sense, the Other literally determines the subject’s desire. Desire can only be formulated in terms of language. In another sense, it is through language that the desire of Other(s) enters the consciousness of the subject. The desire of the Other flows into the subject through discourse (Fink 9). Evidence can be seen in Freud’s formulation of the super-ego, in which the subject internalizes external constructions of morality and uses it to govern his own behavior. In a final sense, the subject desires the desire of the Other. Žižek says that the Other confronts the subject with an “enigmatic desire” (42), which frustrates the subject as it seeks to find the answer to this



question. It is important to note that in Lacan's theory, desire is not something that can be satisfied. "Desire, strictly speaking, has no object... [it is] fundamentally caught up in the dialectical movement of one signifier to the next" (90). Desire for the subject then can never be understood or satisfied.

The Symbolic order further determines the "I" established in the Imaginary. Language gives the subject tools to identify himself as himself and conceptualize his relationship with Others. However, the inherent problem with this identification is that it can only be discussed in the Other that is language (Fink 7). The subject is therefore not able to understand or discuss himself as he *really* is. The effect of initiation into the Symbolic is that the conscious self is forever barred from the subject. The conscious self can only think in language, and therefore can only think from the position of the Symbolic. It cannot access the Real parts of itself, but only those constructed by language. Žižek explores the "unsettling" effect of this alienation by posturing, "I am deprived of even my most intimate subjective experience, the way things 'really seem to me' ... the core of my being, since I can never consciously experience and assume it." (53). The subject can never fully realize the way he is or what he desires, nor can he see the complex effect of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and the Real that structure his idea of the self.

Together, Freud and Lacan's theories work to show the subject as decentered, providing solid psychoanalytic framework for discussing the subject of the modernist Bildungsroman. The sense of self for the subjects in these novels frequently shifts and changes, demonstrating a difficulty in cultivating a complete and stable notion of "self." These theories provide a critical vocabulary for explaining the alienation seen between subject and their sense of self and desire in the modernist Bildungsroman. Lacan and Freud show the subject as split between trying to sustain different aspects of a very contrived 'reality' for a sense of control, trying to fulfill the

needs of their instincts, their own desire, and the desire of other. These various demands place pressure on the subject, and cannot be found in one simple solution, requiring the subject to continuously and unconsciously shift his focuses. The divisions in the Freudian and Lacanian conception of the subject eliminate the possibility of a stable sense of self, which explains the recursive shifts between elation and bathos in the modernist Bildungsroman. Most importantly, these theories prompt the reader to examine those aspects of the self that the subject must repress to gain a sense of autonomy, asking the reader to redefine what autonomy is.

### III.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with its decidedly Gothic elements and its date of publication (1890), does not fit exclusively into the modernist cannon; however, a reading of this novel as a modernist text is by no means unfounded or obscure. In fact, both Gregory Castle's *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* and Paul Sheehan's *Modernism and the Aesthetics of Violence* do so without explanation or justification. The psychological depth of the novel's characters and its narrative mode make it difficult not to associate *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with more traditional examples of modernist writing. Michael Gillespie asserts that, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "through the multiple perspectives imbedded in the narrative ... encourages diverse readings, anticipating the direction taken by the experimental efforts of twentieth-century fiction" (qtd. in Wenaus 60). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* achieves this complexity through a free-indirect discourse style that, though told in the third-person, allows the reader to access the stream-of-conscious thought of multiple characters. Additionally, plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is rife with modernist skepticism. With Dorian's degeneration into debauchery, crime, and eventually death, Wilde undermines the Enlightenment notion that the subject can, through conscious effort, self-reflection, and reason arrive with clarity at one's ability, one's purpose, and

one's place in the world. Instead the novel is much more cynical about the subject's ability and authority in his own self-definition and discovery.

By shifting the center of consciousness in the narrative perspective throughout, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* effectively demonstrates Dorian's character development as an intersubjective process. It is not merely Dorian who determines his own fate, but also the desires of Basil and Lord Henry. In the first place, Castle notes, their "influence over Dorian spurs on him to make the perverse wish that projects his own actual physical and moral development into the proximate space of the picture" (154). Basil continues to influence Dorian by trying to repress him under an ideal, while Lord Henry seduces him into his New Hedonism. As will be demonstrated, both have determining (and detrimental) effects.

### **The Imaginary Image**

In order to understand the transformative effect of the portrait, it is first essential to understand how Wilde constructs Dorian preceding his encounter with it. Dorian is not initially characterized through his own behavior or actions, but rather through a dialogic exchange between other subjects. In the first scene of the novel, Basil and Lord Henry discuss Dorian at length, but he is not there to participate. Therefore, he does not form himself for the reader – Basil and Lord Henry do. Dorian appears as a "compelling tabula rasa" for Basil and Lord Henry (Castle 141); he has not yet begun the process of self-cultivation and development. Dorian's naivety further emphasized in descriptions that make him appear exceedingly innocent, and childlike – Basil says that he possesses a "simple and beautiful nature" (55) and Lord Henry thinks that he seems to have "kept himself unspotted from the world" (57). Dorian has not yet been developed through time or experience. It is the portrait itself that catalyzes Dorian's development by giving him the feeling of his own ego.

Basil's portrait has a transformative effect on Dorian because it is so imbued with Basil's own desire. Basil recalls, "When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale... I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature" (Wilde 48). This recollection intermixes the language of attraction and anxiety, showing the immense power Dorian has over Basil. For Basil, Dorian represents the ultimate aesthetic ideal, "the harmony of soul and body" (Oates 422). Basil says, "His personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style... I can now re-create life in a way that was hidden from me before" (51). Dorian is for Basil what Lacan refers to as the "object cause," a representative of the ultimate signifier that allows him to create meaning through art. As a result, the desire Basil feels for Dorian is overwhelming. Craft says that Basil addresses this by "[translating] his sexually charged desire for Dorian into disciplined artistic production" (120). Basil "sublimates" his desire into creation (*Civilization* 44); however, it seems that evidence of desire persists in the completed work. Though the portrait itself is not described, Basil's confession, "I felt, Dorian, that I had put too much of myself in it" (Wilde 149), indicates that his desire for Dorian is inscribed in the image. It is no wonder that Dorian himself is so drawn to it.

Dorian's identification with his image in the portrait has determinative effects on his development. The moment Dorian sees himself in the portrait is described as positively transformative: "A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized *himself* for the first time... The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before" (Wilde 65, emphasis added). The diction used, specifically the words "joy" and revelation," characterize this moment with all of the 'jubilation' of Lacan's Mirror Stage ("The Mirror Stage" 75). This jubilation can be attributed to the fact that it is a moment of specular identification, of

“self”-recognition. Dorian does not see the portrait as merely a representation, but actually as a reflection of “*himself*.” Due to this misrecognition, it is apparent that though it is a reproduction, the portrait functions symbolically as a mirror. It is thus able to produce, in Dorian, the feeling of his own ego. It is also a moment, as Freud says, in which “the boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain” (*Civilization* 13). The use of the portrait as a fulcrum for Dorian’s sense of self emphasizes the self as an artificially constructed object rather than an essential or inherent entity. Additionally, it demonstrates how sensitive subject’s sense of self is to external disturbance.

It is important to note the role that Basil and Lord Henry play in confirming this moment of *méconnaissance*. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the subject’s idea of “himself” is not merely formed in the Imaginary order, but also in the Symbolic, through language. In the Lacanian Mirror Stage, it is the parents that drive the infant child into specular identification with his own image through holding him up to the mirror (“The Mirror Stage” 76). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry and Basil serve this parental function, confirming Dorian’s Imaginary identification with his image through discourse. Lord Henry states that the portrait is, “the real Dorian Gray – that is all” (Wilde 67). Then, when Dorian asks, “Is [the portrait] the *real* Dorian?” (Wilde 69, emphasis added), Basil assents. Through these exchanges, Craft asserts that Dorian “is seduced into specular identification with an erotically charged image of himself” (121). Through this intersubjective exchange, it is easy to understand how Dorian’s perception of “himself” comes to be shaped through the language of others.

The portrait gives Dorian a sense of his own beauty and incites his desire. As Vicki Mahaffey notes, Basil produces Dorian’s “consciousness of the body through his mirror-portrait”

(“Père-version” 254). Dorian’s identification with his image incites his narcissism.<sup>5</sup> When Dorian sees his portrait, he stands, “gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness” (Wilde 65). The term “gazing” has romantic and sexual connotations, and thus indicates that Dorian has a sexual and romantic investment in himself. Dorian’s narcissism gives him an awareness of his own sexual desire. The language describing how he views himself is extremely erotic – he feels a sense of “pleasure” (Wilde 65) at his own image.

Through the realization of his beauty and desire, Dorian comes to understand the influence he has over others. As discussed previously, the subject’s apprehension of himself in the mirror provides him with a false anticipation of self-mastery and power (“The Mirror Stage” 76). It provides a visual union that ensures the immediate satisfaction of desire. In his specular image, the power that Dorian anticipates his ability to provoke sexual desire – the term “gazing” also indicates an awareness that he is an object and therefore can be seen by others who will admire his beauty. Suddenly, the compliments Basil had given him, which he had dismissed as “charming exaggerations of friendship,” (Wilde 65) appear in his conscious mind and bear new significance. Dorian believes that because he is beautiful and has the power to influence others with this beauty, he is capable of fulfilling his own desire. It is Dorian’s awareness of himself as a sexual object that later allows him to consciously control and manipulate others. Realizing the luxury that his beauty affords him, he becomes anxious at the idea of the eventual loss of his power, which will fade with his temporary state of beauty.

The portrait not only incites narcissism and power in Dorian, but also alienation and fear. It serves to remind him of his own instability and lack of control – the portrait’s permanence, by contrast, draws attention to the short-lived power he enjoys from being beautiful. Though he

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<sup>5</sup> Freud describes narcissism as the ego’s cathexis with the libido (*Civilization* 65), or, the moment when the subject becomes libidinally invested in his own ego.

identifies with his empowering beauty, he also sees himself as an object that can and will be influenced and changed. This understanding undermines the feelings of control he gains from his identity, and he is stricken with fear: “He would become dreadful, hideous, and uncouth... As he thought of it, a sharp pang of pain struck through him like a knife” (Wilde 65). Confronted, once again through remembering the words of Lord Henry, with the temporary nature of his beauty, Dorian imagines himself aging with language that indicates extreme dread, fear, and disgust. The very thought of undergoing any physical change psychologically ‘wounds’ Dorian, as it threatens to dismantle the feelings of power he had newly found with the appreciation of his own beauty.

### **Fantasy and Incompatible Desire**

Though he does not (and, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, cannot) realize it, Dorian’s desire for Sibyl is rooted in fantasy. The theatre setting, in which their brief courtship takes place, emphasizes and contributes to Dorian’s view of Sibyl as an idealized image. In the position of spectator, he passively observes her as she enacts the passions and temperaments of all of Shakespeare’s heroines. Dorian proclaims, “She is everything to me in life. Night after night I go to see her play. One evening she is Rosalind, and the next she is Imogen” (Wilde 93). The verb “is” in place of ‘plays’ or ‘portrays’ indicates the blurring of fantasy and reality. As critic Paul Sheehan observes, the roles that Sibyl enacts are, for Dorian, more real than Sibyl herself: “[Dorian’s] desire is focused on her theatrical performances not for their dramatic expressiveness... but as a denial that they are performances” (“*A Malady of Dreaming*” 76). To Dorian, Sibyl is a neutral medium, a “figure of imaginative mobility” onto which the finest theatric renditions of feminine sexuality can be scripted (“*A Malady of Dreaming*” 76). Dorian attempts to preserve his desire for Sibyl by keeping her at a distance. In his dialogue with Lord Henry, Dorian unwittingly reveals that he has no interest in knowing her personally. When

the theater manager offers to tell him about Sibyl's background, Dorian refuses to listen. He later justifies this refusal by saying, "Sibyl is the only thing I care about. What is it to me where she came from?" (Wilde 93). The comic irony of this statement demonstrates Dorian's unconscious wish to keep Sibyl locked in his fantasy of her as neutral medium for artistic expression. He rejects information about her history because it threatens to adulterate his image of her as an artistic ideal with details that are all too human.

Since Dorian's desire for Sibyl is based on a phantasmic image, Dorian is not only unwilling to approach her personally, but also sexually. In spite of his proclamations of his desire for her, Dorian actually seems repulsed when Lord Henry inquires about his "actual" sexual relations with Sibyl: he exclaims in indignation, "Harry! Sibyl Vane is sacred!" (Wilde 91). Aside from underscoring (once again) Dorian's idealization of Sibyl, Dorian's exclamation raises an essential question for understanding how Wilde constructs desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: if Dorian so desires Sibyl, why is he unwilling to touch her? His reasoning, that she is "sacred," indicates that he perceives in her a pure or spiritual quality which would be marred by sexual contact. Dorian's desire for Sibyl is not merely an erotic drive for pleasure. It cannot be satisfied by the possession of Sibyl as an object (i.e., through sexual gratification). Sibyl is for Dorian what Lacan refers to as the "object a in fantasy, which desire substitutes for [the Other]" ("The Subversion of the Subject" 697). Dorian sees Sibyl as an ideal of aesthetic beauty. It seems clear that Dorian does not desire to possess Sibyl, but rather what she represents.

When Dorian wins Sibyl's passion, causing her to abandon her acting, his desire disappears. Brought so close to her, he is unable to sustain his idealized image of her, and is forced to realize her alterity. Unlike Dorian, Sibyl feels aesthetic beauty is secondary to love. She tells Dorian, "You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a



reflection” (123). For her, desire is not attached to art, but rather to what she perceives as Love. While Dorian believes that all knowledge resides in Beauty, Sibyl believes that it resides in Love. Having felt this Love, Sibyl no longer feels that she can artistically give it justice through her performance: “I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns in me like fire” (123). In order to retain her as a symbol of Beauty, Dorian wants to keep her at the distance that allows him to possess his Imaginary image of her, but Sibyl desires to approach closer. Working from Lacan’s theories, Žižek posits “a sexual relation, in order to function, has to be screened through some fantasy” (54). A sexual relation cannot exist between Dorian and Sibyl because their fantasies are mutually incompatible. In this interaction, he is forced into the realization of her otherness, by understanding now that their desires are not the same. She does not want to perform for him anymore. This realization is, of course only temporary, and with her death, Dorian is once again permitted to view Sibyl through the lens of fantasy.

By viewing Sibyl’s suicide as an artistic act, Dorian is able to retain his conception of her as an image and dismiss any personal responsibility for her suicide. Though, initially, Dorian’s superego punishes him for his cruelty to her, he ultimately responds to her death with numbness. As Dickson notes, Dorian is able to “become a spectator of his own life to escape its suffering” (10). Dorian confesses to Lord Henry, ““I must admit that this thing that has happened does not affect me as it should. It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play”” (Wilde 135). His very contrived view of who Sibyl is protects him from the grief that he feels. To Dorian, Sibyl’s suicide is the final act of a “wonderful play.” Even after most she has thoroughly broken the fourth wall, so to speak, in their previous interaction, her death makes it so that he no longer has to interact with her as a subject. He is thus permanently sealed into the view of her as a representative of aesthetic beauty. He tells a distraught Basil, “When [Sibyl]

knew [love's] unreality, she died, as Juliet might have died. She passed again into the sphere of art" (Wilde 144). By noting a similar pattern in the death of Sibyl Vane and the suicides of Shakespeare's tragic heroines, Dorian is able give her suicide aesthetic meaning.

This scene reveals how fantasy, adopted as 'reality,' serves to protect the subject from the traumatic Real. Through the lens of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, Dorian is able is able to deal with the senselessness of Sibyl's suicide. Henry's description of tragedy reminds the reader of the Real element of death. Henry says that tragedies often "occur in crude violence... absolute incoherence" and "give us an impression of sheer brute force" (Wilde 136). His use of the word "incoherence" shows the purpose for tragedy is beyond symbolization. The mind and subject cannot make sense of, and cannot reason with tragedy. It is thus an immense source of fear. Dorian, however, is spared from confronting this fear through the fantasy he has created. This fantasy plays a role in his moral disintegration. Paul Sheehan says that this episode prompts Dorian to believe that "'vulgarity' and 'beauty' are not just parts of an aesthetic vocabulary; they can be applied to the most significant human concerns" (*A Malady of Dreaming* 78). Spared from the Real, Dorian is able to retain his peace of mind; however, he is also prevented from learning compassion, responsibility, or empathy.

### **The Distorted Image**

Dorian's cruel treatment of Sibyl serves as a catalyst in the plot for the supernatural changes that occur in the portrait. Dorian's earlier wish for eternal youth drives this Gothic progression of the story (Castle 154): the reader is reminded of this through Dorian's memory of himself 'uttering' the "mad wish" in Basil's studio (Wilde 127). When he comes back from the theater, Dorian observes an uncanny change the portrait's composition: the "ardent sunlight showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth [of the figure in the portrait] as clearly as if he

had been looking into a mirror” (Wilde 126-7). The use of simile here, again, indicates Dorian’s misrecognition of the portrait as reflective of reality. However, through the Gothic elements of the novel, it seems that Dorian’s misrecognition of the portrait as “reality” is coming true in an unexpected way. Wenaus describes the “new” portrait as an “object that signifies the level-crossing of ... [the] ontological divisions of body and soul” (66). This crossing gives Dorian the idea that his soul can be displayed, as his body can, as a “whole” image. By the end of Chapter VIII, Dorian refers to the portrait as “the most magical of mirrors” (Wilde 141). Whereas previously Dorian used the term “mirror” as a comparative figure of speech, the term “mirror” here directly references the portrait. Dorian believes the portrait to display a “real” and complete rendering of his inner mechanisms.

Even as the portrait begins to decay, Dorian finds it to be a source of narcissistic pleasure. This is, on one hand, due to the simple fact that he believes it to be an image of himself and is therefore drawn to it. Dorian’s investment in the image is, however, more complex. Dorian, initially, “would examine [the portrait] with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead... He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs” (Wilde 162). As seen in his cruel delight at the portrait’s decay, the pleasure he derives from the portrait is also sadistic. This feeds his narcissism by giving him a sense of power. It seems that, though the portrait may be able to protect him from physical decay, it cannot stop, and actually enables his moral decay.

Evidence of Dorian’s moral decay is given in the novel’s climax, when he murders the portrait’s creator. In spite of Dorian’s insistence that there is more to his soul than Basil would recognize, Basil is rigid, insisting that he hold onto this ideal. When Dorian affirms his own history of transgressive actions for Basil, Basil exclaims, ““Deny them, Dorian, deny them! Can’t

you see what I'm going through? My God! don't tell me you are bad, corrupt, and shameful” (Wilde 185). If the reader needs any more evidence that the feelings Basil has towards Dorian are narcissistic, it occurs in this moment. For his own benefit, Basil asks Dorian to deny his actions, as though Dorian is an extension of himself. Instead, Dorian chooses to shock Basil and to show him how his own desire to construct Dorian as a perfect and pure ideal of beauty has instead produced the opposite effect. Mahaffey says that Basil represents, “the ‘good’ mother, the champion of conventional morality propped up by Victorian repression,” and asserts, “Dorian is seized with an irresistible need to *show* Basil the rotten fruit of his idealism” (“Père-version” 255). Basil’s insistence in reducing Dorian to this object, even after Dorian has been separated from him for some time now, angers Dorian and results in aggression. However, the aggression he feels is both the result of his frustration with his ability to live up to the image that Basil has constructed of him and resentment at the idea that he should have to.

The ambivalence Dorian feels towards the portrait is reflected in the dialogue between himself and Basil in this pivotal scene. On the one hand, Dorian explicitly blames Basil and his portrait for the change in his character: “I was wrong. [The portrait] has destroyed me” (Wilde 188). Ashamed at his inability to reach the ideal-ego constructed in the initial portrait, he uses the portrait, and Basil who created it, as scapegoats for his frustration. However, the same narcissistic pride revealed in his earlier adoration of the portrait is also present. He watches Basil view the portrait with, “... the passion of a spectator.... A flicker of triumph in his eyes” (Wilde 187). Dorian is proud of this image of “himself,” and takes pleasure in the feelings of horror it produces. Though the portrait’s surface has changed significantly, he still invests in it the significance of it being “himself” and gains a sense of power from it.

When Dorian realizes that Basil rejects the complexity of his subjectivity, Dorian feels threatened and is compelled to kill him; through this act, he likewise reduces Basil to an object. When Basil responds with horror at Dorian's image, Dorian responds, "Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him, Basil' ... with a wild gesture of despair" (Wilde 188). This paradoxical epigram reflects Dorian's own inner ambivalence and conflict, the various aspects of his subjecthood that he attempts to resolve. Basil, does not, however, does not seem to believe this inner duality is possible and attempts to bind his conception of Dorian to the binary opposition of his ideal. Basil's view of Dorian as beautiful and pure flips to a realization of him as ugly and corrupt. He quiets Dorian saying, "You have done enough evil in your life!" (Wilde 189), and attempts through prayer to revert the image in the portrait back to what it was before without Dorian's consent. Basil's hatred of the portrait, however, rids Dorian's ambivalence of it, and he responds in defense at Basil's second attempt to reduce him to an ideological conception. "The mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him, and he loathed the man who was seated at the table, more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything" (Wilde 189). The comparison of his passion here to those of a hunted animal, not only serve to show the very raw, instinctual aggression of Dorian towards Basil but also the cause. The word 'hunted' here connotes the feeling in Dorian that he is a victim, that Basil is trying to capture or kill a piece of him. He responds in self-defense through violence. Dorian then effectively strips Basil of his own subjectivity, first killing him and then having Alan destroy the body. The chapter concludes: "the thing that had been sitting at the table was gone" (Wilde 204). The narrative voice, reflecting Dorian's inner consciousness, no longer calls Basil by his name, but rather a "thing." Dorian has turned Basil into an object.

Though the murder of Basil is typically viewed as the decisive example of Dorian's corruption, it is also symbolically appropriate. Basil initiates the trajectory of Dorian's development with his desire, drawing Dorian's attention to himself and shaping the way that he relates to others. Basil, through his portrait, gives Dorian the illusion of power and completion that he can never truly have, especially since Basil's ideal demands that Dorian represses key aspects of his subject-hood through repressive morality.

### **The Symbolic**

While the portrait incites Dorian's ego-conception through Imaginary identification, Dorian's sense of self is also shaped through language in the Symbolic order. Dorian is exposed to language through social and textual interaction. Both have determining effects on his character. As critic Andrew Wenaus notes, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the "self" appears as "a product of society and a social artefact" (63). The construction of the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian Gray particularly serves to demonstrate how desire and self-perception are constructed through the discourse of others.

Lord Henry's ability to influence Dorian, and indeed even his will to do so, is the effect of his desire for the boy. His desire is very apparent: upon seeing Dorian for the first time, Lord Henry thinks, "Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes... No wonder Basil Hallward worshipped him" (Wilde 57). The language here, which lingers on the curve of Dorian's lips and sanctions Basil's devotion, is not merely admiring, but sensuous. Though the text never authorizes any overtly sexual contact between these two characters, the language of their interactions continues to be suffused with homoerotic longing. Žižek explains, "the subject desires only in so far as it experiences the Other itself as desiring" (42). Where Basil attempts to repress his desire for Dorian, Lord Henry does not. Thus,

unrestricted, he is able to use his desire, and the corresponding desire that it incites in Dorian, to influence Dorian in a way that Basil never is able to.

The specific attention that the narrative gives to Lord Henry's vocal and linguistic capabilities emphasizes the influential power of his words. Lord Henry is characterized as a loquacious yet skillful orator. He monologues at length, punctuating his speeches with pseudo-philosophical witticisms, such as "Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of the face" (Wilde 45). Though his clever quips are often shallow, he is deeply engaging. At his aunt's dinner party, he is said to have "charmed his listeners out of themselves" (Wilde 77). His voice itself is frequently described as musical and pleasing. This quality is, in fact, one of the first things that Dorian observes about him: "And he had such a beautiful voice" (Wilde 58). Later, Dorian tells Henry, "No one talks so wonderfully as you do" (Wilde 82). Lord Henry's linguistic abilities and vocal timbre draw Dorian's attention, allowing his discourse to capture Dorian's consciousness and influence him on the Symbolic level. When Lord Henry tells Dorian who he is and what he should desire, Dorian listens.

Lord Henry frames Dorian's changing conception of himself by giving him language with which to identify. Lord Henry's language produces a visible and psychological effect in Dorian, noted by both Basil and the narrative voice. Craft notes, "Lord Henry's flux of language suffuses Dorian's ear ... to transform his mind and visage" (123). Henry's probing comment, suggesting Dorian's secret passions and thoughts terrify and shame him, seems to illuminate something within Dorian: "Words!... They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things" (60). Here, the Real within Dorian, the needs and stirrings that he had not previously been able to articulate or recognize, are given shape through Henry's Symbolic representation of them. Suddenly, affects and internal images, things that he had previously not understood, are

made to signify passion, terror, and shame. However, it is important to note that, though a sense of these feelings may have originated within him, his ability to conceptualize them does not. It is language itself that creates this “understanding.” The free-indirect discourse shifts to Dorian’s inner consciousness, allowing a clear for a clear demonstration of how language changes his sense of self:

He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to have come really from himself. The few words that Basil’s friend had said to him . . . had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses.  
(Wilde 59)

Though his subject is highly susceptible to outside influence and Lord Henry’s words have a distinct impact on how Dorian views his life up until this point, Dorian feels as though what Henry has said is a true or “real” rendering of his internal mechanisms. He believes that Henry’s words, rather than constructing, have instead uncovered something that already existed within himself, a “secret chord.”

Lord Henry’s words trap Dorian in a Symbolic order that subverts traditional morality. In Dorian’s private thoughts, the reader sees the immense authority Dorian has invested in Lord Henry. When he first meets Dorian, Lord Henry tells him, ““Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul”” (Wilde 61). Dorian always recalls this epigram, and, in fact, devotes himself entirely to the senses (Dickson 12). Lord Henry constructs a new religion with Dorian as its sole follower. For Dorian, Lord Henry becomes, if not a God, at least a prophet of a new order of living – a key to the knowledge of existence and reality. This very language is used to describe the influence of Lord Henry’s dandyist, experimental creed:



“Yes: there was to be, as Lord Henry has prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to re-create life, and save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival... Of the asceticism that deadens the senses... it was to know nothing” (Wilde 164). Here words such as ‘harsh’ and ‘uncomely,’ typically associated in religious discourse with instinctual impulses or the brute reality of existence untouched by spirituality, are subverted to describe Christian spirituality. It is not sin or gratification that ‘deadens the senses,’ but rather self-restriction and control. Experience and hedonism are the new saviors that promise the drives unrestricted satisfaction. Through the law that Lord Henry sets up, instinctual impulses and both sensual and sexual gratification are bestowed with a new, non-conforming symbolic significance. Suddenly the senses are no longer a part of the taboo, instinctual side of man, but elevate him to a higher place.

If Lord Henry is the prophet of this new order of religion, the yellow book is undoubtedly its bible. It also exercises its influence over Dorian, making him a servant of sensory experience. Similarly to what is seen in the first interaction between Dorian and Lord Henry, Dorian bestows upon the book the power to render his own internal mechanisms, believing that this is a ‘natural’ process. The narrator says, “the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it” (Wilde 161). This sentence simultaneously shows the influence of the book on Dorian, and the lack of insight that he has to this influence. He does not consciously decide to live his life, modeling himself after what he finds in the book. He simply does not distinguish between his own life and the book, seeing them as inextricably bound. He sees himself, ‘his own life’ written in its pages. Through this book, he is compelled to pursue experience in all forms.

In spite of all its seemingly liberating power, the Symbolic order instilled by Lord Henry and the book ultimately proves to be highly restrictive. Dorian, noting his own apathy to his murder of Basil and the death of James Vane, begins to fear that he has been influenced for the worse. Because of this anxiety, he attempts reform. The Symbolic order, voiced through Lord Henry, however, attempts to keep him trapped by denying its influence and retaining its insistence that Dorian, the subject, merely is what he is. Henry says, “You will soon be going about like the converted, and the revivalist, warning people against all the sins of which you have grown tired. You are much too delightful to do that. Besides, it is no use. You and I are what we are and will be what we will be” (Wilde 246). Lord Henry attempts to tell Dorian the desire that he feels is not truly his own, and Dorian believes him. Dorian is thus forced back into a pattern of self-destructive behavior.

### **Destroying the Image**

By the end of the novel, the portrait has completely transformed from a picture of Dorian’s ideal-ego to an external rendition of the punishing superego. Dorian finds, at the end of the novel, that the portrait torments him: “Once it had given him pleasure to watch it changing and growing old. Of late he felt no such pleasure. It kept him awake at night... It had been like a conscience to him” (Wilde 250). Whereas before Dorian was able to derive narcissistic pleasure, satisfying both his erotic and aggressive instincts through watching the portrait change, he now finds the portrait unbearable. Thinking that his body and soul have been divided completely, Dorian resolves to destroy the image with unexpected results.

It is tempting to read the ending *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with a sense that justice has been served to a character fallen irreversibly into crime and moral corruption. However, it seems pertinent to ask what makes this image so credible. If Dorian’s identification with the beautiful

image is a misrecognition, a *méconnaissance* that sets the “I” forever in a fictional direction, is it not possible that Dorian’s identification with the distorted image is similarly false? If so, it seems more appropriate to read this ending as Dorian’s, rather than morality’s, triumph.

#### IV.

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is narrated in the third-person (the two notable exceptions being the hellfire sermon and Stephen’s diary); however, the narrative voice is by no means objective. Joyce employs “free indirect discourse” which makes the narrative center somewhat ambiguous; however, the critical consensus is that the narrative voice is distinctly attached to Stephen’s consciousness (Erikson 53). Thus, the action of the novel is primarily psychological. As Hélène Cixous notes, the “reader [of *A Portrait*] is ushered into the mental circumvolutions of an extremely subjective person” (75). Everything that occurs in the novel, then, cannot be said to reflect an objective reality, but is rather bound up in Stephen’s Imaginary and Symbolic experiences through which Stephen attempts his sense of self and realize his desire. As a definitively modernist text, *A Portrait of the Artist* contains more vivid psychological realism (Booth 59), than *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Due to this realism, the interplay between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and desire in *A Portrait* is quite compact. The analysis in this section examines this interplay chronologically through the chapters, exploring how Stephen’s sense of self and his understanding of his own desire shifts throughout his development.

#### **Chapter I**

Since Stephen’s early home experience is so brief, Stephen’s sense of self does not start to emerge for the reader until his experience at Clongowes. Lacan asserts that the ego is “essentially a relation to the other that finds its point of departure and its fulcrum in the other”

(“Odd or Even?” 177). It is unsurprising, then, that Stephen first begins to establish his sense of self through contrast with the boys at Clongowes. In the first scene, as the other boys play, Stephen stays on the periphery away from the “swarming,” “throng of players” (Joyce 4). These phrases emphasize the homogeneity of the group, negatively implying Stephen’s difference. He is both physically and mentally withdrawn from the match, choosing to daydream rather than engage in play with the other boys. Even in sources of commonality he finds difference: “All the boys seemed to him very strange. They had all fathers and mothers and different clothes and voices” (Joyce 9). Already, in conscious ego-discourse, Stephen is forming himself as a solitary figure, isolated from the interests of his peers and from herd-mentality. Even at an early age, Stephen is an example of what Freud deems “the narcissistic man,” who seeks “his main satisfaction in his internal mental processes” (*Civilization* 31), rather than giving preference to emotional relationships. The reasoning for this can be understood through one of Stephen’s final observations in the first chapter: “He was alone. He was happy and free” (Joyce 54). Stephen associates solitude with autonomy; being an outsider gives him a sense of freedom and self-mastery. It is these feelings of freedom and self-mastery that Stephen continues to chase throughout the narrative.

Since it is freedom that he desires, themes of independence and isolation dominate Stephen’s fantasy. With no desire to connect to his peers, Stephen further forms his sense of self through Imaginary identification with other solitary figures. Particularly, Stephen assimilates heroic figures into the construction of his own experience (“Framing” 222). Stephen fantasizes about his own funeral and the mourners “all with sad faces” (Joyce 19). Pages later, Stephen, in a dream envisions the death and funeral of Parnell. This Imaginary “displacement” of himself onto a dead national hero (Doherty 104) allows Stephen a feeling of pride and self-importance as he

imagines the groups of people gathered solely to mourn his death. Later, in Chapter II, as Stephen becomes absorbed in the *Count of Monte Cristo*, he also identifies with Edmond Dantes: “in his imagination he lived through a train of long adventures, marvelous as those in the book itself, towards the close of which there appeared an image of himself” (Joyce 58). His identification with this character is very telling. Edmund Dantes is removed from society and from social bonds, even turning down Mercedes with a “proud gesture of refusal” (Joyce 58). It is this independence that Stephen hopes to emulate. Through identification with this character, Stephen first begins to imagine removing himself from social bonds in support of his ambitions. Stephen’s sense of self is not only established on the Imaginary plane, but also in the Symbolic.

Throughout the novel, the Symbolic conflicts with Stephen’s Imaginary anticipation of self-mastery and his desire for freedom. Through his portrayal of Stephen’s relationship with the Catholic Church, Joyce demonstrates the formative (and, at times, damaging) effect of institutions on the individual’s psyche. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud explains that the subject’s understanding of “good” and “bad” (in the moral sense) does not originate from within himself: “What is bad is often not at all what is injurious or dangerous to the ego; on the contrary it may be something which is desirable... there is an extraneous influence at work, and it is this that decides what is to be called good or bad” (71). What Freud suggests here is that morality, rather than being inherent, is socially determined. Lacan’s work later draws from this idea, localizing this process to the time when the subject assimilates language:

It is this moment [when, through language, the *I* becomes the social *I*] that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge ... into being mediated by the other's desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns the *I* into an apparatus to which every instinctual

pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process. (“The Mirror Stage as Formative” 79)

For Lacan, socialization, the initiation into the Symbolic, is a restrictive process in which the subject must learn to formulate his desires in accordance with the wishes of the Other. Through socialization, which relies on language and communication, the subject finds his speech and behavior being adjusted to meet these wishes. The subject is thus taught how and what to desire. For Stephen, entry into the Symbolic is deeply rooted in religious practice and experience.

Stephen’s religious upbringing is the “extraneous influence” which confers on him a specific knowledge of good and bad, and places God at the center of the Symbolic order. Especially in his early childhood experience, Stephen regards God with distinct awe: “It was very big to think of everything and everywhere. Only God could do that. He tried to think what a big thought that must be but could only think of God” (Joyce 12). His reflection reveals the cause of his awe: whereas Stephen’s own understanding of the universe is limited and undefined, God’s understanding is infinite and absolute. Žižek’s question, “is what we call ‘God’ not the big Other personified... a subject beyond all subjects?” (41) helps to define the role of God in Stephen’s psychological experience. For Stephen, God serves as the ultimate Other, the source and anchor of meaning. As Gregory Erikson notes, “For Stephen, God is the only force that can bridge the gap between signifier and signified” (8). This authority that his family and Jesuit education have taught Stephen to vest in God causes him to tailor his thoughts and actions to align with the desire of God and the regulations of the Church (which are assumed to speak on His behalf). Thus, as Hèlène Cixous explains, Stephen becomes a “product of the Church and of its system of threats and rewards” (76). Stephen is shaped by a Symbolic order that assumes itself to work on behalf of God, mediating his own individual drives and desires.

In Joyce's work, the regulations of the Church on Stephen's desire are enforced by the threat of punishment. The earliest expression of Stephen's desire, in Chapter I, is met with reprobation: "When they were grown up he was going to marry Eileen. / He hid under the table. His mother said: / - O, Stephen will apologise." (Joyce 4). Here, Stephen recognizes that he has committed a transgression: the act of hiding under the table is a clear expression of shame and fear of punishment. The transgressive nature of his expression is confirmed by his mother's demand for him to apologize and Dante's threat that, if he does not, "eagles will come and pull out his eyes" (Joyce 4). Stephen's desire is deemed inappropriate because of the conventions of his Catholic religion, of which Dante is a rigid proponent, and thus becomes a danger to Stephen's Imaginary body. Stephen's first expression of desire is met with the threat of castration, the physical loss of his eyes. Literary critic Gerald Doherty concisely illuminates the symbolic significance of this threat: "The price of transgressing the law is not only the inability to return the look of the other, but even to see when it is there" (67). The consequence of transgressive desire is to lose the organs in which it is engendered. Stephen is thus taught from an early age that the expression of desire which counters the desire of the Other is a liability.

## **Chapter II**

In Chapter II, as Stephen's consciousness develops further, the formative effects of the Imaginative and Symbolic orders on Stephen's self and desire become more apparent. Stephen's vision of Mercedes conflates sexual and spiritual desires. As Stephen dwells on Mercedes, he filters the Real quality of sex through spiritual and romantic fantasy:

They would meet quietly as if they had known each other and had made their tryst, perhaps at one of the gates or in some more secret place... in that moment of supreme tenderness he would be transfigured. He would fade into something

impalpable under her eyes and then, in a moment, he would be transfigured.

Weakness and timidity and inexperience would fall from him in a magic moment.

(Joyce 60)

This image is on the one hand, decidedly sexual. As Hugh Kenner notes, the gates are evocative of the vagina (40), and the “moment of supreme tenderness” figuratively suggests sexual contact. However, Stephen’s desire for Mercedes indicates more than just a wish for sexual contact. The diction of this passage, with the phrase “supreme tenderness” and the word “transfigured,” has a definitively spiritual undertone. The image evokes an anticipation of “transcendence” (“Framing” 234). Stephen imagines that through this sexual contact, he will shed “weakness” and “inexperience,” and be “transfigured.” Stephen does not, then, merely desire sexual gratification; he is hoping for a spiritual experience that will give him access to his ideal-ego. The reader can see that Stephen is already partially alienated from his desire due to his conflation of its source.

That this vision of wholeness and transcendence occurs on the Imaginary plane is no coincidence; the Symbolic cannot adequately capture what takes place in this moment. The immaturity of the prose – seen in the repetition of “transfigured,” and the vague term, “magic” – reflects this inadequacy. The narrative voice cannot represent Stephen’s desires in concrete terms (even Mercedes herself, the object-cause of desire, is described merely as an “unsubstantial image” (Joyce 60)). Stephen is further alienated from his desire due to the inability of language to represent it.

In the episode at his father’s school in Cork, language itself threatens Stephen’s feelings of autonomy. When Stephen sees the word *Foetus* carved into a desk, a series of shameful, chaotic images and memories spring to his mind. In this moment, which Patrick Parrinder



describes as “an explosion of consciousness” (110), Stephen finds his sense of self threatened by the Symbolic. Even after he leaves the anatomy theater, the image of the word persists: from his own mind, the “letters cut in the stained wood of the desk stared upon him, mocking his bodily weakness and futile enthusiasms and making him loathe himself for his own mad and filthy orgies” (Joyce 85). The signifier seems to have more power than Stephen. It is able to disrupt his mind through triggering unconscious Symbolic associations.

Even in the privacy of his own mind, Stephen is not free from the control of the Symbolic religious order. Lacan proposes that signifiers allow drives to be represented to beings of language (Fink 74). For Stephen, drives are represented in the language of the punishing superego, which deems them “brutish” and “monstrous” (Joyce 64). These words imply that Stephen feels himself to be inhuman. Žižek’s definition of this term helps shed light on the significance of this perception: Žižek notes that “inhuman” indicates being “marked by a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as humanity, is inherent to being human” (47). Stephen’s chaotic feelings of sexuality are all too human; however, due the religious Symbolic structure he is embedded in, he is prevented from seeing himself this way. They have a Real effect on his body, and thus threaten to disrupt his Imaginary sense of wholeness and control. Additionally, they threaten to degrade Stephen’s Symbolic understanding of himself. Stephen thus feels that he has to attempt to control the “terrifying excess” of his “monstrous” drives, in order to regain the human self that the superego tells him he has relinquished.

Given some small power through winning money in an essay contest, Stephen attempts to appease the superego and restore control to the ego through sublimation. This is an attempt to transform his erotic desire into action and what Freud calls “aim-inhibited love” (49). The

activity of this brief passage is characterized as frantic and unceasing: “He bought presents for everyone, overhauled his rooms, wrote out resolutions, marshalled his books up and down” (Joyce 92). That this brief passage is void of Stephen’s conscious thoughts and dominated by actions reveals Stephen’s aims: he is trying to escape his Real sexual impulses and his fantasy (which his superego has told him to fear) through action. However, this does not prove to be effective: “He had tried to ... dam up, by rules of conduct and active interests and new filial relations, the powerful recurrence of tides within him. Useless.” (Joyce 93). Failing to align his own desire with the Symbolic Other, Stephen attempts to find satisfaction in rebellion. Noting his growing isolation from his family and from God (represented through repeated references to moral and immoral behavior), Stephen actually engages in activities that further distance him from both entities.

At the end of Chapter II, instead of trying to prevent sexual desire, Stephen chooses to revel in it: “He wanted to sin with another of his kind, to force another being into sin with him and exult with her in sin” (Joyce 94). Stephen’s metonymic substitution of “sin” for a sexual act demonstrates Stephen’s Symbolic attachment between religious language and his drives. However, the categorization of his “drives” as sin, does not, in these final episodes of the chapter, have negative connotations. Freud notes that civilizations’ restrictions on sexuality creates a sense of injustice in the individual (*Civilization* 51). Stephen’s response, then, from one view, can be read as an act of rebellion against a God figure who attempts to control his desire. Taken further, it can be read as a rebellion against the very language of the God figure, as Stephen appropriates “sin” as a desirable term. However, with the addition of Lacanian theory, this reading can become more nuanced. Working from Lacanian theory, Žižek notes that even transgressive desires are determined by the Symbolic order, because “transgression relies on

what it transgresses” (42). With this in mind, it seems apparent that Stephen’s desire for rebellion through sex is no longer the autonomous act he believes it to be. Even when he attempts to rebel, the Symbolic structure that he resides in is still determining his actions.

In spite of this misrecognition, Stephen does, temporarily, regain a feeling of power through sex. In a more profane version of his earlier fantasy with Mercedes, Stephen believes himself to have found the “transfiguration” he was searching for, in the company of a Dublin prostitute: “In her arms he felt that he had suddenly become strong and fearless and sure of himself” (Joyce 95). The phrases “strong” and “fearless” and “sure of himself” are antonymic reversals of the “weakness,” “timidity,” and “inexperience.” Through Stephen’s ego-discourse, the reader gets a sense that he has, indeed, been spiritually “transfigured.” After moments, he is able to shut off even the Symbolic discourse, becoming “conscious of nothing in the world” (Joyce 95) but sensation. It is this separation from conscious discourse that temporarily allows him to succumb to Imaginary wholeness.

### **Chapter III**

Sexual gratification, in spite of its transformative depiction at the conclusion of Chapter II, proves to be debasing in Chapter III. As Parrinder notes, “Such a blissful escape from the realms of socially acceptable voice and speech cannot be allowed to last” (111). As Stephen’s conscious discourse resurfaces, so does his self-doubt. Stephen’s question, “What did it avail to pray when he knew that his soul lusted after its own destruction?” (Joyce 97) shows a split in his ego-feeling. His “soul” appears to him to have a separate will from his conscious self, as it unfolds itself “sin by sin” (Joyce 97). This incites a sense of fatalism in Stephen. Whereas before he felt autonomous, he now feels like a powerless sinner. Cixous notes, “what he had voluntarily begun escapes from his control before he realizes it, and he leads himself on with hopes of the

encounter of which he dreamed” (76). The ideal-ego that Stephen had sought through sexual encounter eludes his grasp, and his sexual encounter slips as the cause of Stephen’s desire.

Plagued by feelings of guilt and sin, Stephen’s desire metonymically slips from the prostitute to the Virgin Mary. Stephen feels compelled towards her: “His sin, which had covered him from the sight of God, had led him nearer to the refuge of sinners” (Joyce 99). She appears as a silent, Imaginary refuge from the punishing Symbolic. As in the scene with Mercedes and the Dublin prostitute, the language creates an overlap between the sexual and the spiritual:

If ever his soul, reentering her dwelling shyly after the frenzy of his body’s lust had spent itself was turned towards her whose emblem is the morning star... it was when her names were murmured softly by lips whereon there still lingered the foul and shameful words, the savour itself of a lewd kiss. (Joyce 99)

It is not only as a repentant sinner that Stephen approaches Mary. Though he notes his frenzied lust and his “foul and shameful words,” the tone of this scene does not contain the harsh guilt of so many other passages in the novel. Instead, his desirousness is apparent. He approaches her as timidly and intimately as a young lover would: he reenters her dwelling “shyly” (a phrase which adds to the sexual quality of the scene by suggesting female penetration), and murmurs her names “softly.” The alliterative quality of the words “lips,” “lingered,” and “lewd” draw attention to the sensuality of the scene. Mary provides a respite for Stephen in which his transgressive desire and his spiritual desire can comeingle, uninterrupted by Symbolic law; however, this respite is only temporary.

The most notable effect of the Symbolic order on Stephen’s consciousness occurs in Chapter III, with Father’s Arnell’s hellfire sermon. This passage, written in a markedly different style from the rest of the narrative, employs a pastiche of Jesuit sermons to emphasize the power

of the words on Stephen's consciousness. Father Arnell urges, "Banish from your minds all worldly thoughts and think only of the last things, death, judgement, hell and heaven" (Joyce 105), and Stephen's mind complies. The sermon suppresses the free indirect discourse of Stephen's internal musings for nearly thirty pages (Cixous 73), showing, once again, the power of the signifier over individual consciousness.

Even the threat of the sermon provokes the punishment of Stephen's superego. After Father Arnell gives an overview of the sermon, Stephen responds in fear: "Every word of it was for him... The preacher's knife had probed deeply into his diseased conscience and he felt now that his soul was festering in sin" (Joyce 109). The religious Symbolic, once again, shapes Stephen's view of his drives and desires, evoking guilt. Cixous notes that Stephen, "however free, is marked by the monstrous rhetoric of punishment" (80). The superego, adopting the language of the religious Symbolic, causes him to believe that the preacher's words are uncovering a foulness that is inherent in him.

Stephen, provoked by Father Arnall's elaborate descriptions of Hell, has a visceral reaction to vivid threat of eternal spiritual and physical torment. Castle notes that Father Arnell's words exert a "painful and invasive influence" (171). This invasion is demonstrated in Stephen's physical reaction: "His hands were cold and damp and his limbs ached with chill. Bodily unrest and chill and weariness beset him" (Joyce 130). At the words of the Symbolic, which promise physical torment and discomfort, Stephen's own Real body reacts with pain. The Symbolic also invades Stephen's consciousness, stirring his mind with nonsensical words: "Murmuring faces waited and watched; murmurous voices filled the dark shell of the cave. He feared intensely... but... He told himself calmly that those words had absolutely no sense" (Joyce 130). Similar to

the earlier scene when Stephen sees the word *foetus*, the Symbolic triggers a stream of words from his unconsciousness, disrupting his conscious mind.

This time, however, the Real anxiety Stephen feels in this horrific scene causes language itself to break down; in this moment, he cannot symbolize his own thoughts. Boes notes that the “shock reduces the objective world to a jumble of meaningless signifiers that encroach upon and threaten to overwhelm the subject” (779). While the Symbolic threatens to trap Stephen in an all too rigid order, the Real is even more overwhelming because it strips away everything he believes that he knows about himself and the world. Stephen must retreat once more to the Symbolic.

Out of a fear of both the pressure of his superego and the threat of disorder, Stephen suppresses his previous desires. He attempts, once more, to align his desire with God’s, vowing to “be at one with others and with God” (Joyce 136). In the final pages of Chapter III, Stephen demonstrates the dual meaning of the Lacanian formula that it is “qua Other that man desires” (“The Subversion of the Subject” 672). As seen in the previous quote, Stephen desires Imaginary unity with God, to “be at one.” His desire, in one sense, is the desire of possessing (and being possessed by) the Other. However, it is not just unity with God that he desires, but God’s desire itself: “It would be so beautiful to die if God so willed. It was beautiful to live if God so willed” (Joyce 139). Žižek notes, “the subject desires only in so far as it experiences the Other itself as desiring” (42). Divining the desire of God, Stephen metonymically shifts his desire from the female figure to the desire of God. Once again, the illusion of Imaginary unity causes him to anticipate self-mastery. Chapter III concludes, “Another life! A life of grace and virtue and happiness! It was true. It was not a dream from which he would wake. The past was past.” (Joyce 140). The feeling of Imaginary unity with God, the center of stability, causes Stephen to

(mistakenly) believe that he is in tune with his own desire and acting out of his own autonomous will.

#### **Chapter IV**

In Chapter IV, the feeling of Imaginary unity and self-mastery proves to be, once again, only temporary. Stephen's short-lived "spiritual awakening" is marked by rigorous activity and ritual, through which he tries to sublimate his desires in activity. He involves himself heavily in activities to display faith and devotion: "He drove his soul daily through an increasing circle of works of supererogation" (Joyce 141). The increasing momentum of Stephen's activity show that this life of piety is not fulfilling for Stephen. His lingering desire prompts him to try to draw more and more out of it. Kenner notes that Stephen's spiritual regimen at the beginning of Chapter IV mirrors the vigorous activity of Chapter II (51), when Stephen tries to sublimate his sexual desire through familial relations and constant motion. It is another attempt to suppress his consciousness through compliance with Symbolic dictates. As the list of activities ends and Stephen's consciousness surfaces, doubt makes itself present. He finds aspects of religious teaching easy to accept, but he cannot accept into his mind "the simple fact that God had loved his soul from all eternity" (Joyce 143). His remark indicates that the feeling of transcendence and Imaginary unity is dissipating. It also foreshadows Stephen's coming separation from the Church.

Growing restless with from the monotony of spiritual piety, Stephen's surety at the end of Chapter III turns to doubt. He notes, "A restless feeling of guilt would always be present with him: he would confess and repent and be absolved, confess and repent be absolved again, fruitlessly" (Joyce 147). The repetition of the pattern of action shows Stephen's frustration with the monotony of religious life. The "restless" feeling threatens to pull him out of this pattern, and

he is no longer sure that he has truly found purpose in religious life. He tries to reassure himself, but his self-doubt is evident: "I have amended my life, have I not? he asked himself" (Joyce 147). The first-person phrasing of this question is a rare interruption from the third-person style that dominates the narrative. This interruption in the narrative mode emphasizes Stephen's self-alienation and his alienation from his own desire. He himself is not sure that he is serving the purpose he initially believed that he was. Nor is he sure that he wants to.

Being invited to join the priesthood is the psychological crisis that turns Stephen's search for self and meaning elsewhere; however, due to Stephen's alienation from his desire, this effect is not immediate. At the offer, Stephen thinks to himself, "How often had he seen himself as a priest wielding calmly and humbly the awful power of which angels and saints stood in reverence! His soul had loved to muse in secret on this desire" (Joyce 152). His Imaginary construction of the priest offers the illusion of autonomy, and even dominance with its "awful power." The role initially appeals to Stephen's individualistic nature for this reason. However, Stephen's desire for the priesthood is not based on the reality of the role. As Castle notes, "Stephen's profanation of the sacrament destabilizes the dialectic of repentance and absolution by exploiting [its] aesthetic thrills" (175). Just as he is on the verge of sealing his fate in a permanent direction, another break in his self-conception occurs.

Stephen's desire for autonomy causes him to reject the role of the priesthood. Remembering the Jesuit priests at Clongowes, Stephen wonders at "the remoteness of his own soul from what he had hitherto imagined her sanctuary. At the frail hold which so many years of order and obedience had of him when once a definite and irrevocable act of his threatened to end, in time and eternity, his freedom" (Joyce 155). Stephen realizes in this moment his inability to understand his own desires. To some extent (though not in these terms), Stephen understands the



hold of the religious Symbolic order on his being. Though he thought he sought union with God and God's desire, he realizes that this union will not satisfy his individualistic nature.

Stephen's decision to reject this priesthood is not made out of conscious logic, but rather stems from a feeling of intuition. Parrinder observes that it is "his sense of what is innate to him" that causes him to make this decision (114). Stephen reflects, "The end he had been born to serve yet did not see allowed him to escape by an unseen path" (Joyce 158). In spite of his assurance that his "end" lays outside of the priesthood, Stephen has no real sense of what, precisely, that "end" is. While he believes himself to be acting of his own volition, the narrative structure, which by this point is proving to be quite cyclical, throws this into question. Kenner notes "Stephen's unstable pact with the Church, and its dissolutions follows the pattern of composition and dissipation established by his other dreams" (50). Stephen seems to be stuck in a train of repetition. This repetitive sequence serves to undercut the euphoria of the following scene on Dollymount Beach.

The narrative climax of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* occurs on Dollymount Beach. Rhythmic exultations punctuate the passage, urging "Yes! Yes! Yes!" (Joyce 163), "On and on and on and on!" (Joyce 165). Motifs of resurrection - "His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood" (Joyce 163) - and flight - the squall, the birdgirl, the figure soaring above the sea - appear throughout. Together, these elements create the euphoric experience of epiphany. Stephen believes that he has found a new mode of living. He vows "To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life" (Joyce 165). This declaration of his future intent seems sure; however, it is important to note that Stephen does not, in any way, specify what this new life will look like or consist of.

Stephen's desire metonymically slips again, travelling from God and the images of priesthood and settling his vision of the Birdgirl. Upon seeing her, Stephen reflects, "Her image had passed into his soul forever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him to live and his soul had leaped at the call" (Joyce 165). The image of the birdgirl provokes Stephen's desire with its suggestion of flight, which itself metonymically suggests freedom: his soul 'leaps' to her soundless call.

Like his earlier identifications with solitary heroes, Stephen's Imaginary identification with Daedalus, his namesake, changes his sense of self. Reflecting on his name, Stephen resolves to "create proudly out of the freedom and of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable" (Joyce 163). In this statement, Stephen envisions himself both as the artist, "the great artificer," as well as the creation itself, "the living thing... beautiful, impalpable, imperishable." Through identification with Daedalus, Stephen anticipates a mastery that will give him the power to shape his own life, according to his own vision and desire. This repetition suggests that Stephen is no closer to being able to signify (and therefore create) the ideal-ego that he anticipates.

## **Chapter V**

The ecstatic epiphany of Chapter IV is met in Chapter V with another swift and deadening anticlimax. Buckley notes, "The Daedalian symphony fades for the reader in the banal chatter of the Dedalus breakfast table" (237). As he sits at the breakfast table, memories of the "dark turfcoloured water" at Clongowes come flooding back to him (Joyce 167). This allusion to the events in Chapter I, by moving backwards in the narrative, undermines the assertion that life will continue "On and on and on and on" in Chapter IV. Stephen's mind seems to be spiraling

back upon itself. The structures of his unconscious disable him from suppressing the oppressive memories of his boyhood school.

In Chapter V, Stephen is no closer to the self-mastery that he anticipates. The aesthetic education that he sought out proves to be just as frustrating as his religious one. His mind ‘wearies’ of “the search for the essence of beauty amid the spectral words of Aristotle or Aquinas” (Joyce 167). He finds the clarity of mind he anticipated to be clouded again by the words of the Symbolic. Additionally, Stephen has already grown tired of the routine and restrictions placed upon him in this new setting, arguing with the dean and refusing to attend classes. His desire for autonomy also creates a need for distance from his Irish nationalist classmates. As he reflects on his frustrations in the university setting, he notes, “His thinking was a dusk of doubt and selfmistrust lit up at moments by the lightnings of intuition” (Joyce 170). The dual contrast between dark and light indicate the insistent, cyclical pattern of Stephen’s development. The ability to signify what he desires and the way he wants to shape his life still eludes him.

As seen through the discussion of the previous chapters, *A Portrait of the Artist* continuously shifts between epiphany and bathetic anticlimax. Each chapter closes with Stephen feeling that he has discovered a new mode of living, only to have the following chapter open with despondency. Hugh Kenner notes the patterns as one of “dream nourished in contempt of reality, put into practice, and dashed by reality” (qtd. in Parrinder 100). Each time Stephen believes himself to have achieved self-mastery, he is confronted with the falsity of this feeling and forced to reassess. Additionally, his desire is never satisfied. It metonymically slips from image to image, never allowing for the possibility of restlessness to disappear. Stephen is consistently barred from understanding what it is that he wants, and who it is that he wants to be.

How, then, is the reader to take the narrative's conclusion, which seems to promise, once again, that Stephen will discover both of these things?

It is impossible not to read the triumphant tone of Stephen's final diary entries with a high degree of skepticism. Buckley notes, "The fifth and last chapter hardly advances at all beyond the epiphany ... that ends the fourth" (247). In the second to last entry, Stephen proclaims, "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (Joyce 244). Stephen's confidence is apparent; he is certain that he will discover the reality of experience. Identifying with Daedalus as creator once again, he believes that he is now prepared to "forge" in his soul the conscience that seems to elude his Irish kinsman. However, given the repetitive structure of the novel, this bravado cannot be taken seriously. How many times has Stephen welcomed life previously, only to realize that he has to reassess his mode of living? Levenson notes that the apostrophe, "O life!" returns the reader to the "euphoric pledge" made on the beach (193) to recreate life. Stephen is always on the verge of freedom and self-mastery, and therefore never achieves either. It seems that Stephen himself is holding out for the teleological ending to his own Bildungsroman, when he will find his sense of unity and purpose.

#### V.

Through this exploration of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, it seems evident that the portrayals of the self and development in the modernist Bildungsroman have shifted dramatically from the teleological narrative of the traditional Bildungsroman. Neither Stephen nor Dorian is able to achieve a stable sense of identity or a harmonious relationship with society.

While, in the traditional Bildungsroman, the protagonist is able to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with society, the protagonists of the modernist Bildungsroman find that society is ultimately antagonistic. Dorian's relationships with Basil and Henry instill in him a problematic conception of moral behavior, leading him to harm both himself and others. Stephen's interactions with the Church show the damaging effects that society's institutions can have on individuals. These portrayals suggest that, rather than being beneficial, societal structures actually deter individuals from taking action in their own self-interest.

More importantly, these novels both suggest that the self is not something that can be understood or mastered. In the modernist Bildungsroman, unity and mastery of the self are unattainable. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian is in an Imaginary misrecognition of himself that becomes even more distorted as the novel progresses. Caught in the triadic trap of the distorted self-image, Lord Henry's assertion of the way that Dorian *is*, and the way that Basil believed him to be, Dorian ultimately destroys himself. At the conclusion of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen finds that freedom, identity, and the knowledge of his own desire have once again slipped from his grasp. Though he believes himself to have discovered the answer once again, the repetitive structure of the novel and its lack of resolution indicate that this is merely another misrecognition. The sense of self-mastery Stephen hopes to achieve has been delayed. He is sent off again in a seemingly endless search for wholeness and freedom.

In her reading of Lacan's "Some Reflections of the Ego," Jane Gallop concludes that "To 'master' the self, to understand it, would be to realize its falsity, and therefore realize the impossibility of coinciding with one's self. The moment of 'self-mastery' cannot but be infinitely deferred" (84). Since the anticipation of self-mastery is thematically central to both traditional and modernist Bildungsroman, Gallop's reading of Lacan has important implications for

discussing these novels' verisimilitude. As Gallop simply and eloquently explains, Lacan revises the idea of self-mastery by saying that the subject simply cannot attain it. The moment that the subject has mastered the self, the self disappears. Working from a psychoanalytic framework, it is reasonable to conclude that modernist Bildungsroman achieves a higher degree of verisimilitude than its predecessors by allowing its subjects to hope for, rather than achieve autonomy. The protagonists of the Bildungsroman are stuck in repetitive fruitless attempts at "becoming" the selves they feel certain they were meant to be.

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