

# As Blissful in Heaven as Decadent in Hell: Salvations in *Faust* and *Dorian Gray*

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**Abstract:** This paper compares the idea of redemption in Goethe's *Faust*, with its flip side, namely the idea of decadence in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It inquires into the notion of decadence as a perversion of Christian virtues, and reveals its consanguinity with the very virtues it seeks to subvert. The paper will focus on two important developments throughout the two works: the fates of the woman in love and the interaction with "knowledge" which lure the two protagonists into their contradistinctive views of beauty. In both cases, we are given a relentless pursuit of life, as understood through its entanglements with beauty. As such, the paper is also an inquiry into the notion of beauty, particularly the ethics of it, and this comparative study hopefully reveals what has changed from Goethe to Wilde, a century apart.

*Keywords:* Decadence, aesthetics, Wilde, Goethe, women, literature and religion

This paper compares Goethe's *Faust* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Written a century apart, both books told a story of a man who struck a deal with the devil, willingly and unwillingly, to experience life to a fuller extent. Faust traded his soul to Mephistopheles so that he may see the grandness of nature and life. Dorian Gray unknowingly sold his to his own devilishly possessed portrait, in which his representation would grow old and ugly in his stead. But whereas both of them made an ominous deal, only Faust eventually attained salvation in heaven while Dorian fell to his death at the end. In light of the similar themes of the two works and the many nuanced differences in setting up their tropes, this paper is guided by a simple question: why did Faust triumph in the end and why did Dorian Gray come to a tragic end? Of the plethora of elements which contributed to the two characters' eventual ends, the paper focuses on two of the most striking ones: the death of the female lover who appears in both stories and the presence of "book" which, to varying extent, guided both protagonists' journeys. Through these two motifs, the paper makes the overarching argument that the arch of redemption in Faust was a process of fulfillment that could only be accomplished by Dorian Gray through an arch of decadence. In other words, whereas Faust must adhere to a conventional notion of bliss to be salvaged, Dorian must acquire the same by sabotaging that bliss.

The reputation of *Dorian Gray* might make the thesis of this paper somewhat predictable. After all, the end of Faust's journey has generally been viewed as, if not glorious, at least quite healthy. Wilde's story was at best a perversion of all positive religious values which Goethe celebrated. However, the paper's ultimate goal is not to reiterate the amorality of beauty and its echo in the concept of decadence. Rather, it seeks to interrogate that notion and inquires after the various forces that made "decadence" an urgent notion to be adopted by our fin-de-siècle English gentleman. Goethe's *Faust* is thus a perfect comparison and contrast to note the various points of perversion which Wilde artfully painted onto his Dorian.

### Gretchen and Sybil Vane: the Essence of Sacrifice

For both Dorian and Faust, there was a period in which the epitome of beauty shows itself to them in the form of the woman they love. There is a striking parallel and an equally striking opposition between the two men's lovers—Faust's Margaret, namely the "Gretchen", and Dorian's Sybil Vane. Both women are victims of their lovers' pursuits of an ideal. Faust and Dorian's amorous fixations upon them have largely been instrumental to and contingent upon something else. As Faust drank down the witch's potion which turned him back into a young man, he saw in that transformative moment the vision of his heart's desires—the lovely visage of the Gretchen. The old scholar who has lived his entire life isolated from much of the world now became reinvigorated by the prospect of love. Thus he exclaimed "All theory is gray, my friend. But forever green is the tree of life"<sup>1</sup>. From that moment on, the scholar and the devil's mission became the acquisition of Gretchen, whose person and everything other than her appearance were a complete mystery to the two of them. She was merely seen as the embodiment of "life" and the manifestations of "love", key to Faust's experience of full humanity. It was no surprising then, that when Faust first met Gretchen, he was immediately captivated and compelled to court her despite the complete absence of pretext. Through Faust's initial passionate greetings to Gretchen, the poem provided an ambivalent moment when we know not whether to praise Faust for his daring to pursue love with no regard to the tiring considerations of class (Gretchen was after all, just a regular village girl), or whether to be alarmed by Faust's impending exploitation of her to "experience life"—to enjoy sex, if we should drop the euphemism here. Gretchen was in fact eventually abandoned by Faust, but the process and aftermath of that abandonment required some interrogations, which will show why Gretchen was in many ways different to Wilde's Sybil.

But onto Sybil Vane now, she similarly experienced a process of subsumption under an ideal. It may not be entirely just to claim that Dorian's love for her had ulterior motives. After all, their first kiss was one of the few genuine and moving moments of the novel:

"We kissed each other. I can't describe to you what I felt at that moment. It seemed to me that all my life had been narrowed to one perfect point of rose-coloured joy."<sup>2</sup>

But as Dorian continues to describe their relationship, it increasingly appears that he approached the young actress very much for her roles on the stage. For him she was "my wife in Shakespeare's plays"<sup>3</sup>. When asked about her whereabouts, Dorian's dreamy countenance only produced this: "I left her in the forest of Arden; I shall find her in an orchard in Verona."<sup>4</sup> The idea of literature, to pursue life as if it were a work of art once again seized Dorian. In Sybil Vane he found that window through which he may turn into Romeo, to live as the frozen portrait of heroes that he already switched places with at the beginning of the story. But as they spent more time with each other a tragic irony was revealed that Sybil Vane lost her theatrical talent after she fell in love. Dorian felt his heart broken over this sad realization and their relationship has ended at that instant in effect.

Cruelty! Had he been cruel? It was the girl's fault, not his. He had dreamed of her as a great artist, had given his love to her because he had thought her great. Then she had disappointed him. She had been shallow and unworthy.<sup>5</sup>

The young man thus excused himself for breaking their engagement and sending the girl to ruin. Perhaps more than the fact that she has become "commonplace mediocre actress", he was devastated by the evidence in Sybil that art and life may not so easily become one, or ever at all. In Lord Henry's words, great artists were boring in life because their souls were devoted to arts.<sup>6</sup> To pursue life and love, as Sybil showed, may require departure from art, which his own degenerating portrait also grimly bespeaks. Sybil Vane eventually committed suicide but even her death could not move Dorian to relent. Her cold body only bore witness to his irreversible descent into complete degeneration.

The key difference between Gretchen and Sybil Vane which deserves more attention than this paper is capable of, is perhaps threefold, each of them pitting the salvific power of Gretchen against

Dorian's consumption of Gretchen into his pursuit of decadence. The first difference is quite simply that Gretchen, as Goethe's poem goes on, was eventually redeemed. Lying in the town's prison and refusing to leave with Faust, Gretchen wished for death to grant her salvation. However, a divine voice called from above and claimed that she would be redeemed.<sup>7</sup> At the end of *Faust, Part II*, when Faust made it into heaven, he was indeed reunited with Gretchen and the two attained bliss in heaven which they could not in life. The knowledge of this telos, or teleological arrangement of Gretchen's fall for the sake of her rise pointed to the first important difference between her and Sybil Vane. Namely, Gretchen's suffering has an end beyond itself whereas Sybil Vane's might not. In Rudolf Steiner's analysis of the poem, he pointed out that curious theological move in Goethe's ideas, the postulate of human maturation and fulfillment that "man has to wrestle with Evil in the historic evolution of Earth-life"<sup>8</sup>. Gretchen fell in part I of the poem so that both she and Faust may be redeemed. It is through her refusal to live and her insistence on penitence that Faust, now discovering and fully embracing the deep compassion (*mitleid*) within himself, cried out at the end of Part I: "No! Thou shalt live!"<sup>9</sup>, thus setting in motion his quest in part II to become human through care for others. Medieval theology, via, for instance, both St. Augustine and St. Aquinas, wrestled with the difficult "problem of evil", the contradiction between god's omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and the existence of evils. But this contradiction is precisely the foundation of Christian faith. There can be no religious virtues without evil: no discipline without temptations, no compassion without suffering, no generosity without neediness, and definitely no redemption without sins. Gretchen's fall was in fact her rise and also the divine lift of Faust into bliss.

With Oscar Wilde's Sybil Vane however, this movement of teleos from fall to redemption, and from personal gratification to universal care was forestalled by Dorian's dismissal of her death. Or rather, it was his dismissal guided by Lord Henry's persuasions. After Sybil Vane committed suicide due to her abandonment by Dorian, Lord Henry, in a few striking sentences, reduced Sybil Vane into that theatrical figure which he knew Dorian originally saw her to be and thus sealed the latter's conscience that was faltering towards repentance:

She has played her last part. But you must think of that lonely death in the tawdry dressing-room simply as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy, as a wonderful scene from Webster, or Ford, or Cyril Tourneur. The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died.<sup>10</sup>

And here lies the power of Lord Henry's honeyed tongue, that "good-natured-fellow" speech which softly kills off Sybil Vane's existence more totally than her own suicide. If Sybil Vane's death was God's last gambit to turn Dorian back into his conscience, then Lord Henry, much more qualified than Mephistopheles to play the rival role against God, snaps that chance into nothing. His tool, as has always been since the striking line—"the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it"<sup>11</sup>—is to ask Dorian to embrace his desires, but only those which are hedonistic and pleasurable. By leveraging theatre above life, which he knew was Dorian's belief all along, he invoked that cruel and yet most seductive decadentist truth: to die for beauty and art is no death at all. If Sybil Vane lives for theatre, then she must also die for it. Only then may she become a true Juliet or Isolde.

The tricky question now is that, although it may seem that Sybil Vane was a failed attempt to bring Dorian's conscience back, which is precisely what the Gretchen accomplished in *Faust*, Wilde may not think quite simply that Dorian was "going downhill" at that moment, so to speak. Professor Vincent Sherry for instance, alerted us to Wilde's rather overt intention to muddle our moral judgement of the novel, who inserted as preface in the second edition of the book that "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."<sup>12</sup> If this authorial voice means anything, or that, should we think like the most obedient readers out there and take it completely to heart, then did Sybil Vane truly die in vain? Did she not, in a most twisted, "decadent" fashion, contribute to Dorian's growth as an aesthete, who could now truly resolve to place art above life because of her death? And did she not also make Wilde's book "better" by spicing

it up with that most scandalous and dazzlingly tragic element—the liebestod of a beautiful actress for her prince charming? In other words, Sybil Vane may have lifted Dorian the same way Gretchen lifted Faust, albeit à façon maudit. In this way Wilde may have also accomplished his own personal vendetta against his moralizing critics, who believes in morality before beauty, by creating morality out of beauty.

The second difference between Gretchen and Sybil Vane, more so perhaps as a corollary of the first, is the ways in which death functions in relation to beauty. European tragedies up to the point of Wilde were no stranger to the trope of fair maidens living from the point of their infatuation with a young man, towards their eventual demise. As Georges Bataille puts it, beauty, in the form of eroticism (which I now simplify into sexual passions), is “assenting to life up to the point of death”<sup>13</sup>. Female characters, reduced into erotic subjects and foils to men, as in *Faust* and *Dorian Gray*, died to demonstrate the indispensability of death to men’s experience of beauty. Goethe deals with this idea in a fairly straightforward way. The old scholar, confined within his own intellect, vowed precisely to break out and find his “tree of life”. To love, to desire, to live, and to die, as such, are parts of the cosmology of beings, as essential to nature as it is to humanity.

Looks not mine eye now into thine?  
And feel'st thou not an innate force propelling  
Thy tide of life to head and heart,  
A power that, in eternal mystery dwelling,  
Invisible visible moves beside thee?<sup>14</sup>

Finding himself in love with the Gretchen, Faust exclaimed his passions, somewhat interestingly in such language as “tide of life” and “eternal mystery”. His love, rather than a spontaneous feeling arising out of himself, was more of the “innate force” of a cosmological order. We hear here the echo of that romanticist yearning in which humanity and nature are one, and that feeling of love which had had the most poetic conceits in poetry was now a part of the cosmos. As such, for Faust, that which is amorous and passionate is simultaneously natural, his own progression within the story is at once his gradual embrace of nature. Gretchen’s death at the end of part I similarly signifies for him the end of the hours and the beginning of a new time. “Day! yes, it is day! the Judgment-day breaks in!”<sup>15</sup>, thus exclaimed the Gretchen near her death. Dawn breaks in, and Faust enters a new life, into a completely new scheme of things in part II.

If the death of beauty in *Faust* was employed to constitute nature and its mimesis—human life, then its appearance in *Dorian Gray* is harnessed, controlled, and consumed for what may be called decadent pleasures. Nature gave way completely to artificiality. After Sybil Vane’s death, Dorian thought of the event as the following:

When he thought of her, it would be as a wonderful tragic figure sent on to the world’s stage to show the supreme reality of love... Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins—he was to have all these things.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear, as has already been said, that Lord Henry, through the death of Sybil Vane nurtured Dorian into a heartless aesthete and this passage clearly shows the imprint of that influence. “Wild joys and wilder sins” is an important phrase, for it reverses the faustian theology of striving for joys from sins and rather strives for sins from joys. Only great pleasures can breed great sins. It was only through loving Sybil Vane that Dorian could relish from her death such emotional intensity and tragic sentiments, all so as to be memorialized and dramatized in his mind as his Juliet. In Bataille’s words again: “Beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled; not for its own sake, but for the joy brought by the certainty of profaning it.”<sup>17</sup> The purpose of acquiring beauty is not to ruminate it until it turns bland, or, in Dorian’s case, until his Shakespearean idol turns into a “commonplace mediocre actress”. Rather, it is to profane it, to see it fall and destroyed. It is not the beauty of eternal art that

interests him, but the beauty of falling snowflakes and cherry blossoms, dwindling into mud. As such, beauty must die, and if it does not seem to be on the track of dying, then it must be killed. Gretchen's death brings about true suffering for Faust. It is as real as nature, and it is in fact in nature that we must confront death. Dorian however, plays the role of nature, for it is him who causes Sybil Vane to kill herself. His relentless pursuit of fresh pleasures set things in motion. That epic turn of fates which binds Faust to the world is stagnant in Dorian's London. He had to be the master of it all lest the "dull England" plunges him into constant boredom and mediocrity. The natural tragedy which befalls Faust and turns him good must be made by Dorian's own hands, harnessed and put to use.

The last important difference between Sybil Vane and Gretchen is the difference between their influences on the central character (Faust, Dorian), against the influences of the devil (Mephistopheles, Lord Henry). In a very similar way, both Gretchen and Sybil Vane were discovered at the encouragement of the "devil". Dominick Rossi, in his very short piece indexing the similarities between Gretchen and Sybil Vane, notes that both Mephistopheles and Lord Henry, wanting to give their companions more experience in life, decides on having them meet a beautiful woman to accomplish that task.<sup>18</sup> Both men find their women, according to Rossi, in an atmospheric representation, or we may say, portrayals. Faust gained a vision of Gretchen as she appears in a portraiture in dreams and Dorian saw Sybil Vane for the first time when she was performing on stage. In both women we had a fatally predetermined connection to art, one as painting and the other as theatre, which pits them both categorically against the role of the two devils, Mephistopheles and Lord Henry, who unequivocally embody the idea of "words": rhetorics, persuasions, and (a)moral lectures.

But where Gretchen differs from Sybil Vane is precisely that she is "painting" and Sybil Vane is "theatre" and thus she may have her eventual triumph while Sybil Vane could not. The figure of Gretchen was seared into Faust's memory when she appeared in his vision. In the frame of the mirror which resembles an icon, Gretchen came momentarily and vanished. That representation, without body nor scent of flesh struck Faust as related to the messianic Virgin. He exclaimed: "Indulge me with one glance!—one moment spare! It was a virgin—form surpassing fair!"<sup>19</sup> Gretchen haunts him merely as a visage, somewhat detached from reality. That icon greatly displeased Mephistopheles, as he immediately rebuked Faust: "No! No! with my good aid thou soon shalt see/ The paragon of women bodily."<sup>20</sup> Underneath this impatience was Mephistopheles' anxiety that Gretchen may mean more to Faust than the devil himself. The ominous feeling that Gretchen will undo what he was painstakingly planning prompted him to reemphasize "my aid". Moreover, Mephistopheles' instinct may have reminded him of the danger of the word "virgin" and the threateningly (to the devil of course) salvific power of the icon, which was why he hastened to add "bodily". His gambit relied on "flesh", on making Faust employ his senses. He understood that paintings have the power to invoke piety and thus defeat him. Of course his suspicions proved to be correct when at last, in a scene of still divinity, Gretchen led Faust into heaven.

But as we noted just a bit earlier, Mephistopheles did not only excel at invoking flesh. He was, above all, a master of words. But words too were warded off by Faust as a result of his encounters with Gretchen. After meeting Gretchen, Faust awakened to his first discovery of life, namely that words cannot encompass all there is to know and all there is to feel:

Let this look proclaim,  
This pressure of my hand declare  
What words can never name:  
To yield us to an ecstasy of joy,  
And feel this tranceful bliss must be  
Eternal!<sup>21</sup>

It was at this precise moment that Mephistopheles lost control of Faust. Faust discovered an ineffable joy which his yet innocent love of Gretchen granted him, and that "tranceful bliss" later became his

resolve to escape Walpurgisnacht's fleshly carnival. Mephistopheles became for him no longer a guide, but rather a helping hand whose will may no longer interfere with his. In his usual acrimonious tone, Mephistopheles tried to make fun of Faust's love-sickness and hurry him away from Gretchen:

What have you here, in caves and clefts, to do,  
Like an old owl, screeching to-whit, to-whooh?  
Or like a torpid toad, that sits alone  
Sipping the oozing moss and dripping stone?<sup>22</sup>

Usually, this witty insult would embarrass Faust and urge him forward on their journey but here Faust rebuked him thus: "Couldst thou but know what re-born vigour springs/From this lone wandering in the wilderness,/Couldst thou conceive what heavenly joy it brings,/Then wert thou fiend enough to envy me my bliss."<sup>23</sup> The memory of Gretchen, alive and in death, remained in Faust and constantly reminded him of his blissful time with her. She lived on as an icon.

Sybil Vane's tragic affiliation with theatre gave her a different end. As previously noted, Dorian fell in love with her when he saw her performing on stage. She was his Juliet. But more than that, Sybil herself saw Dorian as an actor as well, as she commented on his looks by saying: "You look more like a prince. I must call you Prince Charming."<sup>24</sup> Many scholars have noticed the general theatricality of *Dorian Gray* as a literary work and many saw Dorian and Sybil's relationship as a watershed moment where life and theatre threatened to penetrate each other. According to Maho Hidaka, their relationship was doomed the moment they addressed each other as Juliet and Prince Charming.<sup>25</sup> It began, like all plays started, with a "dramatis personae" of the cast. Both actors acknowledged the theatricality of it. But whereas Sybil exclaimed the name of Prince Charming because she was fresh off stage, Dorian welcomed his Juliet because that was what he always wanted as his love. Dorian wanted to bring theatre into life and Sybil unknowingly granted his wish. She played Juliet on the first day they met and she played Juliet again on the day when she died, much like Juliet, from imbibing a poisonous potion.<sup>26</sup> It was the perfection of their relationship as a theatrical act which allows the word of Lord Henry to contain it in sober clarity. In a way, the mysticism which enshrouds Gretchen's icon and wards off Mephistopheles' witticism could not be replicated in Sybil's acting. Gretchen's was, after all, the power of religious art. Theatre however, was prone to the words of spectators, commentators, and critics, and such were the roles that Lord Henry have been playing all along:

Sometimes, however, a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty crosses our lives. If these elements of beauty are real, the whole thing simply appeals to our sense of dramatic effect. Suddenly we find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both. We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enralls us.<sup>27</sup>

Well aware that Dorian has wanted a life of theatrical wonders, he urged him on and quite veritably told him that Sybil Vane's death was "a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty". But he did not simply persuade him, with the "we" he also passed on that thought as if it were a piece of universal wisdom. An actor and a spectator in one, Dorian fell for the charismatic critic. He was unsure of his own performance, and equally so of his interpretation of Sybil's. But he was reassured by Lord Henry and his words. So he moved on and declared himself triumphant in the play of life: "Like the gods of the Greeks, he would be strong, and fleet, and joyous. He would be safe. That was everything."<sup>28</sup> This last appeal to the flourishing life of the Greeks further echoes Lord Henry's point that tragedies were not moralizing performances but "mere wonder of the spectacle". Tragedies were to be enjoyed and its cathartic elements absorbed to make ourselves better. Thus Dorian made peace with his vices, for they ultimately led to tragedies and tragedies led to a joyous and beautiful life.

Looking back now at Gretchen and Sybil Vane again, it may be said that there is a striking structural similarity between the two. Both serve as some sort of foils and keys for the male protagonists to living a vigorous and amorous life. However, whereas Goethe's heroine engaged in a conventional sense of the word "sacrifice" and redeemed not only herself but also the old scholar, Wilde's

Sybil was fatally entrapped in the elusive and dangerous frame of “theatre”, for not only is theatre her own commitment in life but it is also Dorian’s obsession. Her “redemption” of Dorian was thus the complete reversion of Gretchen for she not only died in pain but also plunged Dorian into his own abyssal pursuit of a theatrical and dramatic life.

### **Books as Decadent Lives: The Collapse of Arts into the Mundanity of Being**

The other significant cause of Faust’s and Dorian’s different endings was their different views of knowledge. It was not just Faust’s own unparalleled knowledge at the beginning of the poem that makes him far more sober than the youthful Dorian. Both of them set out on a journey to acquire knowledge, more specifically the knowledge of life. But where they differ is the question of what role does knowledge play in life. The simplified thesis is this: whereas Faust’s journey to acquire knowledge of life culminates in him putting order to things and restoring the boundary between knowledge, morality and sensuality, Dorian’s life went the other way: in him knowledge and morality alike collapse into sensuality.

The most significant instance is found in their different interactions with books, more or less a symbol and embodiment of knowledge. In *Faust*, books were the first things the esteemed doctor left behind in pursuit of greater things. In the famous opening of the poem, Faust lamented:

There now, I’ve toiled my way quite through  
Law, Medicine, and Philosophy,  
And, to my sorrow, also thee,  
Theology, with much ado;  
And here I stand, poor human fool,  
As wise as when I went to school.<sup>29</sup>

The entire premise of *Faust* is the inadequacy of knowledge, or knowledge recorded in books. With as much as he has read, Faust still felt that he was “as wise as when [he] went to school”. This is a curious statement because he felt that his pursuit of wisdom was lacking yet he has supposedly mastered philosophy, the love of wisdom. One must wonder what kind of “wisdom” he desired. It wasn’t long before Faust himself made it clear: “Where grasp I thee, thou infinite Nature, where?”<sup>30</sup> Faust wanted to know life and its interconnection to nature. What he needed was experience, the floods of sensations which tickled and invigorated his body and made him feel connected to nature. He wanted to be stirred “from the high welkin to earth’s centre bounding,/ Harmonious all through the great All resounding”. Capitalizing the “H” and “A” in “Harmonious” and “All”, he was also aware that what he sought was something ineffable and divine, perhaps sourced directly from God. Yet he merely knew it and this knowledge without experience frustrated him exceedingly, because although he understood what God has to offer, learning “theology” from books only brought him much ado. To find wisdom, life, love, and God, Faust had to abandon the books. In fact, books indeed never returned for the rest of the play. Faust and Mephistopheles were constantly moving.

It is not clear whether Oscar Wilde noticed this radical departure from books in *Faust*, but he quite conspicuously turned books into a major source of seductions, and orchestrated an impactful return to them. For the first half of *Dorian Gray*, Dorian has been a man of experience. He went out everyday, went to the theatre, the opera, the galleries, and fell in love, got engaged, and ruined the life of Sybil Vane. Then, at just about midway through the novel, Lord Henry gave him a “yellow book”. Dorian was infatuated, obsessed, and absorbed. The book reversed how he lived his life and turned him backward from where Faust was heading. He locked himself up in his study, collected different editions of the “yellow book” and avariciously reread it time and time again. The fulfillment and succor which even the death of Sybil Vane could not tragically offer him enough, was found in that “yellow book”:

The hero, the wonderful young Parisian in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it.<sup>31</sup>

As Faust left his study to find life, Dorian did the opposite and went back into his study to find it. He was bewitched by the ornaments and luxury of Parisian boutiques and treasuries. Wilde lavishly spent the entire chapter 11 listing and describing the exotic and exquisite goods depicted in the life of the “yellow book”, of all the “dainty Delhi muslins, finely wrought with gold-thread palmates and stitched over with iridescent beetles’ wing”<sup>32</sup>. One is as bedazzled as bored by these bombastic and finely detailed descriptions. They hover in front of the readers’ eyes more vividly and more plainly than anything else from the novel. Yet curiously enough, they were merely objects from the “book”. The chronicles of the crusades, stories of the saints and the magnificence of Jerusalem which Faust has no doubt read over and over again during his theological endeavors bored him. Yet the same kind of materials, albeit in the forms of Indian muslins and Chinese hangings left a deeper impressions on Dorian than his own reality. The tales of Christ that failed to impress Faust now exerted tremendous influence on Dorian, through the figure of a satanic *imitatio christo* in the “yellow book”. One might wonder why Dorian found the imitations in the book more alluring than life itself. Certainly the “yellow book”, which can be no other than Huysmans’ *À Rebours*, painted a luxuriously decadent life.<sup>33</sup> Importantly, it was also sent to Dorian from Lord Henry, right after the two of them met and decided to make peace with Sybil Vane’s death. At that point, Dorian was well on the way to accept Sybil as a theatrical component of his decadently flourishing life. Theatre, life, literature, and words were increasingly losing their distinctions from one another. His proclivities for an amoral life were strengthening: “I love scandals about other people, but scandals about myself don’t interest me. They have not got the charm of novelty.” In his arguments against Basil Howard, the artist who made his portrait, Dorian shunned Basil’s moral accusations of his character, calling them lacking in “novelty”.<sup>34</sup> His moral intuitions, shrunk after Sybil’s death and quite diminished from the “yellow book”, finally collapsed into matters of taste. As long as there is pleasure, it matters not where it comes from. Life, representations, vices, or deaths. Sybil Vane could die in life and moved him as much—or less—as Juliet’s death on stage.

For Faust, the lengthy journey across the worlds only sharpened his epistemological faculties. With Gretchen’s death, he was awakened to the bliss of the love of a maiden and that angelic experience was severed from other types of sensual experience. During the Walpurgisnacht, he saw right through the danger beneath the sensual dances of a beautiful young witch: “Alas! while she so passing sweet was singing, /I saw a red mouse from her mouth outspringing.”<sup>35</sup> He no longer longed simply for fleshly gratifications, the wildly blooming “tree of life” began to take shape and gain order, branch by branch. Near the end of the Witch’s Night, Mephistopheles, in a sort of final gambit, took Faust to see a celebratory play dedicated to Oberon and Titania, rulers of the fairies. Intended by Mephistopheles to seduce Faust with the sensational display of nature, the play majorly backfired. For when it ended, Faust, reminded of his innocent Gretchen by the bountiful scenes of nature, cried aloud:

In misery! in despair! Wandering in hopeless wretchedness over the wide earth, and at last made prisoner!  
Shut up like a malefactor in a dungeon, victim of the most horrible woes—poor miserable girl!<sup>36</sup>

He wished only to see his Gretchen, her suffering from the shame of her affair with him had made her squalor as striking as the beauty in front of the old scholar’s eyes. The allure of theatre did not encroach on Faust, like it did with Dorian. Rather it awakened him further to his moral integrity and compassion. Pleasure elevates his morality rather than collapses into it.

Although in *Faust* there is undeniable departure from books which the very premise of the story demonstrates, it is not Goethe’s intention to dismiss books as causes for one’s dotage. Rather, that departure only shows his desire to leave them alone from other pleasures and entertainment. In the preliminary for *Faust*, John Stuart Blackie explains that the old German poet, sitting at his desk in Weimar, surrounded by his admirers, had been upset:

It was natural that the language of the sacred Book should have been considered as containing something mystical and transcendental even in its very letters; and we need not wonder that the enthusiasm of the first Hebrew scholars in Germany should have discovered the key of all the sciences in that cabalistic lore, which we are now accustomed to use in common discourse, as a synonym for the most childish and unintelligible jargon.<sup>37</sup>

The renowned poet's discontents here were that scriptures and important books had been read too easily. Their words, which contained such profound mysticism as befits a primeval religion have been flattened and absorbed into the daily Parlance of modern languages. We uttered "God" all the time yet we no longer revered it and, in due days, no longer even knew what it meant. In a way, combatting this was also the project of Faust. The easy thing to see in *Faust* is that the old scholar left his desk in pursuit of life. But what may not be as obvious was the fact that he was going out into life to separate life from books, which his scholarly life has made indistinguishable from each other. "Cheat my thought with words no more."<sup>38</sup> Uttered the old scholar. To find life is simultaneously to restore the clarity of "categories", life in one, books in another. What is real must be distinguished from what is intelligible. Of course, Dorian Gray was meanwhile gorging on the "yellow book" and turned it into his very life.

Following this thread of thoughts on the concept of "books", it may be useful to return to the question of "decadence" and asks why Faust, with as much carnal pleasures as he has pursued, was not a follower of it, whereas Dorian was. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno made the following remark regarding what contributed to decadence's emergence in art:

"Light" art as such, entertainment, is not a form of decadence. Those who deplore it as a betrayal of the ideal of pure expression harbor illusions about society... Light art has accompanied autonomous art as its shadow. It is the social bad conscience of serious art. The truth which the latter could not apprehend because of its social premises gives the former an appearance of objective justification. The split between them is itself the truth: it expresses at least the negativity of the culture which is the sum of both spheres. The antithesis can be reconciled least of all by absorbing light art into serious or vice versa.<sup>39</sup>

Although the two Frankfurt thinkers were mostly discussing the American culture industry, specifically Hollywood, this phenomenon may be as accurate in capturing the tensions between Faust and Dorian Gray. The corruption of modernity, as an aftermath of the democratization of arts in a series of revolutions, no longer wished to recognize the noble status of serious arts. Even in Goethe's time, the printing press and Reformation turned the Bible into a chapbook for all who cared to quote from. The holiest prayer invoked the name of god as much as the most vulgar curses before a tavern. In Dorian's times, the hierarchy of arts was further effaced. Even men like Jame Vane, with no appreciation for the theatre felt it proper to waltz around and comment on its scandalousness.<sup>40</sup> And thus was born the mischief of the "yellow book", a work that was in essence a quaint mishmash of serious observation and indulgent exploration of Paris' glamour. It absorbs "light art into serious art", rendering them indistinguishable. Dorian's mistake, whether willingly or not, was thus to turn the squalor of his life into a fine tragedy and made them all look like the delirious dream of the "yellow book". This may well be Wilde's own resolve when he claimed that "books are only good or bad". They were not organized into high or low, moral or immoral. They have collapsed into an irreversible flood of decadence.

## Conclusion

Returning to the thesis of this paper, and perhaps modifying it a little, it may be argued that Faust and Dorian Gray had a rather similar goal towards life. They both felt a certain discontent. For the old scholar, that discontent was expressed and resolved in the most conventional and healthiest fashion: it is to find order to life, to separate books from where they cannot reach and to find God and salvation which theology can only promise in words. Dorian Gray's discontents, rather perversely,

began with where Faust ended. He was wearied with the order of things, with how morality was so radically separated from arts and theatre so clearly demarcated from life. His answer is to collapse them, to give them closures into each other, to break them into that delirious mixture of all things beautiful. In a way, decadence is dissolution, of values and morals into experience. It is the creeping shadow of Goethe's romantic triumph of reason and salvation, yet they also look so alike.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, (London: Penguin, 2005), Act II, Scene III.

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 2003), chapter 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Wilde, chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Goethe, Act V, Scene V.

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Steiner, "5. Faust and the Problem of Evil", *The Rudolf Steiner Archive*, <https://rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA273/English/UNK1930/19171103p01.html>

<sup>9</sup> Act V, Scene V.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 10.

<sup>11</sup> Chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> 1.

<sup>13</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, (San Francisco: City Lights Publishing, 1986), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Act IV, Scene V.

<sup>15</sup> Act V, Scene V.

<sup>16</sup> Chapter IX.

<sup>17</sup> Bataille, 144.

<sup>18</sup> Dominick Rossi, "Parallels in Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* and Goethe's *Faust*", *CLA Journal*, vol. 13, 1963, 189.

<sup>19</sup> Act III, Scene IV.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Act IV, Scene I.

<sup>22</sup> Act IV, Scene III.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> 46.

<sup>25</sup> Maho Hidaka, "Play on Life: Exploring the Theatrical World of 'The Picture of Dorian Gray'", *Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol.21 (2006), 98.

<sup>26</sup> 76.

<sup>27</sup> 80.

<sup>28</sup> 83.

<sup>29</sup> 15.

<sup>30</sup> 17.

<sup>31</sup> Chapter 11.

<sup>32</sup> Chapter 11.

<sup>33</sup> Vincent Sherry, "The Codes of Decadence: Modernism and Its Discontents", *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Chapter 12

<sup>35</sup> Act V, Scene I

<sup>36</sup> Act V, Scene III

<sup>37</sup> 3.

<sup>38</sup> 15.

<sup>39</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 107.

<sup>40</sup> Chapter XII.

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