

# Oscar Wilde, photography, and cultures of spiritualism

Dobson, Eleanor

*License:*

None: All rights reserved

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Dobson, E 2020, 'Oscar Wilde, photography, and cultures of spiritualism: "The most magical of mirrors"', *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, vol. 63, no. 2, pp. 139-161. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/743939/summary>>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

Checked for eligibility 12/02/2019

Published in *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*  
<http://www.eltpress.org/index.html>

**General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

**Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

## Oscar Wilde, Photography, and Cultures of Spiritualism: 'The most magical of mirrors'

On 20 August 1962 the British medium Leslie Flint claimed to have communicated with the spirit of Oscar Wilde. Investigated and denounced by the Society for Psychical Research (an organization which examines purportedly paranormal phenomena, founded in 1882), Flint was renowned for contacting nineteenth-century celebrities, Queen Victoria, Charlotte Brontë, Helena Blavatsky, Oliver Lodge, Arthur Conan Doyle and Wilde himself among the most eminent. Like his Victorian predecessors, and conforming to what Sarah Crofton has identified as the nineteenth-century tradition of 'creative collaboration between the living and the dead', particularly that with 'posthumous celebrity endorsement', Flint relied upon the established conventions of the darkened séance room, claimed to be able to produce ectoplasm, and permitted experts to scrutinize his methods, situating his interaction with the spirits within familiar, if somewhat antiquated, parameters.<sup>1</sup> Many of Flint's séances were recorded, and tapes survive of the voice which he professed to be Wilde's, which elicits star-struck sycophancy from the living attendees.<sup>2</sup>

This was not the first occasion upon which Wilde's ghost had supposedly made itself known to spiritualists. The Irish medium Hester Travers Smith, who specialized in contacting deceased literati, Shakespeare included, insisted that she had communicated with Wilde on several occasions in 1923 via automatic writing and Ouija board, resulting in the publication of *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde* the next year.<sup>3</sup> Among those convinced by Smith's report was Conan Doyle, declining caution even after his recent, well-known (and rather embarrassing) dalliance with the Cottingley Fairies.<sup>4</sup> He wrote to Smith:

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Crofton, 'Victorian Spiritualism and Narratives of Proof, 1882-1912: Familiarity, Fraud, and Fiction' (2013) PhD Thesis King's College London, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> The recording is available online: New Leslie Flint Trust, 'Oscar Wilde', *YouTube* (23 August 2014) <[https://youtu.be/jGRznHDaS\\_I](https://youtu.be/jGRznHDaS_I)> [accessed 9 May 2018].

<sup>3</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Hester Travers Smith (London: T. Werner Laurie [1934]).

<sup>4</sup> On this subject, see, for example, Paul Smith, 'The Cottingley Fairies: The End of a Legend', in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narváez (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), pp. 371-405.

I think that the Wilde messages are the most final evidence of continued personality that we have. [...] If you are in contact you might mention me to him – I knew him – and tell him that if he would honour me by coming through my wife who is an excellent automatic writer, there are some things which I should wish to say.<sup>5</sup>

The repeated summoning of Wilde's spirit in these and lesser-known instances cannot be entirely explained as the inevitable result of his continuing notoriety in the twentieth century, nor even as the mediums' desire to produce a few witty epigrams to sway the incredulous, although these factors are undoubtedly significant. Flint's catalogue of ghostly contacts privileges those with an established interest in spiritualism before their deaths: Lodge, Blavatsky and Conan Doyle, for instance.<sup>6</sup> Wilde's spectral return amidst this assembly of spiritually-inclined contemporaries, then, might suggest perceived links between him and spiritualism that made him particularly susceptible to being heard from beyond the grave.<sup>7</sup> Wilde's interest in the otherworldly is expressed most explicitly – in terms of his literary output, at least – in his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; 1891), though the ties between this text and spiritualism have heretofore gone unexplored. This essay fills this lacuna by establishing Wilde's position within the *fin-de-siècle* magical revival, reading this novel and Wilde's wider *oeuvre* as in dialogue with the very spiritualist ideas and practices which would later find in the posthumous Wilde a tempting subject. As Christine Ferguson suggests, *fin-de-siècle* readers were accustomed to reading texts using what she calls an 'occultic approach': they scrutinized texts with supernatural themes 'for direct encounter with a hidden ancient wisdom tradition associated contemporarily with occultic experience'.<sup>8</sup> It is my intention here to suggest how we might read Wilde's work with supernatural themes as his *fin-de-siècle* readers might have done using such an

---

<sup>5</sup> Karl Beckson, 'Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde: Some New A. Conan Doyle Letters', *English Language Notes*, 17.1 (1979), 39. A somewhat less convincing Wilde appears in Lazar, *The Ghost Epigrams of Oscar Wilde as Taken Down through Automatic Writing by Lazar* (New York: Covici Friede, 1928).

<sup>6</sup> Alex Owen describes Queen Victoria as 'hav[ing] dabbled' in spiritualism; see Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> See also Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 159-64, for a discussion of Wilde as 'revenant' in the early twentieth century. For Wilde's ghost as it appears in fictional media, see Eleanor Dobson, 'The Ghost of Oscar Wilde: Fictional Representations', in *Ghosts – or the (Nearly) Invisible: Spectral Phenomena in Literature and the Media*, ed. by Maria Fleischhack and Elmar Schenkel (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 35-44.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Ferguson, 'Reading with the Occultists: Arthur Machen, A. E. Waite, and the Ecstasies of Popular Fiction', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 21.1 (2016), 40-55 (p. 42).

‘occultic approach’, and in so doing to firmly relocate him within the context of the magical revival and subsequent occultism, within which he participated both *pre-* and, purportedly, *post-mortem*.

This article thus investigates Wilde’s engagement with phenomena associated with spiritualism and the supernatural. In doing so, it pays particular attention to his encounters with the photographic medium, drawing connections between his experiences of photographic and painted portraits on the one hand, and occult activities on the other, in order to illuminate spiritually-inflected traces in his writings, especially in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In reading the titular portrait with photographic technologies in mind, this essay does not deny the centrality of older forms of art within Wilde’s publications and lectures, nor the significance of ‘the spirit within the artwork’, a concept with a rich cultural history brilliantly elucidated by Lynda Nead among others.<sup>9</sup> Instead, it emphasizes the generic overlaps between the painted and the photographic portrait in spiritualist contexts, and in Wilde’s writing. The variety of media produced by nineteenth-century spiritualists – spirit photographs, spirit portraits, and automatic writing, as well as combinations of these and other forms – blurs aesthetic boundaries. Dorian’s portrait achieves this too in its composite makeup: a painted picture with all of the realism of a photograph, but an object which is (fundamentally) rendered in text. In connecting the supernatural portrait to spirit photography in particular, this article seeks to contribute to the understanding of Wilde’s complex and multifaceted engagement with the artistic media of the age, and, by exploring the intricacies of the spiritualist and the spectral in *Dorian Gray* among other texts, to reveal Wilde’s negotiation with nineteenth-century spiritualist conventions.

## **I. Painting, Photography, and Hybrid Spiritualist Media**

Before teasing out the suggesting influence of photographic cultures on Wilde’s eponymous portrait, I acknowledge that the picture in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is, first and foremost, a painting and not a

---

<sup>9</sup> See, in particular, Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2007).

photograph. A painting is unique; modern photographs, as Wilde was aware, were becoming increasingly easy to reproduce. As Elisa Glick elucidates,

Dorian yearns to transcend the limitations of everyday consumption. Resisting bourgeois or mass styles of consumption, his elitist consumption looks back to the traditional aristocracy for inspiration, shunning that which is merely merchandise – the ‘unrefined’ consumption of an increasingly massified society – and instead valuing objects that are unique, handmade, and rare. In this respect, Gray implicitly repudiates the mechanical reproduction at the heart of the consumer revolution, privileging the imperfections and detail of hand labor over the uniformity of the machine.<sup>10</sup>

Although they exist in the novel, photographs of Dorian are not produced for Dorian himself, but for his masses of admirers. Traditional art, and not the photograph, was the domain of the dandy, a *rôle* which Wilde himself had also gone to great lengths to cultivate. Furthermore, by the time he published *Dorian Gray*, Wilde was already well-known for his lectures on aesthetics, while his friendships – with James McNeill Whistler, John Singer Sargent, and Charles Shannon among others – reflected his interest in the world of fine art. As J. Hillis Miller records of idealist aesthetics, ‘[f]or traditional men and women the work of art was unique, made once only, impossible to reproduce, except in degraded form, since the copy would lack the authenticity and aura of the original work’; both Wilde and Dorian appear to conform to a traditional view of art’s cultural capital.<sup>11</sup> Alan Trachtenberg records that, on the other hand, in the 1890s photography was particularly ‘linked to the [...] unlimited reproduction of images in newspapers and periodicals’; this medium was one which

---

<sup>10</sup> Elisa Glick, ‘The Dialectics of Dandyism’, *Cultural Critique*, 48 (Spring 2001), 129-63 (pp. 141-42).

<sup>11</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Illustration* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), p. 20. See also Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 182-94.

seemed ‘to revel in its sheer mechanicalness, and in spontaneous pictures of the mundane, the quotidian’, contrasting with contemporary notions of high art.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of the novel, furthermore, the painted portrait, rather than the photographic, bore substantial historical and literary weight: there was an established Gothic tradition of paintings in literature, while the Gothic photograph had not yet emerged as a fully-fledged trope.<sup>13</sup> As a number of critics have noted, Wilde’s supernatural painting had predecessors in the works of some of the most celebrated authors of the Gothic genre – notably Horace Walpole, who had popularized the motif of the moving portrait in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and Edgar Allan Poe, whose short story ‘The Oval Portrait’ (1842) intimately connects the subject’s death to the act of painting.<sup>14</sup> A similar device is used in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), written by Charles Maturin, Wilde’s great-uncle. The concept of moving or haunted portraits thus had a literary history stretching back over a hundred years, as well as a history within Wilde’s own family. Indeed, this tradition of the Gothic portrait continued in the writings of aesthetes at the *fin de siècle*: Vernon Lee for example, further elaborated upon this trope.<sup>15</sup> By depicting a supernatural painting rather than a photograph, then, Wilde aligned his novel with these earlier celebrated writings and all of the cultural acclaim associated with them.

I want to suggest, however, that Wilde updates the literary trope of the Gothic portrait by combining the painterly with elements of the photographic, and of the spirit photograph in particular; he draws upon photographic imagery to imbue his spectral portrait with contemporary features.<sup>16</sup> This

---

<sup>12</sup> ‘Introduction’, *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. by Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CN: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), pp. vii-xiii (p. xi). While Trachtenberg’s statement rings true, the nineteenth-century debate on the photograph’s relation to high art is, however, more complex. The essays in his edited collection explore the full range of the debate.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle’s ghost story, ‘The Captain of the “Pole-star”’ (1883) is a noteworthy example of a tale combining the supernatural with the photographic.

<sup>14</sup> For the most thorough examination of the magic-picture genre with reference to *Dorian Gray*, see Kerry Powell, ‘Tom, Dick and Dorian Gray: Magic-Picture Mania in Late Victorian Fiction’, *Philological Quarterly*, 62.2 (1983), 147-70.

<sup>15</sup> See Hilary Grimes, *The Late Victorian Gothic: Mental Science, the Uncanny and Scenes of Writing* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 112-18.

<sup>16</sup> There are, of course, other practical reasons for the choice: Dorian’s beauty is also characterized by the colouring of his ivory skin, scarlet lips, blue eyes and golden hair, necessitating that the image is in colour, especially important when a bloodstain appears on the portrait, a detail that would not be so horrifically and immediately apparent in greyscale. Wilde, in a letter to Robert Ross dated 14 May 1900, commented that ‘My photographs are now so good that in my moments of mental depression [...] I think I was intended to be a photographer’, before adding that ‘I was made for more terrible things of which colour is “an element.”’; Oscar Wilde, ‘To Robert Ross’, 14 May 1900, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estates, 2000), p. 1187, quoted in Lindsay Smith, ‘“Play[ing] Narcissus to a

hybridity is reflected in the title of the novel; it is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, not the ‘portrait’ or ‘painting’ (unlike, for example, ‘The Portrait of Mr. W. H.’ [1889]), inviting readers to consider the full range of connotations of the word, including the photographic. Of course, ‘to picture’ can also refer to conjuring up an image in the mind’s eye – a psychic process. Such ambiguity invites us to read Wilde’s text with these multiple meanings in mind.

The close relationship between the painted and photographic image in spiritualist contexts is one way in which we might understand the text’s blurring of the painterly and the photographic, and the interplay of these forms in Wilde’s account of the portrait. As John Harvey notes, both spirit paintings – paintings purportedly produced by spirits called forth by a medium – and spirit photographs – photographs supposedly taken of spirits by photographers, often in the presence of mediums – were the subject of much debate within scientific and artistic circles, at times bringing the two into conversation. With the advent of photography, many spiritualists who had experimented with spirit painting and drawing eagerly embraced the new medium.<sup>17</sup> Spirit photographs were also intimately connected with the formal portrait: the very first images of ‘spirits’ produced by Mumler and his predecessors appeared on photographic portraits of living sitters. While the picture in *Dorian Gray* is of a single living sitter, its metamorphosis to ‘reveal to him his own soul’ (83) at once connects it to spirit photography and foreshadows Dorian’s death. When the artist who painted the portrait, Basil Hallward, sees the transformed picture, he observes that ‘the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away’, worse than ‘[t]he rotting of a corpse’ (136). The picture is as much of a dead as it is of a living presence.

The products of spiritualism, like Dorian’s portrait, did not necessarily fall into neat categories of ‘writing’, ‘painting’ and ‘photography’. One photographer, Richard Boursnell, created

---

Photograph”: Oscar Wilde and the Image of the Child’, in *Oscar Wilde and the Cultures of Childhood*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 41-67 (p. 61). Photographs were often hand-coloured through the addition of paint, however. There exists a hand-coloured photograph of Wilde circa 1890.

When Wilde wrote his novel, spirit photographs had existed for a relatively short time. William H. Mumler claimed to have produced the first in America in the 1860s; in Britain they were produced a decade later in 1872. See Ronald Pearsall, *The Table-Rappers: The Victorians and the Occult* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), p. 120; Jennifer Tucker, ‘Photography as Witness, Detective, and Imposter: Visual Representation in Victorian Science’, in *Victorian Science in Context* ed. by Bernard Lightman (London; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 378-408 (p. 396). Pearsall notes that there are claims that the first ‘extras’ appeared in photographs by Richard Boursnell in 1851, predating Mumler’s examples by over a decade.

<sup>17</sup> John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit* (London: Reaktion, 2007), pp. 110-11.

spirit extras – spirits which appear in photographic portraits of the living – by painting the form onto the photographic backdrop with a chemical such as quinine sulphate, which would reveal itself on the photographic plate, but was undetectable to the naked eye, while others painted spirits directly onto the photographic plates themselves.<sup>18</sup> Spirit paintings could be made to materialize rapidly using photographic techniques. Ronald Pearsall recounts one particular case, in which oil paintings could be made to materialize within a matter of minutes in a darkened room, through the application of photographic chemicals to a canvas which had been prepared earlier.<sup>19</sup> Mediums often flitted between artistic outputs: the spiritualist medium David Duguid, notorious for his spirit paintings, also produced spirit photographs and automatic writing.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes spirit writing appeared superimposed onto a spirit photograph. The artistic products of spiritualism, therefore, collapsed traditional categories of media, oscillating between the written, the photographic and the drawn, very much as the portrait of Dorian does: it is a ‘picture’ rendered only (from the reader of an unillustrated edition’s perspective) in text. As Dorian himself remarks of this textual portrait, ‘I keep a diary of my life from day to day, and it never leaves the room in which it is written’ (132). This multimodality is common to both Wilde’s literary portrait and the wealth of spiritualist media being produced at the *fin de siècle*.

## II. The Wildes, Occultism, and Photography

Oscar Wilde’s flirtations with spiritualism and the occult have hitherto received little scholarly attention; instead, literary critics interested in Wilde’s spiritual beliefs have focussed predominantly on his attitudes towards Christianity, and his wavering between denominations until his death-bed conversion to Roman Catholicism.<sup>21</sup> He was, however, intrigued by alternative spiritual attitudes, and,

---

<sup>18</sup> Pearsall, *Table-Rappers*, p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> Pearsall, *Table-Rappers*, p. 104.

<sup>20</sup> Pearsall, *Table-Rappers*, p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> For Wilde and religion, see, for example, Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 257-59. Scholars who address Wilde’s links to occultism include Marie Mulvey Roberts, who connects Wilde’s legal trials to Freemasonic rites, and Jarlath Killeen, who claims that Wilde’s fairy tales should be read with occultism (particularly that connected to Helena Blavatsky and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn) in mind. See Marie Mulvey Roberts, ‘The Importance of Being a



as so many of his contemporaries attested, spiritualist and Christian beliefs were by no means incompatible.<sup>22</sup> At various points throughout his life, Wilde had his fortune told, his palm read and participated in thought-reading experiments.<sup>23</sup> Shortly after writing *Dorian Gray* he attended a séance at which he believed he had seen the ghost of his father, and had subsequently received a message from him ‘given thro’ raps’.<sup>24</sup> Although his wife, Constance, was sceptical about the veracity of this particular ‘communication from ghost-land’, she was – on the whole – even more convinced by spiritualism and magic than her husband. Indeed, it is likely that Constance’s experiences in several organizations central to the late-Victorian magical revival exposed Oscar to a wealth of supernatural media, which included images that some claimed to depict the spirits themselves.

Both Oscar’s and Constance’s fathers were Freemasons, and Wilde himself had been initiated while at Oxford.<sup>25</sup> Constance, unable to access this exclusive all-male secret society, turned to alternative organizations in order to pursue hidden knowledge. After participation in the Theosophical Society (sometimes with Oscar in attendance) and forays into the world of spiritualism, Constance was initiated into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a group that promised the realization of ancient magical power, on 13 November 1888.<sup>26</sup> Her membership was suspended in November 1889, and she went on to join the Society for Psychical Research as an associate in 1892, becoming a full member in 1894.<sup>27</sup> In correspondence from 1878 she had claimed the ability to mesmerize and was, in turn, mesmerized by friends as an evening entertainment.<sup>28</sup> Her distant cousin Lady Mount-Temple produced spirit drawings, while from around 1886 both of the Wildes were friendly with Samuel

---

Freemason: The Trials of Oscar Wilde’, in *Decadence and Danger: Writing, History and the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Tracey Hill (Bath: Sulis Press, 1997), pp. 138-49; Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 11-13.

<sup>22</sup> Pearsall, *The Table-Rappers*, p. 60; Owen, *The Darkened Room*, pp. 22-23; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> John Stokes, *Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles and Imitations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 1; Vincent O’Sullivan, *Aspects of Wilde* (London: Constable, 1936), p. 35. O’Sullivan records that the scandal of Wilde’s trials led his mother to believe that ‘he was possessed by the Spirit of Evil’, and that Wilde claimed to have been visited by her ghost while he was in prison, before he learned of her death; see pp. 61, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Constance Wilde to Lady Mount-Temple, 29 November 1893, University of Southampton, Broadlands Archive, 57/47/17, as quoted in Franny Moyle, *Constance: The Tragic and Scandalous life of Mrs Oscar Wilde* (London: John Murray, 2011), p. 235.

<sup>25</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, p. 14; Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, pp. 62-63. Oscar’s mother and brother were also attracted to Theosophy; see p. 108.

<sup>27</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, pp. 175-76.

<sup>28</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, pp. 22, 59.

Liddell MacGregor Mathers, a leading figure in the Golden Dawn.<sup>29</sup> On 21 June 1889, the year in which it is held that Wilde likely began to write *Dorian Gray*,<sup>30</sup> moreover, the couple had shared a table in a restaurant with the matriarch of the Theosophical Society, Helena Blavatsky, who personally invited him to join; Wilde would later purchase a copy of Blavatsky's *The Key to Theosophy* (1889).<sup>31</sup> Encouraged by his wife's connections, Wilde evidently dipped more than just a toe into occult waters.

In her biography of Constance Wilde, Franny Moyle has suggested that Constance's supernatural undertakings had a profound impact upon Oscar's literary work, proposing that her Golden Dawn membership was suspended at the time Oscar had just begun to write *Dorian Gray* because the Order had learned that she had been revealing their secrets to her husband.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the discovery of a manuscript of Wilde's fairy-tale 'The Selfish Giant' in 2008, written in Constance's handwriting and with pencil corrections in Oscar's, has raised questions of authorship and suggests the possibility of collaboration between husband and wife in the late 1880s and early 1890s.<sup>33</sup> The couple were evidently working together at this time, and Constance might have had more of an influence on *Dorian Gray* than has previously been recognized. The portrait in *Dorian Gray* does indeed conform to the Golden Dawn's beliefs in the supernatural power of images: practitioners participated in magical ceremonies that purportedly channelled the spirits of ancient Egyptian gods through statues of these deities.<sup>34</sup> There are certainly equivalents to the Order's beliefs in Wilde's representation of a painted portrait that conveys the soul of the individual depicted, inviting consideration that Constance may have revealed details of the Golden Dawn's rites to Oscar. Similarly, the picture sits very comfortably alongside one of the main tenets of theosophy with which both Wildes, but particularly Constance, would have been familiar: 'that the material world cannot be

---

<sup>29</sup> Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, p. 272, n. 30; Moyle, *Constance*, pp. 168, 213.

<sup>30</sup> See Donald L. Lawler, 'Oscar Wilde's First Manuscript of "The Picture of Dorian Gray"', *Studies in Bibliography*, 25 (1972), 125-35 (p. 127). Lawler cites evidence that Wilde began *The Picture and Dorian Gray* prior to October 1889.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Wright, *Oscar's Books* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008), p. 136; Moyle, *Constance*, p. 165; Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, p. 175.

<sup>33</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, p. 136. This claim warrants further investigation, and while for reasons of scope, I am unable to make a full analysis here, I am inclined to believe that some degree of co-authorship between husband and wife was taking place.

<sup>34</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon and London, 2002), p. 130.

separated from its spiritual counterpart'.<sup>35</sup> The painting is an object loaded with supernatural power, and there are traces of both Oscar's and Constance's occult experiences woven through it. When we examine these alongside Wilde's gestures towards the photographic medium (in which both the Wildes took an interest) in his writings, particular spiritualist image-making practices are thrown into relief.

Recent years have seen a surge in interest in both photographic images of Wilde and his own photographs, leading to fruitful reassessments of the importance he placed on this medium. Constance acquired a Kodak camera shortly after they became available to purchase (she had certainly acquired one by 1892 at the latest; portable Kodaks were released just a couple of years prior).<sup>36</sup> Oscar, too, would take up amateur photography upon his release from prison; in the final years of his life Wilde '[thought] that I was intended to be a photographer'.<sup>37</sup> Rather eerily, it was with his own Kodak that the *post-mortem* photograph of Wilde on his hotel bed in Paris would be taken.<sup>38</sup> At their home in Chelsea, renowned for its stylishness, photographs of the Wildes' children were displayed alongside prints of their favourite paintings on a gold frieze in their drawing room, suggesting, on the Wildes' part, a shared appreciation of photographic and painted art as generic cousins. In the Wildes' home, at least, traditional and photographic art were equally cherished.<sup>39</sup> Wilde famously used photographic portraiture as a means of self-expression and self-promotion, posing in various outfits and with his books for props, and he, like many of his contemporaries, gave and received *cartes de visites* – portrait photographs – as gifts.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, the most best-known images of Wilde are photographic; well-known non-photographic images are, on the whole and with a few notable exceptions, caricature sketches. Wilde did not often sit to be painted or sketched. Only one known formal portrait of him comes close to

---

<sup>35</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, p. 166. This is, of course, also an idea central to Christianity: lines between religion, spirituality and occultism were often indistinct.

<sup>36</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, p. 218.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, "Play[ing] Narcissus to a Photograph", p. 42; Wilde, 'To Robert Ross', 14 May 1900, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 1187, quoted in Smith "Play[ing] Narcissus to a Photograph", p. 61.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Fryer, *Robbie Ross: Oscar Wilde's True Love* (London: Thistle, 2013), p. 140.

<sup>39</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> See John Plunkett, 'Celebrity and Community: The Poetics of the *Carte-de-visite*', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 8.1 (2003), 55-79.

resembling ‘the Realism of the method’ of painting in *Dorian Gray* (264).<sup>41</sup> This full-length portrait by Harper Pennington *circa* 1884 remains the only known painted portrait that Wilde commissioned, depicting him ‘as he looked in 1881’, and was also displayed in the Wildes’ drawing room with the art prints and photographs.<sup>42</sup> The only other realistic painting of Wilde was produced in 1883: Wilde can be seen surrounded by female admirers in William Powell Frith’s satire on aestheticism, *A Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881*.<sup>43</sup> Wilde would later mischievously critique his depiction in this scene in *Dorian Gray* when Lord Henry Wotton advises that Dorian’s portrait should not be exhibited in the Royal Academy:

The Academy is too large and too vulgar. Whenever I have gone there, there have been either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse. (4)

Wilde nods jokingly to a satirical painted portrait of himself (looking at painted pictures) in his own novel featuring a supernatural painting: there are multiple layers of (typically Wildean) self-reflexivity here. Like so many famous paintings of the time, Frith’s *Private View* was reproduced via photogravure, translating the painted image into a photographic one, and then an etching. These transformations in media (from painterly to photographic) not only chime with the painting in *Dorian Gray* but a variety of spiritualist image-making practices. There is an echo of Wilde’s own experiences of being captured in media which move between the painterly and the photographic in the painting in *Dorian Gray*, an image which first captures Dorian’s appearance, and later his soul, with a kind of photographic realism.

---

<sup>41</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Ian Small, 7 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005-13), III, ed. by Joseph Bristow (2005), p. 264. Subsequent page references will be cited in the body of the text.

<sup>42</sup> Gary Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde: Interpreting Oscar* (London: Abacus, 1994), p. xii; Harper Pennington, *Portrait of Oscar Wilde, c.1884*, oil on canvas, 180 × 110 cm, William Andrews Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

<sup>43</sup> William Powell Frith, *A Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881*, 1883, oil on canvas, 60 × 114 cm, Royal Academy, London, on loan from the Pope Family Trust.

It was just prior to Wilde's depiction in *Private View*, in New York City in January 1882, that Wilde was photographed by Napoleon Sarony, 'the best-known practitioner of his art in America and the top celebrity and theatrical photographer'. The resulting images were 'the most widely circulated photographs of Wilde', and remain iconic.<sup>44</sup> The experience of being portrayed in different media within a short time may have reinforced Wilde's sense of their interconnectedness. This supposition can actually be traced not only in his and Constance's display of photographs and art prints side-by-side in their family home, but in Wilde's writings, in which photographic and painted portraits appear within the same narratives. Indeed, Wilde emphasizes their closeness, and – to a degree – interchangeability, by concurrently drawing upon the supernatural: spirits mediate these forms.

Many photographic portraits taken earlier in Wilde's life were daguerreotypes, created by a process which was replaced by alternative photographic methods by the early 1860s. Produced on a polished silver surface, daguerreotypes are notable for resembling mirrors: the photographic image is only visible from certain angles, and even then its lines emerge from a reflective metallic plane. This and the lateral reversal of the subject (avoided in subsequent photographic techniques based on a double inversion process), led to associations between photography and the 'magic mirror', a phrase that Wilde echoes when he writes that, to Dorian, upon first learning that the portrait changes as he sins, the picture would be 'the most magical of mirrors' (83), invoking a contemporary romanticized label for the camera. Andrea Henderson eloquently sums up the full range of meanings behind the phrase 'magic mirror' in nineteenth-century mouths: '[w]hen Victorians called the camera a "magic mirror" they not only commented on its mimetic accuracy but also spoke to its power to make the once-familiar mirror image strangely unfamiliar, the site of defining oppositions, inversions, and "realistic" apparitions'.<sup>45</sup> While normal mirrors reflect Dorian's preserved youth – a 'fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass' (277) – the 'magic mirror' of the painting is an indicator of supernatural abhumanity.

---

<sup>44</sup> Daniel A. Novak, 'Sexuality in the Age of Technological Reproducibility: Oscar Wilde, Photography, and Identity', in *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), pp. 63-95 (pp. 64, 77); Laurence Dumortier, 'Oscar Wilde's Multitudes: Against Limiting his Photographic Iconography', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 58.2 (2015), 147-63 (pp. 147-48).

<sup>45</sup> Andrea Henderson, 'Magic Mirrors: Formalist Realism in Victorian Physics and Photography', *Representations*, 117 (2012), 120-50 (p. 132).

### III. Photographic culture and *Dorian Gray*

Recently, Lindsay Smith has suggested that Wilde's fairy tales might be read alongside 'the photographic discourse that was contemporary with them', proposing that 'connections with, and debts to' this discourse 'invite the reader to contemplate the [figure of the] child [in Wilde's fairy tales] as an image formed by a relatively new technology of vision'.<sup>46</sup> Several other scholars have noted the connections between photography and the portrait in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, though explicit observations about the spiritualist associations of photography have heretofore been lacking. Christopher Craft and Donald R. Dickson have both commented on Wilde's use of mirror symbolism in *Dorian Gray*, closely linked to nineteenth-century photographic culture.<sup>47</sup> Craft draws attention to 'Wilde's notable, almost technical deployment of "shadow" (an English usage specifying a human image within a mirror and, later, a photograph)', one image of the enchanted double which, like Narcissus's 'phantasm' reflection, is ghostly, 'a shimmering dream-figure'.<sup>48</sup> Dickson, meanwhile, observes the similarities between the painting and a mirror image, which expresses 'the confusion of art and life' which recurs in Wilde's work.<sup>49</sup> Kerry Powell further recognizes a particularly noteworthy alteration to the tale when published in book form: in the novel (though not in the *Lippincott's* version), Dorian destroys his mirror as well as the portrait, equating the two.<sup>50</sup> Others connect the portrait and the photographic image more explicitly, arguing that the novel itself 'is really a metaphor for photography' and that '[t]he visible rot of Dorian's picture [is] as instantaneous in its increments as if it were itself photographically recorded stage by stage'.<sup>51</sup> Nancy Armstrong asserts

---

<sup>46</sup> Smith, "Play[ing] Narcissus to a Photograph", p. 42.

<sup>47</sup> The mirror is also intimately connected to the magic picture genre. See Powell, 'Tom, Dick and Dorian Gray', pp. 151, 165.

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Craft, 'Come see about me: Enchantment of the Double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *Representations*, 91.1 (2005), 109-36 (pp. 109-10, 114).

<sup>49</sup> Donald R. Dickson, "'In a mirror that mirrors the soul": Masks and Mirrors in *Dorian Gray*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 26.1 (1983), 5-15 (p. 11).

<sup>50</sup> Powell, 'Tom, Dick and Dorian Gray', p. 165.

<sup>51</sup> Jane M. Gaines, *Contested Culture: The Image, the Voice, and the Law* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 42; Garrett Stewart, 'Reading Figures: The Legible Image of Victorian Textuality', in *Victorian Literature and the*

that ‘Wilde refuses [...] to resolve the conflict between type and individual implicit in the relationship between the longstanding tradition of portrait painting and the differential system created by the market in photographic images’.<sup>52</sup> The notion of photography providing ‘the fantasy of perfect-presentation, a mirroring of the object which surpasses mimesis’, is also evident in Dorian’s portrait: the image is a reflection of himself, but it reflects *more* than is apparent upon looking at the original.<sup>53</sup>

The essay that most convincingly connects Dorian’s portrait to photography, however, is Daniel A. Novak’s ‘Sexuality in the Age of Technological Reproducibility’, which contends that ‘Basil’s “portrait” is [simultaneously] a *picture* and a *photographic* picture’; while it ‘is not explicitly a photograph, it is described as a realistic representation’.<sup>54</sup> While Novak’s argument is particularly concerned with sexuality and the burgeoning field of art-photography, his essay draws attention to the wealth of thematic and linguistic connections between the portrait and the photograph, and, in keeping with Craft’s and Dickson’s essays, notes the particular significance of mirroring: ‘[I]literalizing Wilde’s argument in “The Decay of Lying” [...] that “Life holds the mirror up to Art” [...], Dorian Gray becomes an exact or “photographic” reproduction of Basil’s portrait’.<sup>55</sup> Novak’s essay is also the first to hint at a spiritualist aspect to the portrait, stating that ‘Basil Hallward’s painting [...] offers the fantasy that the photograph reveals not the body but the soul’, a mirror image of the psychical rather than the physical self.<sup>56</sup>

Dorian’s gloomy attic within which the picture changes mimics the photographer’s darkroom: ‘hidden away in a locked room, [...] shut out from the sunlight’, the picture continues to ‘develop’ each time it is left, and, like the spirit photograph, it is only upon the development of the image that

---

*Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. by Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 345-66 (p. 350).

<sup>52</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 159-60.

<sup>53</sup> Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>54</sup> Novak, ‘Sexuality in the Age of Technological Reproducibility’, pp. 83-84. This connection appears to have been recognized in a film adaptation of the novel, *Dorian Gray* (dir. Oliver Parker: 2009), in which Dorian has his photograph taken as he stands in front of the portrait.

<sup>55</sup> Novak, ‘Sexuality in the Age of Technological Reproducibility’, p. 85; Oscar Wilde, ‘The Decay of Lying’.

<sup>56</sup> Novak, ‘Sexuality in the Age of Technological Reproducibility’, p. 84.

the supposedly ‘unseeable’ is rendered visible.<sup>57</sup> The picture transforms without Dorian but, we learn, he ‘hoped that some day he would see the change taking place before his very eyes’ – to watch the course of development in the metaphorical darkroom (82). Hallward, upon seeing his deformed creation, considers – even if only to protect himself from confronting the more troubling supernatural reasons for the metamorphosis – that the changes might be explained via chemistry: that ‘the paints [...] had some wretched mineral poison in them’ (135). The development of the image that Hallward proposes, based on the transformative effects of chemicals, also evokes the processes of the darkroom, and it is noteworthy that, after his murder, Hallward’s body is dissolved using nitric acid, a chemical used in the collodion process, the photographic technique that succeeded the daguerreotype.<sup>58</sup>

Dorian’s material covering for the painting – ‘a large, purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold’ – not only functions as a conventional protective layer to protect paintings from light,<sup>59</sup> but emulates the use of thick fabric drapery (often velvet) on early photographic equipment, designed to keep excess light from interfering with the photograph outside of the controlled exposure times (96).<sup>60</sup> In veiling his portrait he evokes not only the photographic apparatus but the boundary between the real world and the realm of the spirits. The velvet covering thus combines psychical and scientific function.

It becomes apparent, on consideration of the wealth of Wilde criticism that touches upon photography, particularly that which reads the photographic medium as significant in *The Picture of Doria Gray*, and to the Gothic purposes to which such imagery is put in Wilde’s text, that the hazy boundaries between different types of spiritualist image-making are at the foreground of Wilde’s depiction of his supernatural portrait. While *Dorian Gray* offers up the best-known depiction of a

---

<sup>57</sup> The darkroom is, as Owen Clayton suggests (speaking of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* [1886]), ‘the place where composite monsters were born’; see Owen Clayton, *Literature and Photography in Transition, 1850-1915* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 79.

<sup>58</sup> John Hannavy, *Victorian Photographers at Work* (Princes Risborough: Shire, 1997), p. 20.

<sup>59</sup> A protective covering for a Gothic portrait also appears in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), though this is a somewhat simpler ‘green baize’.

<sup>60</sup> This drapery also functions metaphorically: a hanging piece of silvery fabric is emblazoned across the black cloth boards of Smith’s *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde*, a literalization of the phrase ‘beyond the veil’, referring to the boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead. In the case of the drapery that graces the covers of Smith’s book, there are further connotations: the veil evokes the theatrical curtain (alluding to both the theatricality of mediumship as well as Wilde’s reputation as a dramatist), and the filmy translucency of ectoplasmic gauze.



‘soul’ in Wilde’s *oeuvre*, there is another spirit of interest to a consideration of Wilde’s textual engagement with occultism in his earlier work, ‘The Canterville Ghost’.

#### IV. ‘The Canterville Ghost’, *Dorian Gray*, and the Society for Psychical Research

Wilde’s first published short story, ‘The Canterville Ghost’, appeared in the *Court and Society Review* in February 1887, three years before the initial appearance of *Dorian Gray*. It is in this work that Wilde reveals most explicitly his interest in the supernatural, and, tellingly, associates the photographic portrait with ghosts through references to the photographer who had captured Wilde’s most famous images: Sarony. Even at this early stage in Wilde’s literary career, interactions between the ghost and portraiture adumbrate the changing image of Dorian’s soul. Wilde describes the ghost ‘amusing himself by making satirical remarks on the large Saroni [*sic*] photographs of the United States Minister and his wife, which had now taken the place of the Canterville family pictures’, depicted in the accompanying illustration by Wallace Goldsmith (Figure 1). Dorian too would peruse family pictures – ‘portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins’ (121) – his own portrait acting as the realistic (near-photographic) replacement of these older, inherited artworks.<sup>61</sup>

It was not until 1910 that an edition of *Dorian Gray* was published with illustrations.<sup>62</sup> A decade after Wilde’s death, Charles Carrington of Paris brought out the first illustrated edition (delayed after its intended publication date of 1908 specifically because Carrington was awaiting the completion of these images). A frontispiece showing the portrait and six plates of wood engravings by

---

<sup>61</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Canterville Ghost* (Boston; London: John W. Luce, 1906), pp. 63-64. Given the current rarity of *The Court and Society Review*, in which ‘The Canterville Ghost’ was first published, I refer to a more readily-available edition of the text that reproduces the original illustrations.

<sup>62</sup> In the 1890 and 1891 versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* there are no illustrations. The artistic styles of Wilde’s illustrators were not suited to the mimetic realism of the portrait. Charles Ricketts was perfectly capable of producing brilliant artwork – his most celebrated illustrative work for Wilde would occur later for his long poem *The Sphinx* published in 1894. He did not, however, produce *photorealistic* works. The kinds of visual material that Wilde admired and commissioned for his texts did not conform to realistic representations, and never came close to approaching the portrait’s photographic quality. The textual, artistic, and photographic multimodality associated with spiritualist media can be traced to the version of the text as it appeared as a novel in April of 1891. The binding and title page were designed by Ricketts. It was in this latter edition that art and photographic technology collided: the title page features ‘lettering, which has been reproduced photographically from a hand-drawn design’, very much the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction; see Nicholas Frankel, *Oscar Wilde’s Decorated Books* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000, p. 143.

Eugène Dété from drawings by Paul Thiriat accompanied Wilde's text. Of these images, only two depict the portrait, and both show it as Basil Hallward originally painted it: one before Dorian acquires it, and one after his death (Figure 2).<sup>63</sup> While publisher and illustrator were apparently comfortable producing an image of the portrait as it was before it has begun to demonstrate the corruption of the sitter, they seem to have been, as Wilde was, aware that to provide an illustration of the changed painting could only reduce its horror in the mind of the reader. There was something *undepictable* about the portrait; neither a highly stylized nor a more realistic rendering would do justice to the picture of Wilde's imagination, which hovered at the boundary of material and spiritual realms, somewhere between painted portrait and spirit photograph. Yet the final image in this edition of the text is eerily familiar in subject matter, composition and execution. Dorian's servant holds a candlestick high, illuminating the picture on the wall, much as the Canterville ghost holds a lantern aloft to examine the photographic portrait. In both, the pictures have a peculiar mirror-like quality, in which they appear to present their own image whilst simultaneously reflecting the figure before them, a feature which connects both images to the nineteenth-century photograph and its aforementioned associations with mirrors.<sup>64</sup>

Wilde's depiction in 'The Canterville Ghost' of a spectre mocking photographs which have replaced traditional painted portraits does not necessarily imply contempt for the replacement of the antique with the new-fangled, however. Indeed, the Canterville ghost himself does not evoke fear but ridicule; the people he haunts see him both as an inconvenience to be dealt with pragmatically, and an anomaly to be recorded with detached scientific curiosity: 'Mrs. Otis expressed her intention of joining the Psychical Society, and Washington prepared a long letter to Messrs. Myers and Podmore'.<sup>65</sup> The ghost is a figure of absurdity, decked out in chains in emulation of Marley's ghost in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), and similarly backwards in his stubborn resistance to the paraphernalia of modernity filtering into his ancestral home. In this scene, in which a spirit peruses photographs of living people, Wilde inverts the contemporary fascination for spirit

---

<sup>63</sup> Of course, in this format the portrait is rendered in greyscale, a palette more redolent of the photograph.

<sup>64</sup> The mirror-like aspect of the portrait in this image is also apparent in the other engraving that depicts the painting: in this illustration too, the figure of Dorian in the painting is complemented by the posture of the figure standing opposite.

<sup>65</sup> Wilde, *Canterville Ghost*, p. 18.

photography, which saw living people scrutinize photographs thought (by some) to depict the spirits of the deceased. Subtle allusions to the culture of spirit photography are therefore detectable in works that precede *Dorian Gray*, and are accompanied by gestures towards scholarly scrutiny of such subjects. Invocations of the Society for Psychical Research (the scientific organisation that would investigate the supposed recording of the voice of Wilde's ghost in the twentieth century), along with two of its founders, Frederic W. H. Myers and Frank Podmore, indicate an acquaintance, on Wilde's part, with middle-class, pseudo-academic investigations into the occult.

When Dorian notices changes to the painting he also speculates in strikingly scientific terms, although his theories contrast with Basil's straightforward chemical explanations. Dorian instead ponders the connections between material and immaterial spheres: 'Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and color on the canvas, and the soul that was within him?' (72). And later,

[m]ight there not be some curious scientific reason for it all? If thought could exercise its influence upon a living organism, might not thought exercise an influence upon dead and inorganic things? Nay, without thought or conscious desire, might not things external to ourselves vibrate in unison with our moods and passions, atom calling to atom in secret love or strange affinity? (83)

Dorian's explanations, with their references to 'atoms' and 'vibrations', read almost like speculations by members of the Society for Psychical Research. For example, in the year in which *Dorian Gray* was first published, one issue of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* printed a letter to the editor, Myers, in which the writer, F. B. Doveton, expresses their belief that ghosts 'can (being atomic) *pass through molecular obstructions*' (original emphasis).<sup>66</sup> Myers responds with his assessment of the physics behind the visualization of a spirit, providing several explanations, including: 'The action – vibration or whatever else it may be – may possibly require the molecular

---

<sup>66</sup> 'Correspondence', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 4.69 (1890), 243-48 (p. 244).

world for its propagation and transmission'.<sup>67</sup> Wilde, having already alluded to the Society in 'The Canterville Ghost', and again in his essay 'The Decay of Lying' (1889; 1891), and employing similar language of 'atoms' and 'vibrations', was – if not with this particular correspondence – clearly familiar with some of the Society's literature.

'The Decay of Lying' sees an invented character, Vivian, poke fun at

[t]he dreams of the great middle classes of this country, as recorded in Mr. Myers's two bulky volumes on the subject, and in the Transactions of the Psychical Society, [which] are the most depressing things that I have ever read. There is not even a fine nightmare among them. They are commonplace, sordid, and tedious.<sup>68</sup>

While it may be tempting to take Vivian's views as Wilde's own – as Elisha Cohn notes, 'Wilde's dandies are given to speaking Wilde's own aphorisms and are difficult to distinguish both from one another and from Wilde's own social persona' – Wilde's true opinions are particularly difficult to uncover here.<sup>69</sup> Although Wilde mocks the Society's publications, the implication is that he himself is familiar with them to some degree and, when considered in tandem with Constance's admittance to the Society the year following the republication of both 'The Decay of Lying' and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his real attitude become even harder to ascertain. Nevertheless, Dorian's stance appears to be one of credulity, mirroring the language used in the Society for Psychical Research's publications, and speculating about the changes to the painting in distinctly spiritualist terms.

While Dorian expresses his theories in the language employed in Society reports, the fundamental concept he proposes is one central to theosophy: the connections 'between the spiritual and the material dimensions'.<sup>70</sup> Spirits invisible to the naked eye could – according to spiritualists

---

<sup>67</sup> 'Correspondence', p. 248.

<sup>68</sup> Wilde, *Complete Works*, IV, ed. by Josephine Guy (2007), p. 99. The text in 'two bulky volumes' to which Wilde refers is *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), which Myers – one of the Society's founding members, who would go on to become President of the organization in 1900 – co-authored with Frank Podmore and Edmund Gurney.

<sup>69</sup> Elisha Cohn, 'Oscar Wilde's Ghost: The Play of Imitation', *Victorian Studies*, 54.3 (2012), 474-85 (p. 481).

<sup>70</sup> In *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde*, Wilde's spirit purportedly relates: 'I have always admired the Society for Psychical Research. They are the most magnificent doubters in the world. They are never happy until they

themselves and the members of the Society who scrutinized their images – be captured and rendered visible through chemical processes, reintroducing them into the material world. Similar language is used in the Society’s writings on telepathy: Dorian’s emphasis on ‘thought’ and ‘consciousness’ in the process of making the picture a ‘magic mirror’ gestures towards processes of supernatural image-making, as well as the materialization of ghosts. When he expresses ‘how terrible it was to think that conscience could raise such fearful phantoms, and give them visible form’, his soul perceptible within the painting arises like a product of ‘thoughtography’ or ‘psychography’, a method by which a medium could create an image of a spirit on an undeveloped photographic plate through the power of their will alone (339).<sup>71</sup> Dorian’s question – ‘If thought could exercise its influence upon a living organism, might not thought exercise an influence upon dead and inorganic things?’ – is one suggestive of a burgeoning belief in his own thoughtographic abilities, as he considers the possibility that it is his ‘thought[s]’ which have brought about the changes in the painting. Most revealingly, there were even suggestions by spiritualism’s opponents that in accumulating these abilities mediums (like Dorian himself) had entered into a ‘diabolic pact’.<sup>72</sup> Dorian’s susceptibility to mediumship is especially evident towards the end of the novel.<sup>73</sup> While he waits for Alan Campbell to dispose of Hallward’s body, he sketches a number of faces (recalling Lady Mount-Temple’s images produced in a trance state), all of which bear a ‘fantastic likeness’ to the deceased, an act redolent of spirit drawing (304).<sup>74</sup>

---

have explained away their spectres’. Smith, who was herself very familiar with Wilde’s *oeuvre*, would have been aware of his written allusions to the Society – a sceptic would suggest that this would allow her to imitate Wilde’s epigrammatic style in a far superior way to Flint. See Moyle, *Constance*, p. 166.

<sup>71</sup> Daniel Wojcik, ‘Spirits, Apparitions, and Traditions of Supernatural Photography’, *Visual Resources*, 25.1 (2009), 109-136 (p. 113); Gettings, *Ghosts in Photographs*, p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Gettings, *Ghosts in Photographs*, p. 15. As Owen suggests, when confronted with spirit phenomena, ‘[t]he Roman Catholic church [...] fell back on a revamped schema of demonology and satanic intent’; see Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. xviii.

<sup>73</sup> Owen notes the connection between mediumistic talent and femininity. While most male mediums attempted to cultivate masculine personas, she records the ‘persistent rumours [...] about the supposed effeminacy of Daniel Dunglas Home, a leading male medium [which] seemed to centre on [...] his long hair, sensitive hands, and personal vanity’; see Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 10. It is tempting to read Home as one of the ‘feminized and sexually suspect men exemplified by Wilde’, along with, of course, Dorian himself; see Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, p. 86.

<sup>74</sup> Powell reads this detail as a nod to *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) by Émile Zola; see Powell, ‘Tom, Dick and Dorian Gray’, p. 150.

## Conclusion

The fluidity of spiritualist media can be traced in the picture at the very heart of *Dorian Gray*, foreshadowed by the treatment of painted and photographic portraits in 'The Canterville Ghost'. Considering the products of spiritualism (which blur boundaries between the painted and drawn, the photographic and the textual) allows the full range of visual media to which Wilde was referring in his novel to come into focus, along with references to organizations that sought to investigate spiritualist media, such as the Society for Psychical Research. With the full wealth of esoteric associations in Wilde's novel, as well as his and his wife's twin interests in occultism and photography in mind, *Dorian Gray* appears not only to conform to the tropes and doctrines of late nineteenth-century spiritualism, theosophy and occultism more broadly, but does so in ways that correspond to the Wildes' own experiences, beliefs and interests. Hanging photographs next to painted art in their home implies a degree of exchangeability. There is more than a whisper of Golden Dawn ritual taking place in the psychic darkroom that is Dorian's attic: indeed, Dorian's rituals in this secluded room evoke not only contemporary occult practices, ceremonies and séances, but in many ways refer to photographic culture and its place in late nineteenth-century occultism.

What this identification of traces of spiritualism and the culture of occultism more broadly in the nineteenth century leads to is a reconsideration of the meanings of the novel. More than merely a Gothic tale drawing upon long-established motifs, I read it as an engagement with the complex cultures of the *fin-de-siècle* magical revival, addressing both the conventions of high art and the occult imagery that was becoming increasingly visible as photography itself grew in popularity. Furthermore, we can understand Wilde's depiction of this multifaceted image as responsive to the publications of organizations such as the Society for Psychical Research: he uses language associated with the Society with an open-mindedness that he does not chime with (and perhaps might be seen in opposition to) his jibes at the Society elsewhere in his work. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* tessellates with cultures of scientific (and professional) psychical investigation, as well as the tenets of spiritualism, theosophy and the Golden Dawn. This is a work that depicts the soul with photographic realism, not as a mass-produced commodity, but as a unique aesthetic object. This changes not only

how we read Wilde, but also how we read nineteenth-century occultism: we can chart, in Wilde's novel, the elevation of spirit photography to the status of high art.

My intention in this essay is to illuminate a new angle from which we might approach a classic text (indeed, one which has been the subject of so much scholarly scrutiny that fresh interpretations are scant), as well as a recontextualization of a canonical author that suggests original avenues that others might pursue. Most significantly, however, I hope that this essay demonstrates the benefits and unique insights of adopting an 'occultic approach' that seeks to emulate that employed not only by Wilde's original readership, but subsequent audiences – notably in the spiritualist communications in the 1920s and 1960s – to whom his spirit, in myriad ways, has spoken.