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# Communicating homoerotic desire in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Paul J. Sisko  
*Lehigh University*

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Wilde's The  
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Communicating Homoerotic Desire in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

by

Paul J. Sisko

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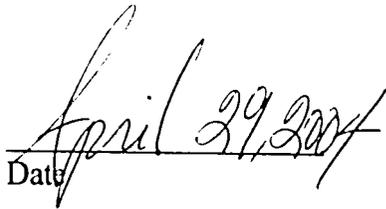
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Thesis Title: Communicating Homoerotic Desire in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

By: Paul J. Sisko

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of requirements for the Master of Arts/Science.

  
Date

Rosemary Munnhenk

Barry Kröj (Dept. Chair)

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## Thesis Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate homoerotic pleasure and communication, deprived of “voice” in late 19<sup>th</sup> century print, as expressed through objects in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I propose that while Wilde does explore how words operate upon the body as objects in the book, he is equally concerned with just the reverse: how *objects* can alter, effect, and fill in for *words*, at times transcending human language in ways that express elements of the psyche we cannot “voice”—the prime example of such unvocalization being, in Wilde’s text, *homoerotic desire as expressly signified*. The aim of this essay, then, will be to explore Wilde’s use of objects as a type of homosexual argot—in other words, as a language of gay subjectivity defined in print during the 1890’s not only as something which dare not, but *could not* “speak its name—in three ways : in terms of how objects bridge “silenced” gay desire in a ways that nonverbally maintain the signifying chain of speech; conversely, how objects supplement language for Dorian both in terms of conversation and analytical thought *precisely at the moments when Dorian’s ethical behavior is called into question*, suggesting that gay desire as mediated through objects perforce divests its subjects of their humanity; and lastly, as both an extension and literalization of this point, in terms of how Dorian rids himself of conscience as a function of speech and *becomes an object*.

## Communicating Homoerotic Desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

“Consider the object for a moment: the object as a humble and receptive supporting actor, as a sort of psychological slave or confidant—the object as directly experienced in traditional daily life and illustrated throughout the history of western art down to our day.”

—Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*

The prose of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is, as has been widely discussed, exemplary of the Continental “jewelled style” ascribed to the book Lord Henry gives Dorian within the story, exemplary to a degree either stridently conscious or magnificently unconscious on Wilde’s part. Yet one wonders why, despite its assignation both to Wilde’s novel and to a genre complexly concerned with form, the term is often treated as a mere synonym for “fancy”—and derisively at that. Rather, it seems to imply a material—one might say a *textural*—effect to words which acts upon the reader’s mind merely as a ricochet first and foremost thrilling the body. As scholar Renu Bora puts it, “textural codes (as expressed by/in words) imply [corresponding] bodily, manual, fecal, and digestive thrills which pack innuendo into the sharpest, roughest crevices of pleasurable topographies and topologies” (95). While Bora’s argument addresses the issue inversely in terms of Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* (in other words, in terms of how textures of the body convert into linguistic relationships involving desire), the idea here carries over nicely to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in suggesting that language, particularly written language (that is, language made

material), enters the body *through the nervous system*, not the *intellect*, in ways that give it all the sensory properties of a physical substance. The point, then, is clear: for Wilde, the primary effect of words is to evoke expression *from the body*, wounding it (words making the body “cry”), pleasuring it (words serving as sexual stimuli), or perhaps, as was widely the case for Wilde’s Victorian audience, revolting it (words making one nauseous). Thus, the “jewelled style” is more than an epithet for fancy writing: it connotes words as reified in and through their effects on the body as *sensory material objects*. Fair enough—yet what I’d like to propose in taking this argument a step further is that while Wilde does explore the “jewelled style” in terms of how words operate upon the body as objects, he is equally concerned with just the reverse: how *objects* can alter, effect, and fill in for *words*, at times transcending human language in ways that express elements of the psyche we literally cannot “voice”—the prime example of such unvocalization being, in Wilde’s text, *homoerotic desire as expressly signified*. The aim of this essay, then, will be to explore Wilde’s use of objects as a type of homosexual argot—in other words, as a language of gay subjectivity defined in print during the 1890’s not only as something which “dare not,” but *could not* “speak its name”<sup>1</sup>—in three ways: in terms of how objects bridge “silenced” gay desire in a ways that nonverbally maintain the signifying chain of speech; conversely, how objects

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<sup>1</sup> From the closing line of Lord Alfred Douglas’s poem “Two Loves”

supplement language for Dorian both in terms of conversation and analytical thought *precisely at the moments when Dorian's ethical behavior is called into question*, suggesting that gay desire as mediated through objects perforce divests its subjects of their humanity; and lastly, as both an extension and literalization of this point, in terms of how Dorian rids himself of conscience as a function of speech and *becomes an object*-- not, as one would presume, in his "prayer" to his portrait at the book's beginning, but as a process culminating in the murder of Basil, the death of whom represents the erasure of spoken homoerotic desire in a world where such desire may signify itself only through objects.

As a way of stepping into these ideas, it seems useful to frame them with some thoughts on how objects work in relation to language as expressed in Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects*. The book opens with the compelling suggestion that, like words (structurally made up of phonemes and morphemes), objects might be considered as being composed of "technemes" which yield an *object language*, both in terms of how the right arrangement of an object's parts allows it to "announce" its function (the "hum" of a microwave, the "roar" of a vacuum-cleaner, etc.), as well as how objects relate *to each other* in signifying schemes they have taught *us* to complete (washer-dryer, refrigerator-stove-dishwasher, etc.). Guided, then, by questions of "how the language of objects is spoken" and "by what means this speech system (or this system which falls somewhere between language and speech) overrides the [human]

linguistic system” (10-11), Baudrillard concludes that:

A genuine revolution has taken place on the everyday plane: *objects have now become more complex than human behavior relative to them*. Objects are more and more highly differentiated—our gestures less and less so. To put it another way: objects are no longer surrounded by the theater of gesture in which they used to be simply the various roles; instead, their emphatic goal-directedness has very nearly turned them into the actors...in a process in which *man* is merely the role, or the spectator. (56)

For Baudrillard, postmodern human desire has receded from the very gestures which constitute it and therefore from the burden of its own expression, transferring expression to the realm of objects. Such an assertion, though, is far from endemic to the postmodern world, being temptingly applicable to understanding gay subjectivity in Wilde’s novel, and it is perhaps then with the notion of objects as surrogate *actors of desire* that we can start analyzing how they work in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Indeed, the opening scene is the perfect place to begin:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink flowering thorn.

As Wilde continues:

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddlebags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily *immobile*, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion.

The sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence round the dusty gilt horns of the straggling woodbine, seemed to make the *stillness* more oppressive. The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ. (1, my emphases)

This scene depicts a paradise of pure objectality, a world propelled—one might even say “carried out”—by the symphonic integration of object discourse, objects whose sounds overlap in what is overwhelmingly a melody signifying *luxury*, whose movements both unburden the human subject of energy (in this case Henry) and entertain him in a kind of dance, his sole function being to read their interactions and translate them into aesthetic (and what I shall argue is progressively homoerotic) delight. Thus, the world presented here is one whose syntax is wholly “hijacked”—and by no means unpleasantly—by the technematic language of objects. Concordantly, note how it is only objects that are assigned active verbs: it is the scent of roses that “fills” the studio, the wind that “stirs” the trees and “comes” through the door, silk curtains that “stretch,” bees that “murmur,” and London that “roars.” Lord Henry, for his part, is the passive receiver of these actions—while it is by him they are “caught,” he offers no tangible human response (a laugh, or even a smile, for example) by which to add to (and probably for him mar) this discourse of objects.

Thus, Henry is the “happy” prefiguration of what Baudrillard morosely forecasts for the human future: the reduction of man to a merely specular function within a self-sufficient world of objects. The difference, of course, is that Wilde sees

this function (as suggested in Henry) as a human ascent into pure creative imaginativity, a recalibration of mind where man's purpose would be to explore new aesthetic combinations of the world around him—thus realizing, in turn, the highest purpose of humanity, its apotheosis in living life as dedicated (and in turn dedicating life) to beauty. Baudrillard, offering a perspective nearly a century later rooted in his observations of late capitalism, sees this function in opposite terms: as a paraplegic one wherein man has steadily transferred all of his desires and functions to machines and hence become obsolete in relation to them. Yet we must remember, at the risk of getting sidetracked, that this opening scene is consciously utopian (that is, unrealizable) for Wilde except in glimpses, and that he is well aware of the fact that the language the world operates in is crisscrossed by that of objects and that of humans in complex and perhaps dangerous ways, ways which Wilde explores through Dorian's relation to gay desire as being *object-based*.

Having laid out the above arguments, it seems important now to contextualize them within the contemporary print culture of Wilde's novel—a print culture that rigorously sought to signify Wilde himself (as coterminous with his characters) as Other to a field of signification huddled tightly in terms of *humanity/nature*. Ed Cohen, in his book *Talk on the Wilde Side*, proves useful here, analyzing journalistic interpretation of Wilde during his trial with the Marquess of Queensbury:

The gestural significance [by print] attributed to Queensbury's 'arms folded' is defined over and against Wilde's 'hands limply crossed,' so that the latter can be read as a negation of the male propriety that impels the former...hence, the depictions of the two men come both to personify the structures of difference through which the newspapers articulated their narratives and to represent the differences in question as the negation of middle-class male norms. (143)

Even more suggestively, Cohen goes on to claim that such negatively "coded"

depictions of Wilde's behavior successively came to be coded as sheer *negation*, stating that:

Since the allegation made against Wilde both in the libel itself and in the subsequent 'justification' [came to be] defined in the dominant representational codes of the period as literally unrepresentable, they therefore could not actually appear in print on the pages of the newspapers that purported to tell their story. Hence the possibility of signifying these allegations *negatively* as the *absence* of what was precisely most representable, i.e., the dominant norms, allowed the newspapers to circumvent those very representational structures that would have otherwise rendered their coverage of the trial both unintelligible and unmarketable. [Thus], the newspapers developed a compensatory set of signifying practices to invoke the unprintable signifier without naming it directly. For, in order to mitigate the semantic and commercial consequences that the exclusion of the word "sodomy" [as synonymous with homoerotic desire] threatened to produce, the journalistic texts constructed a complex web of signifiers *that endlessly deferred specifying the unnamed and unnameable accusations while explicitly denoting them as an absent site of signification*. In other words, they negatively characterized Wilde's behavior as "immoral," "immodest," "unnatural," "improper," "indecent," "unrespectable," "disreputable," etc, in order to avoid having to specify positively the actual sexual acts named in Queensbury's defense. Instead, they portrayed Wilde's acts, and ultimately his "person" [again as necessarily associated with his characters, passages of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* being in fact used by the prosecution in cross-examination of Wilde], in terms of the overdetermined absence of those qualities that ideologically defined normative middle-class behavior (143-44).

I have quoted at length here in emphasizing Cohen's view of homoerotic desire as

depicted in print as being *not human*, or, to be more precise, as devoid of those qualities which constitute the hegemonically endorsed criteria of “humanity.” Yet it should be added that, while Cohen views this move toward the nonhuman representation of such desire as blooming in relation to press demands *qua* Wilde’s trial, it was equally present years earlier in contemporary reviews of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. For instance, Samuel Henry Jeyes speaks of Wilde’s characters in *St. James’s Gazette* as “Puppy No. 1 (the Art Puppy), Puppy No. 2 [presumably Lord Henry], and Puppy No. 3 (the Doll Puppy),” dismissing their humanity into the category “animal” while more importantly lumping them together as “mere catchpenny revelations of *the nonexistent*” (my emphasis). In addition, a reviewer from *The Daily Chronicle* sees them by turns as “moral pestilence incarnate” (disease personified) and “cool, calculating, consciencless characters, evolved logically” (reason/mathematics personified), while an unsigned review in *Theatre* dismisses them forthright as “cultured puppets” with an “utter lack of true humanity”<sup>2</sup>. Wilde, arguing against yet unshocked by such critical evaluations of his characters, was clearly attuned to the language of the journalistic milieu in/through which his book would be interpreted, especially insofar as such language was attributed by English reviewers to earlier works of French Decadence—the very mode upon which Wilde’s work was modeled. Thus, it

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<sup>2</sup> All editorial excerpts taken from *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pgs. 67-82

seems reasonable to infer that Wilde anticipated the nonrepresentability of homoerotic desire as coded either “positive” or “human” in English prose while writing *Dorian Gray*, shifting the awareness of and the response to such nonrepresentation from trial-based print to Wilde’s composition itself. Yet I’d like to further complicate this argument by suggesting that the turn in Wilde’s prose to object-expression in mediating desire between men is a *countermove* to both the *established and anticipated exile of gay desire in the language of print culture*, operating on two levels: first, as a zone of expression appropriated so as to allow, in guerrilla-fashion, for the cultural representation of homoerotic desire in print (that is to say, as made *substantive*—not *absent*—within signification through a discourse of objects); and secondly, as a reinscription of such journalistic practices aimed at revealing their harmful effects on gay subjectivity as relegated to the “nonhuman.”

An obvious reading of Dorian as a bridge between object and human discourse in terms of male beauty and gay attraction toward “the self” would of course focus on him mainly in how he views his portrait; however, what seems to be in danger of neglect in light of an overriding concern for Dorian’s relationship to the painting are the subtle ways in which Wilde explores how objects work on, speak for, and are used by Dorian in a manner that intertwines them with the “speaking” of homoeroticism. Take, for example, something so easily glanced over as this passage, which occurs just after Henry delivers his first speech to Dorian on the transitoriness of human beauty:

Dorian Gray listened, open-eyed and wondering. The spray of lilac fell from his hand upon the gravel. A furry bee came and buzzed round it for a moment. Then it began to scramble all over the oval stellated globe of the tiny blossoms. He watched it with that strange interest in trivial things that we try to develop when things of high import make us afraid, or when we are stirred by some new emotion *for which we cannot find expression*, or when some thought that terrifies us lays sudden *siege to the brain* and calls on us to *yield*. After a time the bee flew away. He saw it creeping into the stained trumpet of a Tyrian convolvulus. The flower seemed to quiver, and then swayed gently to and fro. (24, my emphases)

Here, the bee functions as a signifier of what remains unsaid in the linguistic transaction; it “technematically” fills the gap in the human language involved and thus keeps the signifying chain intact with an object supplement, allowing Henry to know he has “stirred” emotion in Dorian with enough surety to proclaim (without asking) “You are glad to have met me, Mr. Gray” (24). The point to note is that Wilde does not simply sit Dorian in silence while giving us a description of the boy’s thoughts that as opaque to or just “inferred” by Henry; he gives a detailed description of the object world as it articulates Dorian’s silence into metaphor, metaphor as “readable” to Henry as it is to us; the bees’ pollination of the flower, causing it to “quiver, then sway gently to and fro” signifies the success of Henry’s psychic pollination of Dorian without the latter needing to confess that he has been so affected—affected, that is, in terms of a metaphoric signification by natural objects *of homoerotic entry*. Thus, even in this short scene, we see how Wilde’s novel is beginning both to illustrate and complicate Baudrillard’s notion of object language: while the discourse of objects is aesthetically

(or, for Baudrillard, “functionally”) legible unto itself, it also completes human speech (presented here as written dialogue) in ways the latter is culturally unequipped to inscribe, something a man so skilled as Henry in “reading”/“speaking” homoerotic desire through objects would of course notice. This scene, then, so brief and yet so rich, makes us wonder just how we are “spoken” by the contexts, textures, and actions of the things with which we interact as relating to those aspects of subjectivity—aspects in Dorian related to *sexuality*—that have no space in heteronormative language. Are we made transparent, cast in a kind of constant X-ray, by the objects with which we involve ourselves, particularly in terms of what we are uninclined or unable to speak about our identity? Wilde seems to suggest in these introductory moments that the answer is yes, and several scenes that follow elaborate this point, especially insofar as they show how *ethics* operate in relation to objects and problematized when gay subjectivity finds in them its sole means of expression.

Dorian’s ethical “development” through the novel is closely bound with his growing ability to read, arrange, and deploy objects in what becomes for him a “tactical” language of *evasion*—evasion of ethical choice and moral responsibility as corresponding to “sins which dare not speak their names,” sins presumably of an explicit homoerotic nature or rising from a frustrated “guerilla” signification of homoerotic desire through objects. However, this is jumping ahead a bit, for as we have seen, the naive Dorian of the early portions of the book is more so read

“through”—or one might say, technematically “spoken” in unconscious ways—by the objects *around* him, though even in the garden scene, there is a hint of Dorian’s *willed* retreat into the language of objects. The technematic speech of “bee-lilac-flower” works as a kind of psychic walkman for Dorian, allowing him to “tune out” Henry—and in turn distance himself from the homoerotic impulses instilled in him in that moment—by focusing on what the objects around him “say,” even if that this point he cannot understand their “speech” as a usable—and desirable-- homosexual argot the way Henry can.

Moving ahead into the novel, a series of examples show Dorian’s growing technematic literacy and accordant control over objects as signs of homoerotic expression. In this sense, another dismissively decorative line on Wilde’s part takes on new meaning: after having at length been made conscious of his beauty’s power, as well as of the delights of context and texture, Dorian “lean[s] back in his chair” while “look[ing] at Henry over heavy clusters of purple-lipped irises that [stand] in the center of [a] table between them,” asking “what do you mean by [what it means to be] good, Harry?” (64). The line is ingenious—for in looking at Henry *over* the flowers, Dorian strategically aligns (if not substitutes) his mouth with the “purple lips” of the irises, demonstrating his growing awareness of how he can make objects speak homoerotic innuendo *for* him. Indeed, *asking* Henry the question is redundant at this point, for the latter would merely have to turn and glimpse the tableau to hear the question spoken

technematically in Dorian's positioning of the flowers—flowers, of course (and purple irises at that), recontextualizing speech between men here outside of heternormative meanings.

A few paragraphs later, Dorian performs a similar gesture: after Henry telling Dorian that he “represents the *sins* [Dorian] has never had the courage to commit” (my emphasis), Dorian exclaims “what nonsense!” *while* “taking a light from a fire-breathing silver Dragon that the waiter had placed on the table” (65). Here Dorian makes the dissimulation of his words intentionally, if not egregiously, apparent to Henry by speaking *past* them *through* the object on the table: in having the light of the “dragon” replace his mouth as he mutters the words, Dorian in that moment disavows them not only in the “sinning” technemacy of smoking [lighter-flame-cigarette], but in the Luciferian values spoken by the flame itself-- revolt, transgression, etc, in this case of normative sexual boundaries, heat literally and figuratively “happening” between men in this scene. What we see, then, is a growing skill on Dorian's part in making the object world speak for him by proxy, an idea underscored by Baudrillard when he states that “apart from the uses to which we put them at any particular moment, objects...have another aspect which is intimately bound up with the subject: no longer simply material bodies...they become *mental precincts* over which [the subject] holds sway, they become things of which [he] *is the meaning*” (85, my emphasis). However, as Wilde's story progresses, what it comes to call into question is just how much control or “sway”

Dorian maintains in making objects “things of which he is the meaning”—for the more he uses them, the more the playful cleverness of the examples cited falls into a *narcotic* dependency on objects to “speak away” his conscience and the frustration of unrealizable openly expressed homoerotic desire, an addiction that traces the path by which Dorian himself *becomes an object*.

Wilde’s novel is peppered-through with images of overt drug use: after all, the story opens with Henry taking drags on a “heavy opium-tainted cigarette” (8) and even places Dorian near the end in a dockside opium slum. Yet the subtler function of opium in this book is in its juxtaposition as coarse analogue to the narcotic effect of *objects themselves*, at least insofar as Dorian comes to “read” them. An early instance of this drug-like quality to objects is seen when Dorian’s anxiety over how he has treated Sibyl Vane (behavior resulting at least in part, we might infer, from how she has failed Dorian as a means of “impressing” Henry) is pacified through concentrating on his “Sevres china” and “olive-sating curtains,” the considered smoothness of which smooths Dorian’s hectic inner speech and lets him calmly eat breakfast (74-5). Here, the technemantic language of a bedroom bespeaking “smooth” (curtains-china-sheets, etc.) supplants the language of Dorian’s conscience in a way he readily, if not entirely consciously, embraces. Curious here is Wilde’s reinsertion of a bee at this moment—the third instance of one in the novel so far—whose buzzing corresponds with Dorian feeling “perfectly happy” (75) and whose first meaning in the novel connotes Dorian’s

burgeoning gay subjectivity. The steady, smooth, humming cadence of the objects around him is thus translated by Dorian in a *reading gesture* equivalent to “shooting-up,” effacing his guilt over Sibyl by sensory immersion in the objects around him and introjection of *their language* in replacement of his own. Hence, as Baudrillard says, “objects are thus in the strict sense of the word mirrors, for the images they reflect can only follow upon one another without ever contradicting one another. And indeed, as mirrors, objects are perfect, precisely because they send back not real images, but desired ones”(89)—that is to say, not Sibyl (whether dead or alive) as a site of heterosexual ardor, but the pleasures and freedoms Dorian associates with Henry. Thus, this quote sums up nicely how we see objects beginning to work for Dorian as illustrated in the above scene: as supplying a desired, supplemented self made “safe” from the ethical freighting of human language, yet one made increasingly non-ethical (for we cannot call objects “unethical”) by virtue of the domain it inhabits: one in which authentic desire can signify only in and as objects.

Perhaps the best example of Dorian consciously beginning to “shed” his ethical self in relation to an “*object-ive*” gay subjectivity occurs when Henry’s “poisonous” book arrives along with a newspaper write-up of Sibyl’s death. After reading the article, which talks of “considerable sympathy” being felt for the young actress (note the admission, if not precondition, of an ethical response in the heteronormative language discussing her death—the language, of course, of print journalism). Dorian’s

conscience reciprocates a response, causing him to “frown” at the “horrible reality” and “ugliness” of her suicide (97). Within moments, though, Dorian’s attention is drawn to “...the yellow book that Lord Henry had sent him. What was it, he wondered. He went towards the little pearl-coloured octagonal stand, that had always looked to him like the work of some strange Egyptian bees that wrought in silver, and taking up the volume, flung himself into an armchair, and began to turn over the leaves. After a few minutes he became *absorbed*” (97, my emphasis). It’s fascinating how Dorian’s attention is instantly subsumed from ethical anxiety to “wonder” at a stand filigreed with bees (!), a stand which leads his eye up a ladder of texture to the “yellowness” of Henry’s book. Again then, we have a technemantic setup announcing a pathway out of conscience into ornamental detachment, or rather into a place where conscience can be suspended ornamentally outside the self as one more *object offered up*, not *imposed*, for contemplation. For Henry’s book, parading “all the *sins* of the world in dumb show” (97, my emphasis), strips them of a didactic element not only in terms of the prose conveying them (language purely Symbolist or “objectist”), but also from demanding of Dorian any ethical response. Thus, if the growing line separating human language from object language is an ethical one, Henry’s book can be deemed only another *object* into which Dorian can narcotically vanish and experience desire without the burden of expressing it (*objects* being, of course, the only things in the world *free from producing their own expression*), a fact evident in the excrescent opium-like

“yellowness” of a cover that in turn sums up content: impressions spoken in the language and indulged in in terms of objectality, not ideas (or sets of ideas) set to act on the human conscience.

Thus, in living out the book as a sort of program, Dorian comes increasingly to replace human relationships—namely the homoerotically charged ones involving Henry and Basil— with *ethically anaesthetic relations to objects*, for both forms of connection are *synonymous* to the point that Dorian can no longer tell the difference between the two. Objects offer him a “means of forgetfulness” that he grows unable to refuse (109), an exoskeletal enjoyment in “mere existence” (mere here denoting an existence defined by the willed subtraction of ethical choice) reflected in the catalogue of objects Dorian collects and in which he comes to orient his self-understanding. For instance:

On one occasion he took up the study of jewels, and appeared at a costume ball at Anne de Joyeuse, Admiral of France, in a dress covered with five hundred and sixty pearls. This taste enthralled him for years, and, indeed, may be said never to have left him. He would often spend a whole day settling and resettling in their cases the various stones that he had collected, such as the olive-green chrysoberyl that turns red by lamplight, the cymophane with its wire-like line of silver, the pistachio-coloured peridot, rose-pink and wine-yellow topazes, carbuncles of fiery scarlet with tremulous four-rayed stars, flame-red cinnamon stones, orange and violet spinels, and amethysts with their alternate layers of ruby and sapphire. He loved the red gold of the sunstone, and the moonstone’s pearly whiteness, and the broken rainbow of the milky opal. He procured from Amsterdam three emeralds of extraordinary size and richness of colour, and had a turquoise *de la vieille roche* that was the envy of all connoisseurs. (105)

Or, consider this passage:

And for a whole year, he sought to accumulate the most exquisite specimens that

he could find of textile and embroidered work, getting the dainty Delhi muslins, finely wrought with gold- thread palmates, and stitched over with iridescent beetles' wings; the Daccu gauzes, that from their transparency are known in the east as "woven air," and "running water," and "evening dew"; strange figured cloths from Java; elaborate yellow Chinese hangings; books bound in tawny satins or fair blue silks, and wrought with *fleur de lys*, birds, and images; veils of laces worked in Hungary point; Sicilian brocades, and stiff Spanish velvet; Georgian work with its gilt coins, and and Japanese *Foukousas* with their gree-toned golds and their marvelously-plumaged birds. (108)

What is remarkable about these sections, as Renu Bora might suggest, is not so much their sensual indulgence in texture itself as a language of appetite (the "taste" for jewels, for, instance, that never leaves Dorian), as it is the way they *through* language mirror Dorian's view of the world: as a place simply to be transcoded into objects, objective origins, and objective effects, without the interference of ethical (or ethical usages of) language. Dorian does not imaginatively engage these objects into higher structures of meaning *qua* beauty—rather, he just records them with purposeless enjoyment in a technemetic mapping of the world. Such is the effects of a culture that forces homosexuality into signification within the artificial, and its effect is devastating; for in conflating gay desire and human sources of that desire with things material, Dorian *becomes one* with the objects he collects in a divestment of human impulses and responsibilities, proving Baudrillard's eerie assertion that "every collection comprises a succession of items. but the last in the set is [always] the person of the collector" (91). This is the movement, then, toward fully becoming an object that primes Dorian for the killing of Basil and for, by extension, his permanent leap

from human to object space.

Upon Dorian's unveiling of the portrait to Basil just before the latter's death, the language of the two characters is carefully contrasted by Wilde so as to emphasize Basil's humanity and downplay Dorian's. While Basil implores Dorian in the language of sympathy, religious hope, and forgiveness (both human and divine, yet always laden with a *spoken gay guilt*), Dorian stands in aloof silence, "smelling a flower taken from his coat pocket" and transferring his conscience to the object where it is immobilized, having no place in the technemetic order (121). It is thus, then, with "no real sorrow and no real joy," a zero-figure of human expression, that Dorian is able to explain blankly to Basil what has happened to him, how he has sinned, and how the portrait has changed. Most interesting here, however, in what is at first glance an easy metaphor, is Dorian's "crushing" of the flower as he delivers this final speech. No longer is there creative interplay between human and object languages as employed by Dorian in his younger days: here, he speaks the object just as the object speaks him—that is, in pure transparency. The crushed flower *is* Dorian's speech, just as his speech *is* the crushed flower—they say the same thing in what for anyone else would constitute a harmony, but which as spoken by Dorian is one fused, uniform language between man and object. Thus, by transferring his ethical conscience to the object he holds (an act done by his having learned to share its language perfectly), Dorian reifies and crushes for good that which makes him human *in the form of* the flower—that is, not just his subjectivity as a

queer man, but his subjectivity in *all* the registers that make him a person. This gesture in turn accounts for the “strange calm” with which he murders Basil, a moment followed for him by “such quiet” in a world no longer populated by life or the ethics that shape it, but by the pure objectality of *things* (123): Basil becomes a “thing seated in a chair...like a wax image,” equivalent to a “lamp of Moorish workmanship, made of dull silver inlaid with arabesques of burnished steel” which Dorian ponders immediately after slaying him (124). Yet in terms of the cultural context coding his desire as “non-representable,” Dorian has simply followed its logic through to the psychotic extreme: Basil, representing homosexuality as signified within heteronormative language, *cannot exist*, and Dorian sees to it that he doesn’t. Thus, gay subjectivity as made object-ive is literalized here in the harshest terms: all things human have been sucked into the ethical vacancy of object space, including Dorian himself, and it is this scene that constitutes the moment of his true death, not the final “stabbing” of the portrait— a moment more interesting in how it underscores this climax than as a denouement in itself.

An objection arguing that Dorian retains humanity beyond Basil’s murder might be made on the ground that he exhibits great rage toward his portrait at the novel’s end. This seems reasonable enough—yet in his final “yell” and rush at the painting, might we not better read him as an object exhibiting *force* as opposed to *rage*, force heading on a trajectory born at the moment of Basil’s death (an event led up to by Dorian’s exclusion

from human language and its attendant capacity for ethics)—or more simply, as physics would have it, as an object, like all objects, seeking to dispossess itself of energy and reach a perfect non-energy state: the state of inertia, or, in human terms, death?

Evidence for this reading is, I believe, to be found in the closing line of the book, which tells us that is “only upon examination of [Dorian’s] rings” that his servants can identify him. Thus, Dorian as a person winds up a sequence of technemes in the end from which all human semblance has departed, and he is “readable” only as such, echoing well his transformation into an object when Basil dies—an object made such in the progressive exclusion of gay desire from human discourse.

In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard ponders “whether man can ever use objects to set up a language that is more than a discourse addressed to himself” (105). Clearly, Wilde’s novel demonstrates that this is possible in psychologically complex ways, while also upholding the supposition in the claim that objects are for us our main means of self-understanding. In relation to this question, I have left largely undiscussed what I feel has been *overdiscussed*—namely, Dorian’s relationship to his portrait—in an effort to show how Wilde works in subtler, profuse ways *throughout* the book to explore our psychological comportments toward objects—especially insofar as they are the prime mode of expression for gay subjectivity as represented in the novel—all the while showing how human language sets itself “above” objects only to rely on them repeatedly in completion of its expression. Perhaps, then, the greater question to

ask is somewhat of a reversal Baudrillard's: in other words, whether we can ever use *language* in ways that are discursively salient without the supplementation of *objects*? Whatever the answer may be, what *is* made clear in Wilde's novel is a need on our part to think harder about the boundaries we draw—boundaries physical, emotional, intellectual, and *sexual*—between ourselves and objects if we are truly to understand how we relate to desire, gay or otherwise, as an effect of language.

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## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Paul John Sisko

**Place & Date of Birth:** March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Wilkes-Barre PA

**Names of Parents:** Paul Mark Sisko and Mary Elizabeth Sisko

**Institutions attended:** Moravian College (Freshman and Sophomore undergraduate years), Wilkes University, Lehigh University

**Degrees Conferred:** B.A. Summa Cum Laude from Wilkes University, April 2001 (also named Outstanding Graduate in the Arts for that year); M.A., Lehigh University, Spring 2004 (currently being completed)

**Conferences:** presented “Faustian Themes in Chuck Palahniuk’s Novels” (paper title) at Edinboro University of PA in April 2001 (conference title, “Postcards from the Future: The Chuck Palahniuk Project”); “Homosexuality in ‘The Gelded Lady’” (paper title) at Seton Hall University, March 2004 (conference title, “NJCEA Spring Conference”); “Communicating Desire in Henry James’s ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ (paper title) at CUNY, March 2004 (conference title, “Locating Love”)

**Publications:** “Homosexuality in ‘The Gelded Lady’” to be published this summer/fall in *American Notes and Queries*

**Teaching Experience:** Lehigh Eng. 001 and 002 courses (including titles like “Beauties and Beasts: Celebrity Image vs. Identity” and “Disappearance and Disguise”)

**END OF**

**TITLE**