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The Paroxysm of Exhaustion: A Study of Will Self's
Dorian: An Imitation (2002)

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE AUTHOR, CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF WILL SELF'S *DORIAN: AN IMITATION* (2002)

1.1. Will Self's Familial and Cultural Background

William Woodard Self was born in September 1961 in Westminster, London. The son of Peter John Otter Self, Professor of Public Administration at the London School of Economics, and Elaine Rosenbloom, a Jewish woman from Queens, New York, who worked as a publisher's assistant, Self was brought up in north London, between the suburbs of East Finchley and Hampstead Garden. The younger of two brothers, he grew up in the bosom of an accommodated family until the separation and subsequent divorce of his parents when he was only a teenager. He attended University College School, an independent school for boys in Hampstead, and Christ's College, Finchley, before going to Exeter College at the University of Oxford, to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics, graduating with a third class degree. As he told Mike Doherty in an interview, he only attended two lectures (n. p.). In spite of his pleasant class origins, Self soon started drinking and using drugs until he became a heroin addict. Still, since his youth, Self had evinced a remarkable passion for literature probably influenced by his mother's job in the publishing industry. In several interviews, Self has acknowledged his strong attachment to his father, who died in 1999. Indeed, Self's literary career seems to have been strongly influenced by both parents. According to M. Hunter Hayes, Self's point of departure as creative writer was his mother's death. The scholar argues that Will Self began writing due to "a combination of grief and a sense of relief at no longer having to worry about obtaining her approval or scorn with [his] literary endeavours" (10). Although in the interview with Doherty that took place in 2014, Will Self acknowledged that his mother's death was crucial for his literary career, he relativises her influence and

states that “the fact that [his] then wife was expecting [their] first child” (n. p.) was also highly relevant for his decision to start writing seriously.

As an avid reader since childhood, Self has been enormously influenced by writers such as J. G. Ballard and his “world view” or Louis-Ferdinand Cèline “for style” (Testard 2013, n. p.). He has also acknowledged in several interviews that he is somewhat biased against academics and, as a matter of fact, his early fiction was set into question by some scholars apparently because he did not have a degree in English. His literary career began at the tardy age of twenty five when he “got a job through a series of accidents running a small corporate publishing company” (Testard 2013, n. p.) just as his mother had done years before. During his stay at the company, he recognised having borne witness to the birth “of the modern production process” (Testard 2013, n. p.). What is more, throughout his literary career, Self has shown a permanent concern with modernity evinced, for example, in his “claim that literature can do the work of philosophy and function as a vehicle for ideas and concepts that treat the detritus of the world around us as its objects of study” (Matthews 3). In other words, Will Self might be defined as a “novelist of ideas” (Testard 2013, n. p.) genuinely interested in the problems of contemporary British society.

Following this line of thought, one of the main critics of Will Self’s *œuvre*, Graham Matthews, established six different fields of interest in his novels, when he defined him as an “author deeply preoccupied with issues pertaining to satire, psychiatry, medicine, gender, consumption and space” (6). In an interview with Testard conducted in 2012, the author himself acknowledged that in his first short-story collection, *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* (1991), he was “interested in satirizing and taking on psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and psychiatry [that is] the psy-professions and the body theory that lay behind them” (n. p.). Indeed, from early short-story collections like *Grey*

Area (1994), to the novels *Great Apes* (1997), *Walking to Hollywood* (2010) and *Umbrella* (2012), Self characteristically displays a steady satirical treatment of human pathologies, running all the spectrum from physical illnesses to mental disorders and including the role of psychiatrists too.

Leaving satire and medical issues aside, a great number of Self's novels also contain straightforward cultural and ideological concerns. In general, his novels tend to show Self's views on "aspects of contemporary British society, namely food, drugs and the market economy" (Matthews 115). Self's 1993 novel, *My Idea of Fun*, takes the form of a *Bildungsroman* and delves into the financial market system during the 1980s and 1990s, that is, the decade of Thatcherite apogee in Britain as well as of the worldwide dominance of neoliberal discourse. His first published novella, *The Sweet Smell of Psychosis* (1996) is an adaptation of Alexander Mackendrick's 1957 film, *Sweet Smell of Success*; and, as we will see, this adaptation is not an isolated instance in the author's career. In this novella, Will Self adapts Mackendrick's original film derivatively so as to "incorporate the exponential growth of media industries in the 1990s" (Matthews 125). In what concerns the issue of drugs in Self's career, the short-story collection *Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys* (1998) might be regarded as one of the best examples. As the author himself has often acknowledged, one of the main reasons why he accurately includes the "addiction" subject and drug-using terminology in his work is, in part, due to his own real-life experience. In this respect, special emphasis should be made on Self's second literary success, a prose fiction entitled *Cock and Bull* (1992), which is composed of two novellas. In spite of the fact that Self's *œuvre* is characterised by some recurrent key themes that make "his world [...] make sense in its own terms" (Matthews 3), *Cock and Bull* and *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) share an interest in gender issues that distinguishes them from the rest. As Matthews states, these novels deal with "Self's

exploration of sex, gender and sexuality in contemporary British society. In particular, [they] consider his preoccupation with questions of masculinity that are married to a consistently anti-essentialist approach that focuses on doing rather than being” (10). Still, this questioning of the validity of the outdated “collection of social signifiers typically associated with masculinity” (Matthews 93) and of the compatibility of masculinity with contemporary society and modern social values, can also be found in other fictions. In fact, Self’s approach to gender issues in contemporary Britain in his work as a whole evinces the influence of Judith Butler’s theoretical insights. As is well known, one of the major tenets of Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) is that there is an element of “performance” in the construction of gender. Her approach to gender, aiming at the withdrawal of binary categorisations of sex and gender, is postulated in her definition of performativity as “not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual,” and that “gender is performative [and] manufactured through a sustained set of acts” (Butler 15). Self shares with Butler the belief that gender is a social construction, an act and a performance, rather than an innate human feature. However, their opinions diverge in that, “unlike Butler, Self appeals to anatomical difference” (Matthews 92) when defining gender. It is perhaps for this reason that Self’s approach to gender has been so harshly criticised by the academia. Thus, for example, in an essay published in 2005, David Alderson tentatively discusses Self’s condition as straight in order to question his suitability to approach such a problematic issue in *Dorian* as the homosexual subculture of the 1980s and 1990s.

In historical terms, it is widely acknowledged that the Civil Rights Movement that took place in the United States during the decade of the 1960s was aimed at challenging the power relations between those who, until then, had remained oppressed —the African-Americans— and their white oppressors. However, this was not the only

revolutionary instance during that crucial decade. In fact, the 1960s was characterised by many social revolts and revolutionary attempts in several realms. For instance, in the 1970s, The Gay Liberation Movement, encouraged by the spirit of the former feminist waves as well as by the revolutionary enthusiasm of the 1960s, sought to “resist persecution and discrimination against a sexual minority, [and] to encourage gay people themselves to develop a pride in their sexual identities” (Widdowson 243), with the aim of gaining visibility in a deeply conservative society. All these struggles for human rights had progressive but at the same time triumphal consequences during the decade of the 1970s. However, the arrival of Thatcher in the United Kingdom and of Reagan in the United States provoked a widespread revival of social conservatism. In fact, the set of traditional dogmas implemented by these two politicians easily found majority support in a society which soon became homophobic and reactionary. Therefore, it can be argued that one of the main reasons why Self situated the action of *Dorian: An Imitation* in the last two decades of the twentieth century responds to a historical necessity. As Matthews puts it, the “widespread homophobia” (110) of those decades combines in the novel with the neoliberal politics of the Thatcherite programme. Yet another reason why the text focuses on these two decades is Self’s desire to question the social acceptance of same-sex partnership in contemporary British society. In other words, by taking his contemporary readers back to the 1970s, Self was allowing them to establish the critical distance they needed to determine whether homosexuality has really been accepted in present-day society or not.

1.2. Critical Approaches to the Relationship between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dorian: An Imitation*

After having considered the issues of sexuality and gender that must be taken into account in order to analyse *Dorian: An Imitation*, we should now focus on the interaction between

Self's text and Oscar Wilde's original. In fact, the novel plays with the reader in the sense that, as long as we are familiar with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), we will be able to grasp the aim and meaning of Self's rewriting. In an interview with Robert McCrum, Self, talking about the relationship between the two texts, described his novel as "an imitation [and] a homage. As a complete and professed rewrite of a classic, I think it's unique. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the prophecy and *Dorian* is the fulfilment" (McCrum n. p.).

It is widely acknowledged that, particularly since the 1980s, contemporary British fiction has been interested in looking back to the Victorian era and consequently, to its literature. As a matter of fact, this tendency in postmodernist literature originated an enormous amount of criticism from the 1990s onwards, when the term "neo-Victorian" was coined to describe a large number of contemporary British novels, including John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Julian Barnes' *Arthur and George* (2005), Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999) or Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). Consequently, the idea of neo-Victorian fiction will have a significant weight in my analysis of *Dorian*. In their study, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* (2010), Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn refer to this concept not only as a literary trend but also as a "cultural phenomenon" (8) in our contemporary age. These critics make a reference to the scholar Julie Sanders that might be particularly enlightening for the analysis of Will Self's *Dorian*. In her 2006 study, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Sanders argues that the Victorian and the postmodern era share several characteristics such as their interest in "questions of identity [and] repressed and oppressed modes of sexuality" (129). As Aleksandra Trynieka put it in a recent article, titled "The Revisionary Influence: Neo-Victorian Fiction and the Past Redeemed" (2015), "the recurring interest in nineteenth-century literature proves that Victorian

dilemmas are strongly enrooted in the contemporary world” (263). Trynieka highlights the contrast between past and present portrayed in postmodern revisions of canonical texts and argues that this contrast reveals a “mutual dependence and dialogic co-existence” (263) between the two texts.

Following this question of the interaction between two texts, already in 1993 Susana Onega pointed to the emergence of historiographic metafiction as a dominant British trend in the 1980s. Her insights are further developed in the path-breaking study, *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film* (2004), in which Christian Gutleben and Onega propose the term “refraction” to characterise the relationships between canonical and postmodernist texts. Drawing on Gary Saul Morson, Gutleben and Onega argue that unlike intertextuality or parody, which only focus on the result of the relation between the hypotext and the hypertext, the concept of refraction “designate[s] a double process involving the ways in which a text exploits and integrates both the reflections of a previous text *and* the new light shed on the original work by its rewriting.” (7; emphasis in the original). In the ensuing analysis of *Dorian: An Imitation*, I will have recourse to this notion of refraction with the aim of analysing the dialectical relationship between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Self’s rewriting. Together with this, I will also take into account Peter Widdowson’s insights on the subject in his ground-breaking essay “Writing Back: Contemporary Re-visionary Fiction” (2006). Widdowson provides some examples of what he calls “re-visionary” texts and establishes a set of characteristics that all these texts have in common. He defines “re-visionary fiction” as a “sub-genre [that] write[s] back to — indeed rewrite[s] — canonic texts from the past, and hence call[s] to account formative narratives that have been [...] central to the construction of our consciousness” (491). *Dorian* perfectly responds to this definition and does function as a re-visionary text. In fact, the critic himself shares this belief throughout

his essay, as he chose Self's novel in order to illustrate his postulations. However, the process of re-vision might not be so simple as Widdowson's definition might lead readers to believe since, as José María Yebra argues, "the interaction between texts is not linear, but rather complex and multidirectional" (232). In fact, re-visionary texts have a series of features that, together with the aforementioned ideas on neo-Victorian fiction and the process of refraction, complicate the definition of Self's text.

The publication, in 2010, of Louisa Yates' essay, "But it's Only a Novel, Dorian: Neo-Victorian Fiction and the Process of Re-vision" brought about an essential point of departure in the critical analysis of Self's *Dorian*. The critic elaborates on Widdowson's notion of re-visionary fiction and on the characteristics of the contemporary neo-Victorian trend in literature before applying them to her analysis of Self's novel. She also discusses the concept of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 1988) and argues that its "principles are readily applicable to neo-Victorian literature" (187). However, she identifies various new tendencies that attest to the existence of "different impulses resident in the neo-Victorian genre" (188). In other words, she distinguishes different types of neo-Victorian rewritings of canonical texts and states that those texts dealing with "Victorian tropes and conventions" have been variously labelled as "neo-Victorian, post-Victorian [...] or faux Victorian" (188). These trends within the neo-Victorian genre will be taken into account in the following analysis of *Dorian* since not only the novel restores the spirit of a Victorian canonical text, but also, "refracts" contemporary anxieties about similar issues tackled by Oscar Wilde by establishing the setting of the novel in the Thatcherite age.

2. THE FORM AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF *DORIAN: AN IMITATION*

After having considered the possible critical approaches to *Dorian* in terms of its interaction with Oscar Wilde's original, I will focus on the formal aspects of Will Self's text as well as on its relation with the cultural context of the novel. It is widely acknowledged that many contemporary writers use playfulness as one of their main stylistic devices. As Yebra convincingly argues, the formal aspects of Will Self's text are strongly related to the dominant artistic discourse in the "era of simulation" (231). Following this, the analysis of the novel will discuss the problematisation of the relationship between reality and fiction at two different levels: the textual and the artistic. Firstly, Roland Barthes' notion of "the death of the author" (1967) will be essential for the following discussion of the disappearance of ontological barriers in the novel. In other words, the loss of reality produced by the metafictional turn at the end of the novel, through which readers are confronted with the "real" authority of the text, will be an essential point of discussion. This issue goes along with a great part of Self's literary career as his fiction usually "incorporates unreliable narrators, framing narratives, metafictional and autofictional devices in order to address themes such as drug abuse, madness, dreams and illusions, and to collapse the distinction between inner and outer space" (Matthews 4). Secondly, I will have recourse to Jean Baudrillard's notion of "simulation" (1981) to discuss the blurring of ontological boundaries that is portrayed in the novel by means of a video installation, *Cathode Narcissus*, which acts as an artefact that creates a postmodern adaptation of Oscar Wilde's original portrait of Dorian Gray by portraying a parallel reality.

2.1. Theoretical Background and Introduction to Intertextuality

When dealing with the issue of the interaction between two or more different texts, one cannot help but think about Julia Kristeva's concept of *intertextualité* (1968) or Mikhail Bakhtin's notions on the dialogic nature of utterances or words (1981). However, the idea foregrounding the concept of intertextuality is "older than postmodernism" (Broich 249) and even older than Bakhtin and Kristeva since relationships between texts have always been a central object of study for critics and writers. For to this reason, writing a general overview of the origins, development and the contemporary uses of the concept, as well as a general overview of the main authors' insights on intertextuality at this point of the essay is a matter of utmost importance. In his essay "Intertextuality", published in 1997, Ulrich Broich develops the idea of the antiquity of intertextual relations by making a reference to the canonical writer Alexander Pope and his well-known poem "An Essay on Criticism" (1711), in which, as Broich suggests, the Augustan writer is certain about the influence of the classics and urges his contemporaries to follow what T.S. Eliot would later on bring to the fore by the name of 'tradition'.

Broich's comment points to T. S. Eliot's well-known discussion in his path-breaking essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) of the relationships between texts in the same literary tradition. Not only does he acknowledge that "no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone" (15) —a fact that did not suppose a great novelty for the intertextual debate—, but also introduces the idea of the double-sided character of influence in artistic works. That is, the originality of the poet's "quasi-intertextual ideas" (Martínez, 270) is based on Eliot's postulation that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (23). In fact, as María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro contends, some of the major tenets of the Modernist poet are

“surprisingly up-to-date” (271) as they prefigure the way in which postmodernist texts interrelate as well as the double-sided character of textual relations.

Going back to the origins of the concept, the Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin might be considered the most notable influence for intertextual criticism. Yet he was not the originator of the term, it is essential to mention his influence “at least of the specific view of language which helped others articulate theories of intertextuality” (Allen, 10). The critic’s importance has its origins in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), a canonical book upon which some of the most influential critics that came afterwards based their theories, such as Julia Kristeva or Jacques Derrida. In “Discourse in the Novel” Bakhtin acknowledges the transversal character of his ideas in terms of discourse when he states that “the dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is [...] a property of *any* discourse [...] it is the natural orientation of any discourse” (279; emphasis in the original). Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein’s reading of Bakhtin’s insights might be useful in this respect. The critics accurately interpret Bakhtin’s dialogism when they state that “a sign can never be analysed in isolation, for its meaning is always informed by the many often conflicting ways it has been used by other speakers. Thus one focuses not on [...] the sign, but on the relation of one sign to other signs. [Therefore,] every word must be analysed as part of a dialogue” (18).

It is widely acknowledged that Julia Kristeva was the critic who coined the word “intertextuality” while she was commenting on Bakhtin’s work. Her definition of the concept of intertextuality is the most currently used nowadays in mainstream criticism. As a member of the *Tel Quel* group, Kristeva was in contact with Roland Barthes and was influenced by theorists like Derrida, Lacan or Bakhtin himself. In her book, *Desire in Language* (1980), she widens the scope of Bakhtin’s theories by applying his notions on the dialogic nature of words, to entire texts; as is made clear by her following comment

where she paraphrases Bakhtin and adds the word “text” to the Russian critic’s statement: “each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read” (66).

During the decade of the 1970s Roland Barthes represented yet another quintessential figure in the study of intertextual relations and he will be a cornerstone on which some of the major postulations of the following essay will be based. His path-breaking proclamation of the “Death of the Author” and his subsequent ideas on “a theory of intertextuality that depends entirely on the reader as the organizing centre of interpretation” (Clayton and Rothstein, 20) serve as illustration of the critic’s interest in this subject. Barthes’ major works in what concerns the issue of intertextuality are *S/Z* (1973) and *Image-Music-Text* (1977). As is well-known, Barthes’ claims are, to some extent, similar to those of his predecessors. That is, he contends that: “we know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning [...] but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (1977, 146). However, Barthes’ insights into intertextuality differ from the rest in the sense that he attributes a “new” and essential role to the reader, or, in his own terms, “the modern scriptor” (145). In “From Work to Text” Barthes put the responsibility for creating meaning on the reader, thus erasing the boundaries between writing and reading and “joining them in a single signifying practice” (1977, 162). This is so since for him a text only makes sense when it is being read. In other words, Barthes contends that “[t]he Text [...] asks of the reader a practical collaboration” (163). It might seem that these assertions are not influential for the intertextual debate. However, they acquire a higher level of importance when we take into consideration what Barthes in *S/Z* calls the reading “I” or “scriptor.” Unlike Kristeva or Bakhtin, who focused on texts and signs respectively as the “roots” of intertextual relations, what Barthes attempts to demonstrate with this is

that the interpretive role of the reader / scriptor are major elements to consider in intertexts. Regarding this, one must think about Jorge Luis Borges' "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" ("The Garden of the Forking Paths") from the collection *Ficciones* (1944). A short story in which the main character "writes / builds a novel / labyrinth" (Onega, 31) where "instead of just one, all endings take place" (qt. in Onega 31). To put it differently, Barthes argues that "the I who approaches the text is already a plurality of other texts" (10), thus providing evidence for his contention that the reader will interpret the text according to his or her own sources. This notion came to be known as the "already read" (Barthes 1977a, 160). In this sense, Barthes' ideas might be considered similar to those of T. S. Eliot, as both critics' theories erase the temporal boundaries when it comes to analysing the relationship between two or more texts. As a matter of fact, as he states in "The Death of the Author," "every text is eternally written here and now" (1988, 145). Therefore, as Barthes argues in *S/Z*, the scriptor is granted the ability of interpreting and creating meaning since "rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology [...] and recaptures a mythic time (without *before* or *after*) (1973, 16; emphasis in the original). What is more, as Susana Onega accurately points out, Jorge Luis Borges' idea "of a hypertextual library curiously echoes [...] Roland Barthes' notion of the active reader" (32). A final comment on Barthes's intertextual concerns that shall by no means be disregarded is, in Clayton and Rothstein's words, the idea of the "circularity of reference" (22). Barthes comes up with this idea in *S/Z*. The concept enhances the aforementioned erasure of temporal barriers and suggests that texts are a never-ending pattern of relations between each other.

Similarly, in the United States, critics such as Harold Bloom acquired an enormous significance in the intertextual debate. In his ground-breaking study *The Anxiety of Influence* (1975) Bloom works with the previous conceptions on the issue of

intertextuality. As a widely acknowledged critic of the nineteenth century poetry and Romanticism in particular, Bloom delves into the intertextual debate by analysing some of the best-known poetry of the movement “employing a vocabulary taken from Freud’s theory of the Oedipus Complex, in which sons wish to marry or sexually possess their mothers and so wish to supplant or even kill their fathers” (Allen, 134). Unlike Roland Barthes, his theories have “remained committed to an author-centred criticism, concerned with issues of originality” (Clayton and Rothstein, 10), and perhaps the notion of “influence” in the title has its origins in that fact. However, as argued by Clayton and Rothstein in their study of influence and intertextuality, when Bloom states that “influence [...] means that there are no texts but only relationships between texts” (qt. in Clayton and Rothstein) he sounds very much like an intertextual critic and therefore we also must pay attention to his insights throughout the following analysis.

Yet another quintessential figure in the intertextual debate was Gérard Genette. His narratological approach, aiming “to achieve a greater interpretive certainty” (Martínez-Alfaro, 278) made him develop a wider concept of intertextuality than what previous criticism had done until that moment. In his path-breaking study, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982), he coins the term “transtextuality.” In Genette’s words, this concept refers to “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (9-10), thus widening the previous definitions of intertextual relations provided by critics such as Julia Kristeva. In this book, he not only coins and develops a new concept, but also delves into the intertextual debate by explaining coining his own range of concepts related to it: intertextuality, paratextuality, hypertextuality, metatextuality and archtextuality.—Some of these notions will be used throughout the analysis of *Dorian: An Imitation*. Finally, Genette also problematizes the relationships between texts in a manner that will also signify a cornerstone for the analysis of Will

Self's novel. The father or narratology establishes an outline in which notions such as parody, imitation, transformation, pastiche or transposition are accurately explained and differentiated from one another. Following this, some of Genette's notions in this regard will be part of the following analysis.

2.2. Postmodernist Intertextuality

After having analysed the origins and first stages of the concept of intertextuality, we must now face what is perhaps considered by the majority of critics, the age of the apogee of intertextuality: the postmodern era. In 1967 John Barth asserted in a path-breaking essay, entitled "The Literature of Exhaustion," that "intertextuality has become the very trademark of postmodernism" (1967, 209). Following this, Graham Allen argues that unlike what it may seem, throughout his essay Barth did not want to warn readers of the possible negative effects of "exhaustion" and that this is why he decided to write a continuation of the first article entitled "The Literature of Replenishment" (1967). In these essays, which signified an early attempt to characterize postmodernist literature, there are some ideas that must be taken into account which are inevitably linked to the analysis of *Dorian*. According to Barth, postmodernist "novels imitate the form of the Novel [and are created] by an author who imitates the role of the Author" (1967, 222). This statement is especially important for the analysis due to different reasons. First of all, *Dorian: An Imitation* is a self-recognised imitation of Oscar Wilde's original from its title, which is one of the most notable examples of imitation through the names of the characters, to some other minor references to the original in terms of narrative. Secondly, since one of the major characters of the text is the "real" authorial figure of what has been read, it can also be stated that Will Self's text mirrors the form of a novel created by an author imitating the role of the Author.

Among postmodernist critics, Linda Hutcheon is one of the major referents when dealing with intertextuality. She has written extensively about parody, which might be considered a straightforward form of intertextuality. As she explains in her well-known study, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) “parody [...] suggests repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (26). Due to *Dorian*’s condition as a hypertext of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we can assume that *Dorian* will approach to these similarities and differences by blurring the temporal line between the two texts so as to confront past and present; that is, the Victorian and the Thatcher and Blair eras which, as we shall see later on in the essay, have certain similarities. However, as Hutcheon acknowledges, intertextual parody aims “not to destroy the past [but rather] both to enshrine and question it” (126). Therefore, one of the main targets of the essay will focus on the implications of *Dorian* as a hypertext. To put it differently, since “parody brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic [...] to the political and the historical” (22), one of the main aims of the essay will be to determine whether Self’s text, by re-writing a canonical book, aims to expose dominant discourses (from both the present and the past) or, as Broich puts it, whether it is just “deconstruction for its own sake” (253) as much of the contemporary literature has been. In this sense, Broich argues that “postmodernist intertextuality general has a deconstructive function [...] it questions genre conventions and deconstructs assumptions” (253). However, he also acknowledges the fact that this deconstructive character might be a double-edged sword. Therefore, Kristeva’s notion of translinguistics, which is a “method of analysis that allows [...] to confront the literary work on the formal and the social levels simultaneously” (Clayton and Rothstein, 999) will be essential for the analysis.

2.3. Postmodernist and Neo-Victorian Intertextuality

Heilmann and Llewellyn's extensive study of neo-Victorian fiction will also signify an essential element for the analysis of *Dorian: An Imitation* for different reasons. Firstly, these critics acknowledge the necessity of defining this contemporary cultural and literary trend. Following this, they recognize that, although the "neo-Victorian as a creative form and a place for critical interpretation" (10) may seem a diverse and adaptable creative form, there is a straightforward "tension about the definition of this field" (10). Therefore, throughout their study they focus on finding a definition for the concept that I will take into account to determine to what extent can *Dorian* be identified with the parameters of this terminology.

In this regard, yet another point of interest for the following analysis, also studied in depth by Heilmann and Llewellyn, concerns the ethics and aesthetics of the neo-Victorian genre. Both aspects of the genre are directly associated to some of the major topics approached in Self's text: the ideological subtext as well as the gender issues portrayed in *Dorian*. In addition, when referring to the ethical aspects of neo-Victorian fiction, we must deal with the "intellectual and cultural meanings and impact contained within or consequential to [the] aesthetical choice" (10). Heilmann and Llewellyn consider that the aesthetics of the genre lies in "the decisions made by both writer and reader to use contemporary fiction as a means of (re)encountering the nineteenth century" (10). Consequently, this part of the following analysis of *Dorian* will focus on the ethics and aesthetics of the text. In other words, throughout the essay both the formal (aesthetic) and cultural aspects (ethics) of the text will be explored so as to justify the text's condition as a neo-Victorian work.

These critics refer to Judith Johnston's definition of the term "Neo". Johnston argues that unlike Margaret Thatcher's political idea of neo-Victorianism, which would

imply a return to old-fashioned nineteenth-century values, in literary terms “the implication is rather a new, modified, or more modern style” (qt. in Heilmann and Llewellyn, 5). Johnston’s definition is particularly interesting in that it combines a political and ideological significance with that of literature. Drawing on this, Llewellyn and Heilmann acknowledge that neo-Victorian texts are “engaged with the act of reinterpretation, rediscovery and revision concerning the Victorians” (4). This is precisely what happens in *Dorian*, since the presence of the Victorian past shall be regarded as the source of the strong ethical and aesthetic significance that will be demonstrated throughout the analysis of the text. In fact, the ethical agenda of neo-Victorian fiction cannot be analysed in isolation. That is, the examination of gender as a social construction might be regarded as a fundamental theme of neo-Victorian fiction within its “political re-visioning impulse” (Heilmann and Llewellyn, 106). Throughout Self’s text, the sharp significance of the homosexual theme goes hand in hand with the historical setting of the novel; that is, the Thatcherite era.

Finally, in her study, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006), Julie Sanders argues that adaptations are frequently associated with “the transition from one genre to another: novels into film; drama into musical” (19). Following this, the analysis will take into consideration Sanders’ hedging when defining adaptations. Throughout her study, Sanders delves into adaptation and appropriation studies by taking examples that have undergone a change of medium. In spite of this, she acknowledges the fact that many adaptations may not involve a generic shift. In this line, in 2006 Linda Hutcheon published her study *A Theory of Adaptation* in which she, similarly uses instances of adaptations that have changed their genre. However, she acknowledges that “adaptation is a kind of extended palimpsest [that] not always [...] entails a change of medium” (2006, 33-34). Therefore, it is possible to assume that *Dorian*, in spite of remaining in the

literary genre, may have been affected by what these critics term as adaptation or appropriation.

Sanders also let us glimpse the complexity of adaptation studies as she acknowledges that an adaptation may also offer a re-examination of the hypotext through the addition of “hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced and the marginalized” (19). In fact, one of the major elements throughout the essay will follow this line, since, as previously stated, an essential goal of the following analysis will be to determine whether Self’s text is trying to expose dominant discourses, in this case, regarding the notions of sexual orientation or not. As already stated, the homosexual theme, together with the significant presence of AIDS during the last decades of the twentieth century, are some of the major themes in the novel.

Adaptation and appropriation studies “are in many respects a sub-section of the over-arching practice of intertextuality” (Sanders, 17). Consequently, as Sanders further notes, they may share their *praxis* and effects and, at the same time “possess starkly different [...] aims and intentions” (19). Given the essential role of the intertextual process in *Dorian*, it seems necessary, therefore to familiarize ourselves with these two concepts. Following the line of neo-Victorianism, Sanders argues that both adaptations and appropriative texts have frequently found in the Victorian era one of their major sources of inspiration. This is so since the Victorian era “throws into sharp relief many of the overriding concerns of the postmodern era: questions of identity [or] repressed and oppressed modes of sexuality” (129). Therefore, taking into account the neo-Victorian theoretical framework and following Sanders’ insights into this subject, analyse *Dorian: An Imitation* as an adaptation of Wilde’s original.

3. ANALYSIS OF *DORIAN: AN IMITATION*

The turn of the twenty first century, almost two decades ago now, brought about a general questioning of the vitality of the postmodern paradigm, which had been dominant since the 1960s. Undoubtedly, there have been many transformations in society since the advent of postmodernism, so it seems necessary to ask ourselves if postmodernism is already dead. It is widely acknowledged that one of the most influential changes brought about by the coming of the new century has been the unprecedented boost experienced by technological devices. Notwithstanding this, technological advances and their cultural repercussion were already put into question during the twentieth century. For instance, Walter Benjamin already predicted the mechanization of art as early as 1936 if it continued to be influenced by its conditions of production. Almost at the end of the century, Fredric Jameson (1991) and Jean Baudrillard (1994) started to be interested in the blurring of ontological barriers that was taking place in the age of late capitalism. By means of different analyses of art, literature and other cultural artefacts, postmodern writers (John Fowles, 1969; Martin Amis, 1994; Will Self, 2002) and critics (Brian McHale, 1987; Patricia Waugh, 1984; Linda Hutcheon, 1988) interrogated the ontological difference between reality and fiction and related issues such as the role of the author in the representation of reality.

When facing the question of the possible death of postmodernism, Alan Kirby (2009) positions himself as one of the most prominent scholars on the subject. In order to support his claims, Kirby, together with some other academics (Borgmann, 1992, Lipovetsky, 2005), analyzes the influence of technology in contemporary society and its impact on the cultural realm. In his ground-breaking essay, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond” (2006), Kirby addresses one of the major concerns of postmodern artifacts:

the figure of the author. Kirby's justification of the death of the postmodern paradigm is that the change undergone by cultural artifacts in contemporary times is related to the emergence of the "recipient" of the work as *the* new fetishized figure, which now replaces the author as the main fetishized figure, typical of postmodern works.

Leaving cultural insights aside, this brief contextualization is meant to justify the purpose of the following analysis of Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002). In spite of the fact that it can be approached by paying exclusive attention to the homosexual subculture or the issue of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s (David Alderson, 2005), the novel also shows, as José María Yebra convincingly argues, "how our way of representing and looking at reality has necessarily changed with the coming of new technologies" (82). Following this line of thought, it may be stated that the novel deals with the issue of authorship in a manner that can by no means be disregarded, and that it evinces the enormous pressure of technology on contemporary artistic representations.

Starting from this premise I will explore the postmodern condition of the novel by first considering the main reasons why Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) can be analyzed from the perspective of postmodernist parameters. First of all, it can be stated that the setting of the novel in the 1980s and 1990s coincides with the apogee of the postmodern paradigm in cultural, artistic and aesthetic terms. And just as the events that take place in the novel resemble that age, so do its characters embody the *Zeitgeist* of the period. However, as the novel was published in 2002, one may argue that recently emerged parameters aiming at the withdrawal of postmodernism can be applied to it as well. The aim of the essay is not to deny those new parameters. In fact, the hypothesis on which the essay is sustained has its origins in the changes that postmodernism has undergone since the publication of *Dorian*, as well as in the realization that the cultural

implications of literature and art are not the same nowadays as they were in the first years of the twenty first century.

In agreement with this, and assuming the premise that Oscar Wilde's original novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, reflects the decadence of the fin-de-siècle, it can be argued that what Self's text in fact does is to reflect the decadence of the postmodern paradigm. Taking these aspects into account, the essay will focus on an especially significant aspect of the text, which is the issue of authorship in art and literature. Such salient postmodernist textual devices or techniques as intertextuality, and metafiction will be analyzed with a view to justifying the postmodern condition of the text, followed by an analysis of Self's Dorian's stage adaptation, *Cathode Narcissus*, as a postmodernist artifact and the implications conveyed by this fact.

Since Roland Barthes published his seminal essay "The Death of the Author" in 1967, one of the main concerns in postmodernist literature has been the issue of authorship. However, the problematization of authorship has been a recurrent feature of the modern novel since its birth, often associated to experimentalism and parodic intent, from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) through Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-two-Birds* (1939), to Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953). Yebra points to this aspect of the novel when he states that *Dorian: An Imitation* "plays on different layers of meaning and plot lines" (242). As I will attempt to demonstrate, this playful character of the novel has its roots in the way it deals with what Brian McHale describes as authorial "presence / absence" (199). That is, in spite of the fact that we readers approach the text with an almost absolute certainty that it will draw some parallels with Oscar Wilde's canonical novel, this does not prevent us from taking a "naïve" position towards Self's text. Indeed, Self's novel explicitly resembles some of the major events of Wilde's original such as Basil's murder by Dorian. Besides, some of its most notable characters

including Henry and Victoria Wotton, Basil Hallward and Alan Campbell, are also present in Self's rewriting. Nevertheless, we willingly assume the fictionality of Will Self's narrative but, at the same time, put it at the same level as our own real world. In other words, as Patricia Waugh, echoing Coleridge, argues in her canonical study, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (1984), "we can read novels because of our suspension of disbelief" (Waugh 33); but when we cannot suppress the knowledge of the fictionality of what has been read, fiction and reality collide. Throughout her study, the critic defines the concept of metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). The way in which *Dorian* portrays this issue is particularly shocking as the novel keeps the pretense of realism until the end of the novel, as an epilogue. This unexpected metafictional turn acts as a major frame-break that puts into question the relationship between reality and fiction at the textual level. At the same time, however, the questioning of received assumptions represents a constant struggle, a *Leitmotif* throughout the entire narrative. Not only at the textual level, by means of metafiction; but, as we shall see, in the cultural realm as well. We will, therefore, first focus our attention on the question of the ontological boundaries between reality and fiction at the textual level and its implications in *Dorian*. As Brian McHale reminds us,

If the fictional world now acquires a visible maker, its own status must inevitably change, too: it has become less the mirror of nature, more an *artifact*, visibly a *made* thing. As a corollary, then, to the artist's paradoxical self-representation, the artwork itself comes to be presented *as* an artwork. The devices of art are laid bare. (McHale 30; emphasis in the original)

Taking this pronouncement into account, it is possible to determine that the introduction of the authorial figure inside the narrative and the consequent frame-break that takes place in the epilogue signify the suppression of the willing suspension of disbelief inherent to novels. Following Brian McHale's notions on this issue, the revelation of Henry Wotton as the "real" author of the text, apart from provoking a major frame-break and changing the status of the novel, has further implications since an "author occupies an ontological level superior to his world; by breaking the frame the author foregrounds his own superior reality" (197). With McHale's words in mind it may be stated that by means of breaking the frame, *Dorian* endorses the parodic and deconstructive approach to the conception of the "old analogy between author and God" (McHale, 29) that characterizes postmodernist literature. As a consequence, the reader becomes aware of the change of status of what has been read. In other words, the condition of the novel shifts from a "reality" in which the reader has been immersed throughout its reading, to fiction. This shift "provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction" (Waugh 31). As I will attempt to demonstrate, in *Dorian*, this alternation of frame and frame-break is paralleled by the blurring of ontological boundaries that is taking place in the real world, or, in contemporary culture. To put it differently, the textual implications of this metafictional turn are inevitably linked to the contemporary cultural and literary paradigm since "contemporary metafiction foregrounds framing as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels" (Waugh, 28) and, as we shall see, this is necessarily related to the novel's cultural discourse, which belongs to the era of simulation. One of the major tenets in Patricia Waugh's argumentation is that "metafiction is a tendency within the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique

and counter-technique, of deconstruction of illusion” (14). This pronouncement is particularly meaningful in Will Self’s novel since we discover in its epilogue that the events that take place in the novel respond to a distorted version of reality. In fact, Dorian is incredulous about Henry’s authorship of the novel and states that “he’s [Henry] taken colossal liberties with the truth” (259)

This abrupt epilogue or afterword contains a dialogue between Dorian and Victoria Wotton in which both Dorian and the reader are revealed that Henry Wotton is the “real” author of the text as well as some of his major objectives as *the* author. As a consequence, the reader becomes aware of the novel’s condition as a *text* or, in other words, somebody’s creation. Taking Waugh’s definition of metafiction literally, one may argue that *Dorian* does not systematically refer to itself as an artefact. However, the novel’s condition as an artwork is made explicit throughout the text itself by means of subtle instances which are revealed to the reader as well as to Dorian himself in the epilogue.

Throughout the epilogue, Victoria Wotton not only acts as a mediator between the textual author, Henry Wotton, and Dorian, but also functions as an explanatory figure for the readers, as is made clear by her following comment: “you noticed, of course, that throughout the rest of the book he [Wotton] is continually searching for his keys [...]. Oh well, it’s only one of the ways he plays with the form...” (Self 2002, 258). As Yebra explains, “in this twenty-page afterword, we learn that all we have read so far is just Wotton’s *roman-à-clef* [and thus, that] the ontological boundaries are definitely blurred” (2010, 242). Will Self’s playful blurring of ontological boundaries puts Dorian and the reader at the same (fictional) level. Besides, as Victoria self-consciously tells Dorian “you understand [...] why it is I wanted you to read it?” (Self 2002, 257), it can be stated that the “real” reader and Dorian have been receivers of the same text simultaneously. Roland

Barthes' notable sentence: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (1988 171) might be regarded as particularly meaningful in this respect. Taking this pronouncement literally, it is possible to hypothesize about the existence of an ironic parallel between the final events in the novel and Barthes' statement. To put it differently, our willing suspension of disbelief lasts until Victoria finds that "her husband was gone and his corpse was already cool to the couch" (Self 2002, 255). That is, as the metafictional epilogue begins straightaway, we become aware of the nature of the text as an artifact when the death of the fictional author of the text, Henry Wotton, takes place. Therefore, we bear witness to the birth of the "fictional" readers, Dorian and Victoria, who share, or rather, are nearer the ontological level of the "real" reader.

Throughout the epilogue, Dorian states that "he [Henry] always swore blind he'd never write a novel, let alone a *roman-à-clef*" (Self 2002, 258). Yet another instance of the playful character of the novel can be found in Brian McHale's definition of the *roman-à-clef* as a type of novel that "preserves much of the ontological force of transworld identity but without reproducing real world proper names" (206), as would happen, for example, in historiographic metafiction. Since Henry does include real-world proper names in his text, we can assume that both Henry Wotton, as the fictional author of the text, and Will Self, as the flesh-and-blood author, play with the conventions of the genre. This is why Dorian himself states that

He [Henry] turns me into a layabout — when I've worked hard ever since I left university. He makes me selfish and egotistical [...]. He makes me the supreme fucking narcissist. (259)

3.1. The Function of Parody and Imitation

The blurring of ontological barriers aiming at challenging the relationship between reality and fiction acquires a higher level of relevance if we take into consideration the fact that the real authority of the text belongs to the Victorian writer, Oscar Wilde. Applying Gérard Genette's terminology (1982), we may consider that *Dorian* functions as a "hypertext" evoking and transforming an earlier text, or "hypotext": *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. At the same time, if we take into consideration Patricia Waugh's remark that "taking as its starting point a previous work or genre, [parody] inserts a metaphoric version of this into the ongoing [...] literary tradition" (69), we can assume that the relation between Wilde's and Self's novels is parodic. Since the existence of a previous work becomes fundamental for parody to exist, it is possible to consider that parody is mainly sustained on the intertextual relationships between works. Starting from this premise, Patricia Waugh delves into parody in generic terms. Throughout a section of *Metafiction*, defines parody and its implications for literature, and she also draws attention to the implications for the novel in general terms. In this sense, she states that:

Parody [...] can promote a very positive and long-overdue renewal of the novel, rather than its exhaustion [...] it exploits the indeterminacy of the text, forcing the reader to revise his rigid preconceptions based on literary and social conventions, by playing off contemporary and earlier paradigms against each other and thus defeating the reader's expectations about both of them.
(322)

Taking Waugh's argument into consideration, one may argue that the implications of the metafictional shift that sees the light in the novel's epilogue and the parodic relationship

between Oscar Wilde's original and Will Self's text are similar. To put it differently, the involvement of these techniques in *Dorian* aims at a renewal of the novel. Throughout the text, both metafiction and parody are used to examine the possibilities of postmodernist conventions so as to explore new and original approaches to the novel as a genre. However, this may seem paradoxical in contemporary times since "the Postmodernist is convinced that the social context consists of words and that each new text is written over an older one" (Fokkema, 46). In other words, artistic creations in postmodern times are considered not to be original anymore and for this reason, Will Self, as the flesh-and-blood author of the text, rewrites a canonical novel instead of writing an "original" one so as to bring to light the decadence of the postmodern paradigm in literary terms.

In this line, it may be argued that this renewal follows what John Barth had announced years before. In other words, Barth theorized about the exhaustion of the postmodern literary paradigm and, at the same time, about the original ideas that might emerge after that period of decadence. In this sense, it is possible to consider that Self's text, in spite of creating what might seem a mainstream metafictional narrative, aims at the discovery of new possibilities with regards to originality in the sense that "the novel demands from the reader some involvement and responsibility" (Yebara 236). This hypothesis is enhanced by Alan Kirby's notion of the contemporary fetishization of the reader, which, one may argue, evinces the decadent state of the postmodern paradigm as well as the opening of a new literary and still un-labelled paradigm.

Once having considered that *Dorian: An Imitation* may be addressed as self-conscious and parodic rewriting of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I shall now focus on the distinction between parody and imitation with a view to analysing Will Self's text correctly. In order to distinguish these two terms, I will take into consideration Gérard Genette's insights into the matter. Among the various types of relation between two texts

Genette establishes in *Palimpsests* we find hypertextuality, which he defines as “any relationship uniting a text B (which [he] call[s] the hypertext) to an earlier text A ([... or] hypotext)” (5). As he further explains, text B does not speak of text A but, without the existence of the first, the second would be impossible to exist. Therefore, Oscar Wilde’s text may be regarded as text A or hypotext, and Will Self’s as text B or hypertext. Indeed, *Dorian* does not overtly repeat the contents of its Victorian predecessor but the parallels Will Self’s text draws with Wilde’s original are clear enough to allow us to define their relation in these terms. Further, in one of the chapters of his canonical book, Genette creates a subcategory within hypertextuality that aims to distinguish between parody and imitation. This distinction is particularly important for the analysis of *Dorian* for various reasons. In order to define these concepts, Genette differentiates two main forms of hypertextual relation: stylistic and textual. He explains that “the parodist or travesty writer essentially deals with a text, and with a style only peripherally. Conversely, the imitator essentially deals with style, and with text only incidentally; the target is a style and the thematic motifs that it involves” (82). Regarding the definition of these two concepts, it is possible to hypothesize that Will Self’s text establishes a hypertextual relation with Wilde’s original text both stylistically and thematically. In terms of style, *Dorian* overtly reflects that of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. First of all, due to the great amount of French vocabulary that appears throughout the text which, undoubtedly reminds us of Wilde’s original. In order to illustrate this point, I will compare some instances of both texts. In text A or hypotext, French words do not have the same importance as in text B or hypertext. However, it is possible to find some examples that lead us to establish stylistic parallels. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* there is a reference to Wilde’s admired French writer, Théophile Gautier and to his poem, “Emaux et Camées” (1852). In fact, some of the poem’s stanzas are depicted later on (172).

Throughout this section, Dorian randomly opens a book in which he finds those lines in French. Together with this, there are French words and expressions throughout the entire narrative, such as: “entrées” (Wilde 146), “consolation des arts” (105), “les grand pères ont toujours tort” (48) or “monstre charmant” (174). Similarly, in Will Self’s text the amount of French words and phrases is exceptionally great. In fact, from the beginning of the novel, it is possible to identify from almost irrelevant expressions for the course of the narrative, like “*comme il faut*,” (emphasis in the original, 11) “*en passant*,” (emphasis in the original, 10) “*esprit de l’escalier*” (emphasis in the original, 7) to essential words for the meaning of the plot, like “*roman à clef*” (emphasis in the original, 258).

Together with this, the thematic motifs involving both texts are similar as well. Hallward’s creation, *Cathode Narcisus* in *Dorian* reflects Basil’s portrait in the original text. Critics agree that Wilde’s original reflected the decadence of the Victorian era. Echoing this, Self’s text combines the questioning of some cultural and literary elements which may lead us to think that his novel heralds the decadence of the postmodern paradigm. Taking into account these examples, it is possible to argue that Will Self deals with Wilde’s style and text to a similar extent and so, that *Dorian* is both a parody and an imitation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in spite of Genette’s attempt at establishing a clear-cut distinction between these two terms. In other words, neither the text nor the style of Wilde’s hypotext have been chosen randomly to be parodied or imitated by Self.

Self’s choice to work on Wilde’s original does not come out of a preference for the Victorian era in general or the Irish author in particular. Rather, as Heilman and Llewellyn argue, “the Victorian era has become a homogenized identity, even a signifier, in contemporary culture” (2). It is this function of the Victorian era with respect to the twentieth century that lies behind Will Self’s decision to create *Dorian* as a parodic rewriting of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. That is, by means of parody and distance in

time, Will Self's text aims to create a complex and playful text with contemporary literary techniques which aim to explore new literary forms, thus creating something "original" out of something which may not seem so *a priori*. Although it is a condition *sine qua non* that Self must be strongly acquainted with Wilde's *œuvre*, we can determine that the text's choice is the result of a hard searching process in which Self wanted to set both eras against each other so as to depict the exhaustion of two different historical times and paradigms in many different spheres.

Considering the ongoing (postmodernist) literary tradition, Waugh's definition of parody increases the complexity not only of the text, but also of the title: *Dorian: An Imitation*. Firstly, *An Imitation* might be interpreted as a paratextual unequivocal indication that the text resembles Wilde's novel in derivative form. Secondly, drawing on Linda Hutcheon's contention that "intertextual parody crosses [...] boundaries without reserve" (1988, 139), we may consider that the cultural context of the 1980s and 1990s also has a straightforward influence on the title of the novel and its significance. For example, "imitation" is an essential element in Pop Art, a highly acclaimed artistic trend during those decades best represented by Andy Warhol, who is a constant referent throughout the novel. Together with this, we should also take into consideration Roland Barthes' ideas on the issue of authorship, particularly his contention that: "to give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text" (1988, 171). Drawing on this argument, it is possible to determine that the playfulness of the text lies in the multiplicity of authors and readers resulting from the blurring of the boundaries—or, in Barthes' words, limits—that characterize the novel.

At this juncture, we must focus on some other aesthetic implications of the novel. That is, throughout the following section, the formal aspects of the novel will be

analyzed. In order to do so, I will take into account the epilogue and contrast it with the rest of the narrative, since it is one of the most valuable passages to analyze in *Dorian*.

3.2. Narrative Form and the Creation and Deflation of Suspense in *Dorian: An Imitation*

The novel's epilogue evinces the complexity of the narrative structure of *Dorian* since until the end of the novel we do not know to whom the "real" authority of the text belongs or who the narrator of the story is. Therefore, throughout this section of the essay I will focus on the type of narration and focalization of the novel, with the aim of casting light on the implications of the metafictional epilogue.

First of all, should be stated that the prevalent type of narration in *Dorian* consists of a heterodiegetic-extradiegetic narrator who like the omniscient narrators of Victorian fiction, is outside the diegesis and knows more than the majority of the characters. Throughout the epilogue, the type of narrator remains the same. However, some aspects of the narration drastically change since, once the metafictional epilogue begins, the narration suddenly changes as we come to realize that the author-narrator is one of the major characters in the novel and actually belongs to the diegesis, thus becoming homodiegetic. In other words, we realise that the text that we have just read is Henry's autobiography. Although he tries to trick the reader by using a third-person narration, it is he who is actually narrating the events to us readers. Paradoxically, we are already aware of the fictional nature of the text when this occurs as our willing suspension of disbelief has been flaunted from the very title of the novel. Therefore, it is the reader who has the option to decide whether the events depicted throughout the text are trustworthy or not when it comes to endow the narrative with meaning. As Yebra argues, the novel "demands from the reader some involvement and responsibility" (236). Furthermore, the type of narration throughout the epilogue is the same as in the rest of the narrative, but an element has been added that works to destabilize our assumptions in this respect: Henry is

already dead and the epilogue does not form part of his autobiographical work; so, we can assume that, in the epilogue, the narrator is heterodiegetic, as it seemed to be all the time.

Together with the notion of point of view, temporality and focalization play an essential role in the narrative structure of fictional texts. In their narratological study, *Telling Stories*, Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires define temporality as “the narration’s arrangement and display of events in time, which most clearly illustrates the relation between a story and its telling” (83). As they further note, “the temporal order [...] of events in narration always display, even if only indirectly, a *narrating agency*, some medium of transmitting the story through telling” (89; emphasis in the original). Cohan and Shires’ distinction between “a story and its telling” echo the Russian formalist concepts of *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot), two concepts that are essential for the analysis of temporality in fiction. I will, therefore, have recourse to these two terms with the aim of determining the significance of their arrangement in the text.

The story or *fabula* of *Dorian: An Imitation* would be the chronologically arranged main events in the life of Dorian Gray and Henry Wotton, how they met, and their unhealthy flirting with drugs during the 1980s and 1990s. Key elements of Dorian’s life are his love affairs both with men and women, including Henry Wotton and Baz Hallward, the author of the video installation inspired on Dorian. The *syuzhet* or plot would be the artificial arrangement of these elements in the *fabula*, according to the imposition of narrative time. This difference between story time and narrative time is given a final turn of the screw in the epilogue, where, as we have seen, Wotton’s authorship of the novel is revealed.

In her seminal book, *Narratology* (1985), Mieke Bal, drawing on Genette, theorizes the difference between narrative voice and focalization. As she argues, “focalization is the relation between the ‘vision’, the agent that sees and that which is

seen, perceived” (146). According to Bal, the focalizer is “the subject of focalization [which represents] the point from which the elements are viewed. That point can lie with a character (i.e. an element of the fabula), or outside it” (146). Following this, it can be stated that throughout the novel’s epilogue the perspective from which the events are narrated drastically changes. This is so, since at the beginning of the epilogue we realise that the first three parts of the text have been created by Henry Wotton: we find Dorian shuffling “the pages of the typescript together and [laying] them down on the table” (Self 2002, 257), and finishing the reading of what Henry had been writing during his life. This epilogue, read by Dorian after one of the major character’s death, signifies a moment of understanding, almost epiphanic, for the reader as well as for Dorian. In fact, some fragments of the epilogue are entirely focused on Dorian’s feelings about having been a “victim” of this story as, for example, in the following one:

Every single particular of Dorian’s life that Henry had either experienced directly himself, or heard about from Dorian or mutual friends, had been traduced and bowdlerised in this *book*. The relationship with Herman, which had, on Dorian’s part been one of genuine [...] affection; the sincere efforts he’d made in Manhattan to help out Basil Hallward [...] Henry Wotton hated being Henry Wotton [...] and he, Dorian Gray, had been made the proxy for this monumental self-hatred. (Self 2002, 263; emphasis in the original)

Although focalization remains internal throughout the entire novel since it is either Henry or Dorian who serve as focalizers, this example illustrates perfectly the change of focalization in comparison to the first three sections—when the reader is unaware of Wotton’s authorial role.

As argued by Mieke Bal, “suspense can be generated by the announcement of something that will occur later or by the temporary silence concerning information which is needed. In both cases, the image which is presented to the reader is manipulated” (160). Bal’s definition of suspense must be taken into consideration since suspense is a major motif throughout the text; in spite of the fact that we are not entirely aware of its “presence.” Only the attentive reader will perceive several proleptic references that point to the possibility of the existence of this final revelation that will put an end to a faint but persistent feeling of suspense. The text achieves this feeling of suspense by a steady combination of hints that announce the “real” authority of the text and the existence of hidden information in this regard

By way of example, the passage when Henry meets Dorian for the first time at the beginning of the novel operates as a form of manipulation of the narrative. This excerpt functions as a proleptic warning for the reader since the narrator states that: “Baz would always love Dorian, Wotton would never love Dorian but would want him consistently, and Dorian would betray Baz and would never love anyone at all” (Self 2002, 16). This illustration is exceptionally meaningful for the reader in terms of suspense, as it incites us to be alert to the strong influence of temporality throughout the text. That is, by announcing what will happen later in the narrative, the narrator introduces a subtle reference to what ultimately becomes true: the tremendous importance of the epilogue and the arrangement of the events for the appropriate understanding of the novel. Besides, there are some other instances throughout the narrative that not only are useful for the creation of suspense, but also for warning the reader of the metafictional turn that takes place at the end.

Yet another way in which the narrator also manipulates our perception of “reality” is by hiding quintessential information which remains undisclosed until the epilogue.

Some of the major instances of veiled information of this kind have to do with Henry's car keys. In one of these passages, the narrator indirectly alludes to them when he suggests that Henry Wotton might have been the author of a *roman-à-clef*:

Henry Wotton could have written a brilliant book about the life and times of... Henry Wotton, but as he himself said derisively, 'The only circumstances in which I would write a *roman-à-clef* would be if I'd lost my fucking car keys' (Self 2002, 41)

Taking this instance into account, it is possible to consider that both types of suspense defined by Bal (see above) are present in this example. It announces something that will occur later —Wotton's authorship— and simultaneously denies its possibility, thus maintaining temporary silence concerning this vital information. Thus, the narrator simultaneously suggests and keeps crucial information from the readers that would help us construct a clearer meaning of the narrative, since for us the reference to the car keys is too insidious to be noticed *prima facie*. However, the same example functions as a textual clue which lead us to think that probably Henry is going to write an autobiographical novel. Therefore, it can be stated that, by subtly mentioning what is going to occur, the narrator and simultaneously enhances and deflates suspense.

Although it seems an insignificant passage at first sight, the references to Henry looking for his car keys are *in crescendo* as the narrative develops; so much so, that it can be considered a *Leitmotif* in the novel. Henry himself seems visibly irritated due to his carelessness with his keys. After losing them several times, he exclaims:

Bloody keys! [...] Fucking bloody stupid keys! Always the keys. He was more distressed by this than he'd been about anything else, and seemed close to weeping. (Self 132)

Another instance of Wotton's veiled messages related to his authorial role can be found when he tells Dorian that they are "all inventions of one sort or another" (276). In this example, Wotton directly addresses Dorian at the diegetic level, that is, without crossing the boundaries of the fictional world. However, it is possible to consider Wotton's suggestion of their own fictionality functions as yet another clue addressed to the reader, including Dorian as a fictional reader, thus pointing to the consideration and consequential discovery of the metafictional character of the text. In fact, Wotton's statement might be regarded as an assumption of *the* postmodernist definition of reality. In other words, with this affirmation, Henry Wotton perfectly assumes the spirit of the postmodern paradigm, addressing himself, who consciously forms part of a fictional world, as an invention. Consequently, with this pronouncement the "real" Wotton maintains the suspense in the narrative for, although he is not directly announcing anything that will take place later on, we may consider that once the main part of the narrative is finished and the epilogue starts, the example acquires a new significance—as a playful instance that functions to increment the text's uncertainty in what concerns its nature as both a fictional and a real story.

These examples allow us to conclude that suspense, as defined by Bal, is a key element in *Dorian*. Suspense is generated by the narrator in order not to raise attention of his "real" role, which is that of the writer. Besides, keeping the suspense becomes fundamental for the metafictional epilogue to work properly. That is, the reader's willing suspension of disbelief is based, not only on the fact that we are reading a fictional text,

but is also sustained in the narrator's preservation of uncertainty for the sake of the upcoming events, by means of suspense.

3.3. The Ethics and Aesthetics of *Dorian: An Imitation*

Throughout the following section, the analysis will be focused on the ethics of *Dorian*. That is, the cultural implications of art within and outside the narrative, the ideological concern of the text, as well as the implications of gender in the novel. Regarding the question of the neo-Victorian genre, Heilmann and Llewellyn acknowledge the cultural concern of this genre in ideological as well as in gender terms. As they argue, neo-Victorian writings aim to “scrutinize the instabilities of modern sexual categorizations” (107) which have their roots in the Victorian era. The neo-Victorian appeal to sexuality and identity is an unmistakable feature in *Dorian: An Imitation*. Regarding this, Marie-Luise Kohlke draws on Edward Said's terminology and states that “neo-Victorianism has become the new Orientalism, a significant mode of imagining sexuality in our hedonistic, consumerist, self-surfeited age” (107). In fact, the story created by Henry depicts the main characters' depraved and decadent journey through drug abusing and limitless sexual encounters as depicted in the following reference to both: “While sex undoubtedly melted the social ice, it was drugs that really heated the water then ripped out the thermostat altogether” (Self 2002, 66). Following Marie-Luise Kohlke's insights, it is possible to find some examples throughout the text that resemble the contemporary age in terms of hedonism and self-surfeit. For example, there is an episode in which Dorian and Baz are talking about the possible exhibition of *Cathode Narcissus* in an art gallery. The most striking aspect of their conversation is not related to art, though. They are also talking about their shared sexual experiences at the same time that Dorian is on the verge of injecting heroin into his body:

Well, if you wanted to revitalise the gallery you could always exhibit *Cathode Narcissus* [...] In order to enjoy having sex with you, Baz, I had to become a masochist. Dorian circled the spoons, putting thirty-odd more between himself and Baz. (Self 2002, 115)

The episode echoes Heilmann and Llewellyn's contention that neo-Victorian rewritings "play with the sexual immaturities of our days [...] to address contemporary identity politics by mainstreaming gay coming-out stories" (107). Throughout the text, there are many similar instances referring directly to the sexual experiences of its major characters. The following example is a conversation between Baz and Henry in which the former tries to explain the generational gap in terms of pride between Dorian and them. Baz states:

he's [Dorian] interested in my work, *he* wants to help. He's unashamed — not like us. He belongs to a totally new generation, the first gay generation to come out of the shadows. (12).

This instance is particularly significant for the analysis since it evinces the homosexual pride that was arising in the 1980s and 1990s. Besides, it increases the importance of *Dorian's* condition as a rewriting. As Llewellyn and Heilmann argue, neo-Victorian writings also "scrutinize the instabilities of modern sexual categorizations rooted in Victorian sexological conceptualizations" (107). Therefore, the fact that *Dorian's* hypotext belongs to the Victorian era, gives us a glimpse of the veiled criticism inherent in Self's text. To put it differently, since *Dorian* is set on the last decades of the twentieth

century, with conservative governments in power, it is possible to determine that, by creating a parodic and ironic rewriting of Wilde's original, Will Self's aim is to establish parallels between the silenced testimonies of homosexuals in the Victorian and in the contemporary era and give them nowadays the "voice" they were denied in their own era.

In the introductory pages of *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) Linda Hutcheon asserts that "postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political" (1). Similarly, Michael Greaney, drawing on Jean Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin, argues in *Contemporary Fiction and the Uses of Theory* (2006) that:

Cultural artefacts that once enjoyed the priceless cachet of inimitability are now prone to endless replication by the technologies of advanced capitalism; the signature of a given artist's unique creative style can be instantaneously forged by something as banal as a machine. (140)

After reading *Dorian*, it is possible to differentiate between two artistic or cultural artefacts that have a strong impact on the narrative: firstly, the novel itself. As we have demonstrated, the novel becomes a straightforward form of artistic representation in the epilogue when we discover that Henry Wotton is the "real" author of the novel. This evinces what Yebra has described as the various layers of significance in the novel (see above). That is, neither Henry Wotton nor Will Self can be regarded as the original authors of the text since the initial idea belongs to Oscar Wilde, who had it a century before. Secondly, Baz Hallward's creation, *Cathode Narcissus*, undoubtedly echoes some of the major concerns of contemporary culture since, together with the portrait of Dorian Gray, it is influenced by art historicism as well as by television and mass media elements,

as we shall see. Greaney's and Baudrillard's insights into this matter are fundamental since replication and loss of reality are the two major elements that characterize artistic representations in *Dorian: An Imitation*. Inimitability is not an option in contemporary culture anymore. Artistic representations can be falsified and imitated and it is possible that nobody notices it.

Following this, it can be stated that Baudrillard's and Benjamin's theories are both represented in *Dorian*. As Greaney explains, Benjamin is interested in the political consequences of contemporary artistic representations and the loss of what he calls its "aura" or, in Greaney's words, its uniqueness, while Baudrillard identifies contemporary art with the "death of reality itself — or, rather, its vertiginous implosion into hyperreality" (Greaney, 140). These theorists' ideas are a quintessential part of *Dorian* as the text depicts both the loss of reality and the political death of art. Firstly, as argued above, the Baudrillardian loss of reality is depicted both at the textual and the artistic levels. At the textual level, it does so by means of the metafictional epilogue, thus evincing Baudrillard's idea of the hyperreal.

At this juncture, it seems necessary to delve into this idea and after doing so, discern the parallelisms and implications that it has in *Dorian*. As explained by José María Yebra in his essay on Will Self's novel, "rather than talking about the 'real', Baudrillard speaks of the 'hyperreal', a term which discards the traditional concept of referentiality, and exists within the parameters of simulation" (234). In other words, the French philosopher argues that one of the most relevant aspects of contemporary culture, characterized by enormously advanced technologies and mass media saturation, is the impossibility to distinguish real facts from fiction. To Baudrillard himself, contemporary culture "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (453).

Furthermore, the ideological implications at the textual level have its roots in the idea of possessing in capitalist culture. Walter Benjamin convincingly argued that the work of art has lost its inimitability and “aura” and he linked this idea to one of the major concerns of contemporary capitalist culture, which is the right to ownership that has provoked the death of art. Although this idea may seem paradoxical, art and its ownership have been commodified in contemporary times. That is, art has been understood through the filter of capitalism. Therefore, it is possible to consider that Self’s text, which keeps a parodic relation to Wilde’s original, also depicts a parodic conception of these late-capitalist notions.

3.4. The Function of *Cathode Narcissus*

After having considered the ethical and aesthetic implications of the novel, we should analyze the function of the major work of art within the novel, the video installation, which, in Yebra’s words, acts as the novel’s “*mise-en-abyme* and main simulation” of *Dorian* (238). Baz’s work of art begs for both an aesthetic and an ethical reading that cannot be ignored. As we have seen, Self’s novel draws several parallels with Wilde’s original. However, Will Self endows Wilde’s portrait with a postmodernist essence by transforming it into a video installation. In this sense, as pointed out by the Frankfurt School critic Max Horkheimer, the novel’s approach to the work of art defies Mortimer Adler’s “view of art as independent of time” (281). In his path-breaking study, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson, following the line of art historicism, brought to the fore the “cultural hegemony of video art” (69) in postmodern times, while in an earlier study, “Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity” (1998), he had argued that the postmodernist period has witnessed a clear historical evolution from “traditional art” to the “visual work of art” that leads to “high-

tech hybrids of all kinds” (110). This assertion justifies our contention that every work of art is, to an extent, influenced by its historical conditions. Baz Hallward’s creation, *Cathode Narcissus*, is no exception in this respect as it reflects in different ways both the postmodern condition and the artistic trends of the final decades of the twentieth century. The installation is composed of nine television monitors that portray images of Dorian, in Barthes’ terms, “posing” (10) as a “Greek *kouros*” (Self 2002, 12). The comparison of Dorian to this classical representation of the youth or boy of noble rank associated with Apollo, enriches the imagery of the passage, allowing the reader to imagine Dorian as a geometrically flawless and inexpressive iconic figure of male beauty.

At the same time, the conflict between fact and fiction originated in the epilogue to the novel is paralleled by Baz’s video installation. In *Why Hasn’t Everything Already Disappeared?* (2007), Jean Baudrillard provocatively discusses “the murder of reality in the age of media” (10). His postulation of the murder of reality is exceptionally meaningful since he argues that in the age of “simulacra, images precede the real to the extent that they invert the causal and logical order of the real and its representation” (1984, 13). As he further explains, in our contemporary age art and any other forms of cultural representation have suffered a perverse influence from mass media elements that put into question the “relation between image and its referent” (1984, 13). In the case of Baz’s video installation, the cameras and monitors that intervene in the creative process of *Cathode Narcissus* are the main items through which “reality” is portrayed, thus providing evidence to sustain Susan Sontag’s contention that, in our contemporary age “reality has come to seem more like what we are shown by cameras” (126).

At the artistic level, one may argue that the TV monitors and cameras that depict Dorian in *Cathode Narcissus* are the major expression of contemporary mass media culture. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon draws on this assumption and

refers to Baudrillard. As the Canadian critic states, “The one medium that is consistently referred to as postmodern is television: Baudrillard calls it the paradigmatic form of postmodern signification because its transparent sign seemingly offers direct access to a signified reality” (1989, 10). The nine screens in which Dorian sees himself posing are certainly significant in terms of erasing the limits between reality and its representation. They represent in a hidden and critical way the idea of the troublesome influence of the mass media when it comes to distinguish the real from the representation of the real. Following this, Hutcheon draws on Baudrillard’s “The Precession of Simulacra,” an essay in which he argues that the mass media has influenced and divided reality into four different stages: “first they *reflected* it, then they *masked* and perverted it, next they had to *mask its absence* and finally they produced instead the *simulacrum* of the real, the destruction of meaning and of all relation to reality” (1989, 33; emphasis in the original), thus evincing the negative influence of mass media culture in contemporary society.

As already argued, contemporary culture is straightforwardly depicted in *Dorian* at different levels. Among them, the Baudrillardian simulacrum is definitely present throughout Self’s text at the artistic level, as depicted in the following instance:

As he was speaking the monitors pranged into the present, the Dorians pirouetted and pranced. The five men ranged in front of the nine monitors stared at their cathode partners [...]. Everyone who isn’t an intellectual loves television – it’s so much *realer* than reality. (Self 2002, 66)

The fact that these characters consider a mass media element, a filter through which reality is depicted, as something “superior” to reality itself perfectly parallels the contemporary assumptions with regards to these elements. In other words, this example

serves as an illustration to Ludwig Feuerbach's argument that our era "prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence" (qt. in Debord, 1). As a matter of fact, this illustration eventually stops being metaphoric and becomes an actual truth. Echoing this, Will Self builds on Wilde's original portrait and, as happens in the original, the work of art is affected by the excesses of the "real" Dorian. That is, what in Oscar Wilde's original text might be regarded as something uncanny and completely independent from cultural interpretations or analysis, is adapted and paralleled in *Dorian* so as to represent the postmodernist conception of mass media and subtly highlight its decadent idiosyncrasy.

Further, it is possible to find yet another instance of the decadence of the work of art in contemporary times as there is an example in the novel that acknowledges the crisis brought about by mass media elements in contemporary times:

Baz waved at the televisions. 'It's called *Cathode Narcissus*, and it'll be the last video installation I make. The whole fucking medium is dead. Fuck, it was *born* decadent, like all the rest of conceptual art. First it was Nauman, then Viola and me, now it's finished. From now on, conceptual art will degenerate to the level of crude autobiography, a global village sale of shoddy, personal memorabilia for which video installations like this will be the TV adverts. (Self 2006, 13; emphasis in the original)

Besides its literal meaning, it is possible to hypothesize that the previous quotation includes a subtle reference to the blurring of ontological boundaries at the textual level. In this sense, Baz may be said to exemplify art decadentism when he states that conceptual art may end up being crude autobiography, which is precisely what Self's text is.

Further still, as argued above, it is the *active* reader who notices this veiled critical stance to the mass media in Will Self's text. However, the impossibility of distinguishing fact from fiction also affects Dorian himself in different sections of the narrative. One of the most striking instances of this takes place at the end of the first section of the book, entitled "Recordings." It is a particularly significant episode since immediately after, Dorian becomes aware of his immunity towards aging as well as to the HIV/AIDS virus. After having been using drugs in a party together with Henry Wotton and Herman, Dorian wakes up with a tremendous hangover "beached on a futon" (Self 2002, 70) and goes to contemplate Baz Hallward's work:

Yes there they were, so many cathode Narcissi, all prancing and pirouetting in time with the gross thumping of his hangover. He moved towards the screens, and the banging against his temples rose to a crescendo [...]. Then Dorian saw it: the faces on the screen had all changed — and for the worse. An exaggerated moue twisted his formerly flawless mouth. A distortion of a perfect symmetry such as his was far worse than a harelip on an ordinary face [...]. Closer and closer he drew, until all he could see were lines of dots leading into the future. (70)

This particular instance illustrates the fear that cameras brought about when they came out for the first time during the last years of the nineteenth century. Many people were afraid of the images portrayed in cameras due to their belief that "the camera will rob them of some part of their being" (Sontag, 123). As happened with the original Victorian portrait, once Dorian begins his depraved and self-destructive journey, it is the piece of art, *Cathode Narcissus* that suffers the effects of Dorian's lifestyle, transforming into

“reality” the general fear to cameras. In summary, following the Jamesonian assumption that the contemporary age is a period dominated by the media, it is possible to consider that cameras and monitors contribute to the postmodernist blurring of ontological boundaries, in this case, between reality and its representation.

4. CONCLUSION

Bearing all these aspects in mind, it can be concluded that *Dorian: An Imitation* is a novel that reflects the postmodern condition, but, at the same time, manifests the decadence of the postmodern paradigm. The crisis of postmodernism is depicted throughout the novel by means of two main elements: art and literature itself. The blurring of ontological and artistic boundaries contributes to erase the limits between reality and fiction, the real and the hyperreal. In other words, art and literature collide at the textual level by means of the metafictional turn that takes place at the end of the novel making the reader aware of the nature as artifact of the novel. Besides, at the artistic level, mass culture, represented by cameras, monitors and the video installation, may be regarded as elements that highlight the decadent postmodern condition and blur the limits between the “real” and the representation of the “real.” As already argued, the crisis of postmodernism leads to the appearance of new literary forms associated with new cultural trends. This fact may be reflected in Dorian’s condition as a “prisoner [...] of the camera” (Baudrillard 2007, 37) but also as a prisoner of the narrative, as we eventually discover in the epilogue that we have been told a hyperbolic story, with Henry as the creator of the events. Not only this, but also the readers (including Dorian himself) are prisoners of this narrative playfulness since we do not know until the end that we have been reading a story written by one of its characters. Taking this into consideration, it can be concluded that *Dorian* plays with the

conventions of traditional literature by using different techniques. Firstly, the metafictional turn at the end. In this light, as Patricia Waugh would put it, metafiction represents an “attempt to create alternative linguistic structures or fictions which merely imply the old forms by encouraging the reader to draw on his or her knowledge of traditional literary conventions when struggling to construct a meaning for the new text” (222). With these words in mind, it seems quite straightforward that the metafictional nature of *Dorian* demands an active role of the reader so as to make sense of the narrative and thus, construct a meaning for it. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the novel shows a glimpse of the fetishization of the “recipient of the text” (Kirby, n. p.) that is taking place in contemporary culture. In other words, the text fetishizes the figure of the reader by playing with our willing suspension of disbelief and hiding the authorship of the written narrative. Besides, the text also plays with the real reader in the sense that, to some extent, almost every reader is familiar with Oscar Wilde’s canonical novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Following this, it can be determined that *Dorian: An Imitation* demands the collaboration of the contemporary reader so as to discern the implications and meanings that Self’s rewriting may have. Not only in narrative terms, but also taking into account the interaction produced by these two texts and their different literary and cultural contexts. In this sense, the analysis has attempted to determine that, in spite of the fact that Will Self’s text presents itself as an imitation of its Victorian predecessor, the parodic aura that involves *Dorian* explicitly affects its understanding. To put it differently, Will Self makes use of parody with the aim of establishing a distance with Wilde’s original, which, in addition to the temporal gap that separates the Victorian and the contemporary era, helps the reader to approach concerns that were present in both of them. As argued by Linda Hutcheon “parody also contests our humanist assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness and our capitalist notions of ownership and

property” (1989, 93). Therefore, it can be argued that Will Self’s text aims at deconstruction in literary terms, but at the same time, at bringing to light and posing some questions about hegemonic cultural discourses and about assumptions existing in society since the nineteenth century. Besides, Hutcheon states that the “parodic reprise of the past [...] is not nostalgic; it is always critical” (1989, 93). Therefore, one may argue that the parodic examination of cultural discourses in *Dorian* ultimately becomes a critical questioning. As the essay has attempted to demonstrate, Will Self’s *Dorian: An Imitation* is a significant example of the new literary forms emerging after the postmodern paradigm which are concerned with the death of the author and the role of the reader as scriptor (Barthes, 1988). In the last reading, therefore, *Dorian: An Imitation* might be regarded as a text that is concerned with both the near disappearance of the postmodern paradigm and the coming of new tendencies in artistic and literary terms.

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