

Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic Gothic: Walter Pater, Dark Enlightenment, and The Picture of Dorian Gray.

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Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic Gothic: Walter Pater, Dark Enlightenment, and *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*

John Paul Riquelme *

I. The 1890's

"J'ai soif de ta beauté."

--Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*¹

It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come.

--Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Gothic Chiaroscuro and Realism

The Picture of Dorian Gray proceeds against the background of Walter Pater's aesthetic writings, but also against Pater in a stronger sense.² It provides in narrative form a dark, revealing double for Pater's aestheticism that emerges from a potential for dark doubling and reversal within aestheticism itself. The duplication produces not a repetition of Pater but a new version of his views that says what he cannot or will not articulate, including a recognition of the dark dynamics of doubling and reversal that inhabit those views. That recognition includes the possibility that **[End Page 609]** the process of doubling and reversal will continue. In the novel, Wilde responds to Pater by projecting the dark implications of Pater's attitudes and formulations in a mythic Gothic narrative of destruction and self-destruction. Wilde simultaneously aestheticizes the Gothic and gothicizes the aesthetic. The merger is possible, and inevitable, because of the tendency of Gothic writing to present a fantastic world of indulgence and boundary-crossing and the tendency of the aesthetic, in Pater, to press beyond conventional boundaries and to recognize terror within beauty. As an avatar of Narcissus, Dorian Gray embodies both tendencies in a poisonous, self-negating confluence signifying madness. But the madness is not his alone. He shares it with others in the narrative and with the fantastic quality of his story. No one is immune from the madness and its effects. In this allegory about art, Wilde's book and its producer are themselves implicated. They cannot stand apart in a realm of clarity that is somehow insulated from the darkness they portray and embody. Despite the mannered elegance of the book's characters and its style, it sheds only partial light on its subject, which includes itself.

The novel's narrative concerns a dark and darkening recognition that transforms Dorian's life by actualizing a potential that was already there in his family, a potential that is one truth about British society.³ This dark enlightenment is rendered in a narrative that provides the equivalent of chiaroscuro, understood with reference to painting as a combination of light and clarity with enigmatic darkness and obscurity in a space that undermines the coherence and implied sanity of a representational geometry. By combining clarity and obscurity, often in a shallowly rendered space, chiaroscuro provides an alternative and a challenge to visual representations that rely on general illumination, the appearance of a coherent Cartesian geometry, and a vanishing point. The impression can be enigmatic or frightening for the person whose vision is impeded, because terror tends to arise when insufficient or uneven light creates a sense of disorientation and confusion. Edmund Burke makes this point in his treatise on the sublime and the beautiful.⁴ Things that go bump in the night scare us, especially if we cannot see them clearly and understand them by means of

familiar categories.

The alternative and the challenge to realism in Wilde's literary chiaroscuro concern realism's reliance on positive knowledge and on believable representations that create for the reader an impression of sanity, [End Page 610] intelligibility, and control. The narrative provides in the painting and the book a look at the dark as well as the light, at something disturbing that exceeds, as Gothic writing regularly does, the boundaries of realistic representation and the limits of bourgeois values. As a Gothic revisionary interpretation of Pater's late Romanticism, this particular instance of excess marks a turning point in literary history toward literary modernism. The reliance on doubling as a symptom of a darkness within both culture and the mind follows Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr...*




**OSCAR WILDE'S AESTHETIC
GOTHIC: WALTER PATER, DARK
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