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THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY AND ITS PORTRAYAL  
OF VICTORIAN SOCIETY

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

České Budějovice, 10.11.2023

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## **Anotace**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá románem *Obraz Doriana Graye* napsaným autorem Oscarem Wildem. Cílem práce je ukázat a analyzovat, jakým způsobem kniha zobrazuje tehdejší viktoriánskou společnost a sociální a kulturní rozdíly mezi jejími třídami. V první části práce je představen autor a jeho jedinečný přístup k umění a estetice. Druhá část bakalářské práce představuje viktoriánskou Anglii, její politickou, ekonomickou a sociální situaci na konci 19. století, a zobrazuje problematiku sociálních tříd, jejich rozdíly a standardy. Je důležité porozumět době a společnosti, ve které se příběh odehrává, aby bylo možné správně analyzovat, jaké vlivy pravidla ve společnosti mohou mít na hlavní postavy knihy. Hlavní část se zaměřuje na analýzu románu jako představitele gotické prózy a představuje Doriana Graye jako gotického antagonistu. Práce se dále zabývá jednotlivými postavami z románu a tím, jak v knize reprezentují svou sociální třídu. Poslední část práce se věnuje Dorianu Grayovi a jeho dekadentnímu chování, jako jednomu z hlavních rysů viktoriánské vyšší třídy.

Klíčová slova: Viktoriánská společnost, genderové role, dekadence, gotický román, Oscar Wilde, Dorian Gray



## **Abstract**

This thesis is centred around the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. This work aims to show and analyse the novel and in what ways it portrays Victorian society and the social and cultural differences between its classes. The first part of the thesis introduces the author and his unique approach to art and aestheticism. The second part of the thesis introduces Victorian England and its political, economic and social situation at the end of the nineteenth century, and presents the problems of the country's social classes and their differences and standards, in order to understand the setting of the novel and the possible influences society had on its characters. The main part focuses on the analysis of the novel as a representative of Gothic prose and views Dorian Gray as a Gothic antagonist. This work then deals with individual characters of the novel and describes how they represent their social class in the story. Finally, the last part looks at Dorian Gray and his decadent behaviour as one of the main traits of the Victorian upper class.

Keywords: Victorian society, gender roles, decadence, Gothic novel, Oscar Wilde, Dorian Gray

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# 1 Introduction

Written in the last years of Queen Victoria's reign, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* undeniably deserves to be still regarded as one of the most praised and studied novels of all time. The book is associated with the literature of *fin de siècle*, the last decade of the nineteenth century, which was essentially defined by decadence. Upon the first publishing of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890, a lot of literary critics and academics were shocked at the explicitness and Oscar Wilde's depiction of the social classes. Although, as Anne Shepherd mentions, this period is known to have been open to new technological advancements and discoveries in science and arts, the Victorian era and its people were not that open to progress and kept their beliefs and approach mostly conservative (Shepherd 1). Given the fact that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published at such time, proved to be challenging for some people to accept and was the cause of a lot of controversy and uproar.

Although this was a period of progress and Britain was open to many different scientific discoveries and technological innovations, the people themselves were quite conservative. The growing contrast between radical thinkers and conservative members caused the artists of that time to bring new art styles and new, more controversial topics to portray in their works. It is therefore evident that the publication of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would pose a shocking challenge to society. Over time, Oscar Wilde became one of the authors who are as well-known for their art as they are for their personal life and controversies. The novel was met with a wave of criticism at first, for its exploration of immorality and decadent behaviour. Given the fact that the main character completely devotes his life and soul to pleasure and exploring the limits of immorality, many critics believed that this novel was Wilde's own projection of his

offensive ideals and depravity. However, Oates claims that is important to view Wilde's work as "a highly serious meditation upon the moral role of the artist - an interior challenge, in fact, to the insouciance of the famous pronouncements that would assure us that there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book" (Oates 420). In the Victorian era, literature was supposed to serve different purposes, not only to entertain but also to educate its readers. Naturally, the book was thought to be inappropriate because it did not educate the general reader the way it should, and did not focus on the typical Victorian values and principles. Other authors alongside Wilde challenged this thought, for example Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Walter Pater.

Wilde seemed to reject the idea that all art should be exemplary and teach a moral lesson, proving it by the fact that a lot of his art was generally dismissed by Victorian society as being provoking and disgraceful. What Wilde manages to show in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that the primary value of his book is aesthetic but it also includes a hidden message that the readers can learn from. Despite having suggestive immoral topics, it does not mean that the novel itself is immoral. For that reason, this thesis argues that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* should be seen as a major representative of the Victorian era, its society and principles, since it offers a unique perspective on the problems of Victorian social classes.

## **2 Author**

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, more commonly known as Oscar Wilde, was an English author, playwright, poet and novelist of Irish descent. To the world, he is known as one of the most popular and influential artists of the aesthetic movement. Wilde wrote fourteen short fiction stories, nine plays and seven essays, yet his only novel, and arguably his most popular and well-liked piece, has earned Wilde the most attention from critics and readers alike. Oscar Wilde like some other Victorian writers stirred society with his unconventional aesthetic style, decadence and later even imprisonment. Oscar Wilde went from being a dandy and the darling of the nation to becoming a broken shell of a man who later dies in exile in a cheap Parisian hotel after his release from prison.

### **2.1 The Artist's Beginnings and Downfall**

Oscar Wilde's upbringing definitely had an influence on his artistic expression and on the persona he would later grow to be. He was born in 1854 to Sir William, a respected doctor and to Irish writer Jane Wilde. Being raised in an esteemed upper-class family, Wilde's parents often hosted elite parties, where young Oscar gained experience with talking to Irish intellectuals, which would help him evolve his excellent conversational abilities. Wilde's unique approach to fiction and especially his Gothic influence could be attributed to his childhood as well since his father took him on travels around the country to visit old castles and ruins. It was here, that Oscar's interest in folklore rose, while he gathered superstitions and studied legends (Ransome 30).

Upon Wilde's arrival at Portora Royal School, he immediately distinguished himself from the other young boys. Oscar hated playing games and any other sports activities, to quote from Hesketh Pearson, "I never liked to kick or be kicked". On the other hand, young Oscar Wilde showed signs of interest in a strange fashion, standing out

by wearing brightly coloured clothes and his iconic top hat. He also usually preferred his own company and kept his distance from the other children, and only surrounded himself with people he deemed to be worth conversing with. Wilde took great pleasure in reading and conversing, which would in adulthood become his favourite activity. While at school, he also enjoyed watching sunsets, and flowers and being left in solitude (Pearson 27).

Wilde rather blossomed at Trinity College in Dublin, collecting a considerable array of accomplishments in Classical Studies as well as other awards. His knowledge of classics and Greek literature and drama expanded at this time also. After his college studies, Wilde travelled to Italy and went to Greece in 1877, accompanied by Professor Mahaffy. As Arthur Ransome describes, “This experience had a great influence on his attitude towards art, filled the classical dictionary with life, and made the figures of mythology so luminous that he was tempted to overwork them.” And Wilde’s approach to art and aestheticism truly was distinctive and philosophical. He did not bother himself by worrying about the technical and scientific sides of things, his unique artistic and aesthetic view of the world began developing from an early age. He did not need to know the science behind a sunset to understand and appreciate its beauty (Pearson 27).

Oscar Wilde’s first book, a collection of poems was published in 1881. Being a hit straight away, Wilde was soon enough considered one of the leading members, if not the main voice, of the aesthetic movement which was growing in popularity at that time. Additionally, with his eccentric fashion, hedonistic approach to life and being the master talker that he was, Oscar Wilde became one of the most valuable and talked-about literary figures in the Victorian art community. And for that reason, in 1882 Wilde was selected to be a lecturer on Art in America, a crowd of like minds that he could quickly win over with his extraordinary conversation skills and magnetism (Ransome 32).

After the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and also his most famous plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde rose to stardom and was recognised not only as a caricatured celebrity but also as the nation's success. (Ransome 35) His downfall was slowly coming due to his indulging in some disreputable and taboo activities, such as several homosexual relationships, despite having a wife and children. The big scandal which ruined his reputation for good was when the father of his male partner, Douglas, called him a homosexual publicly, which Wilde would later be tried and sentenced for. Coincidentally, even *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was used as evidence against him in court. After working hard labour for two years, Wilde spent additional six months at Wandsworth prison, from which he was then transferred to Reading (Pearson 315-18).

Upon his release, Oscar Wilde was broken and turned away from the public and remained for the rest of his life in exile. However, being a man with deep-rooted principles, Wilde's beliefs did not falter. Even after his release from prison, Wilde claimed that he did not regret leading the life he did. As a matter of fact, in a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, he wrote:

I amused myself with being a flâneur, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the meaner minds... Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation... Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on... I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace (Wilde 22-23).

### **3 Victorian Society in the Late Nineteenth Century**

In order to analyse Victorian society in the novel, it is important to first examine the historical context and the political situation, as reflected in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The end of the nineteenth century gave importance to more traditional values and questions of morality began to rise as well. In spite of the increasing amount of new radical thinkers and innovators, some conservative groups and members of society kept their firm views and pushed those ideas. When British economy bloomed under the wave of industrialization, urbanization became a more common problem than before. People were leaving their rural homes and began moving into cities and towns because of their jobs, usually in factories or industry. This phenomenon set in motion a series of problems. A significant portion of the population had to deal with unemployment, since their job positions were being replaced by automated machines. Consequently, the crime and murder rates were growing higher than ever before among low-class people, as the unemployed citizens were struggling for food and had limited prospects of livelihood. In addition to that, the streets were sometimes filled with beggars and lowlife was increasing in number.

The eyes of the public first saw *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890. It was published in a period known as the late Victorian era. During Queen Victoria's exceptionally long reign, which spanned over six decades, the United Kingdom experienced abrupt changes - from its political scene to the economy and its influence on citizens' lives and well-being. The Victorian Era, as it was named even while under the Queen's rule, was a time of many revolutionary changes in many areas. Whether it is scientific inventions, medical improvements or the rise of entertainment, British society thrived during Queen Victoria's rule. This subsequently made her one of the few British monarchs that have a time period named after them. Over the course of her reign, the



kingdom's mood began to transform. Since this era lasted for about 60 years, naturally, the country and its people underwent a series of changes. It was an era that produced a big economic boom in which society began to thrive, most notably the upper classes. This transitional time period was crucial for Britain's growth, but it revealed some of the kingdom's social and economic instability. The country was still facing a lot of social issues, including the growing gap between each social class and the values that were set among them. The importance of morality and traditional values was on the rise and was naturally reflected in the time's literature.

### **3.1 Education and Literacy in the Victorian Society**

First of all, the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries proved that mass education and literacy are necessary for any society to become innovative and advance in the field of industry. In addition, to supply the country's military power, the government relied heavily on the industry, creating new job positions and opportunities for the citizens. Therefore, those countries that were pursuing imperial expansion had to support both general and technical education, regardless of how conservative their view on equality and social mobility may have been. The fact that in the 1860s the North defeated the South in the American Civil War and Prussia defeated Austria led to the conclusion that better-educated nations are more likely to win wars, which in turn assisted those people who pushed through the English Education Act of 1870.

Additionally, mass education is also a means to ensure national unification. The education of the public helped with developing national consciousness (Stone 88). As mentioned previously, with the growing population and demands of the government to improve the country's military power, many new job posts were being offered and even new job positions were being created specifically. This allowed for a whole lot of new opportunities for the working classes, who were now on the rise. However, it remained difficult and sometimes even impossible to climb from one social class to a higher one. Working people often got stuck in this cycle without any way out. Since they could barely provide for their families, with little to no entertainment, they either turned to illegal activities or alcoholism.

### **3.2 The Victorian Ideal of a Woman**

Sally Mitchell described the late Victorian atmosphere and society and its portrayal in the then literature as follows:

The later part of the nineteenth century had a somewhat more difficult and diverse tone than the high Victorian years of the mid-century, although not necessarily because times were harder. The balance of domestic political and economic power was shifting, and new groups could make demands of their own. In addition, there seemed to be a cultural transition. . . . The artists and writers who became prominent in the fin de siècle (Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, Aubrey Beardsley) produced less comforting - more “modern” - tone (Mitchell 11).

In the year 1870, the British government passed the Education Act along with the additional act of 1880, which made education mandatory for children from the age of five to ten. Along with further funding from the state, this ensured that education and literacy would be possible for every child. With these possibilities, literacy was at higher rates than ever before, and people who were able to afford it often reached for literature as a form of entertainment.

The women’s rights movement was slowly on the rise because education and social changes were now spreading. However, in the Victorian times, women had little to no rights and did not have the opportunity to be educated as men. They were also denied the chance to get further education outside their homes, since taking part in modern society and clubs was a privilege reserved to men. Furthermore, apart from not getting educated, other things did not go smoothly for Victorian girls and women too. During this time period, men and women looked up to society’s image of an ideal relationship and in

order to meet the set, often unrealistic expectations of the time, and frequently ended up in difficult and non-functioning marriages. In addition to that, a lot of pressure was being put on women specifically to comply with the expectations and those who did not meet them found themselves undesired or spouseless. Using the example of Sibyl Vane in Wilde's novel, Vane herself is aware of the fact that she does not belong with a gentleman. Inter-class relationships were incredibly rare because men typically married women within their circle and of a similar status. On the other hand, society did not have expectations for women only. The image of a perfect Victorian man was also defined and, just like girls, he was pressured to marry well. Thus, men who were born above the level of poverty tried to fit within the definition of a working man or a gentleman.

In her article, Ingrid Ranum discusses the problems and different rules of Victorian relationships between men and women. Ranum quotes John Tosh: "Becoming a man involved detaching oneself from the home and its feminine comforts' and also "the recognition of manhood by one's peers' and getting to a level of material success in the wider world" (Ranum 242).

It can be said that the social roles of Victorian women and men could be mostly defined as such: since their childhoods, women were standardly raised to be feminine and passive homemakers, whereas men were supposed to be the breadwinner of the family and be in control of their women. "While this view of nineteenth-century life was valid", as Shepherd sums up, "it was frequently challenged by contemporaries" (Shepherd 1). Then, the way literature and society viewed women was entirely different from previous time periods.

Many critics note that as time progressed, naturally, society did as well. Women living in the later part of the Victorian era were being allowed to make a choice about

their future careers, thanks to the need for additional workforce. At the beginning of the 20th century, new career opportunities were available for men but also some women were now to a certain extent allowed to work a job and provide for their families as well. This enabled them to be more independent and to be able to voice their opinions more. Over time women raised concerns about them not having a sufficiently active role in politics, including the right to vote. They also demanded to have a more serious status and respect in the household. Slowly breaking the housewife stereotype, many women could be seen in schools and jobs, although still severely underpaid compared to men's higher wages and positions.

In the nineteenth century, femaleness was still attributed to the body, so the woman should be subject to male influence. Late Victorian women were therefore seen in two categories: the working class and upper class; further, they were distinguished into "women" and "ladies". We see this portrayed in Oscar Wilde's novel where at the beginning, before Dorian's soul becomes corrupt, he sees Sibyl Vane, although a poor actress, as a lady and something almost divine, quite overlooking their differences in both class and family background. Dorian views Sibyl as a lady regardless her upbringing is and it is all due to the way she presents herself on the theatre stage and when speaking to him. However, as time passes after Sibyl's devastating death, Dorian becomes more decadent and corrupt, he views women more as an object of temptation.

Despite them being seen as two separate categories, women and ladies had, in society's views, one main purpose: to marry and support their husbands and partake in their husband's interests. Besides making sure to maintain a good appearance, women had to learn some skills before marriage: such as how to cook, clean, sew, repair and wash, to be prepared for their future and meeting the man's standards. If a girl did not

meet the so-called standards to be a good housewife, she would find herself spouseless and with words of disapproval being thrown her way.

### **3.3 The Late Victorian Class System**

As it is known, British society has always had an established social class system. In Victorian times, society still relied on this class division to some extent, therefore the population was split into the working classes and the richer and property-owning classes. In addition to that, the mutual prejudice of these groups was very prominent as can be observed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and other works by Wilde and his contemporaries. What made the Victorian class system different from what it was before, was that the working class was now prioritized. There was a bigger need for industrial workers than before. This led to the growth of the economy as well as the population. According to demographic statistics, the population was 8.9 million in 1801, 17.2 million in 1851, and 26 million in 1881 (Schubert 2003).

The majority of people lived in the countryside prior to the Victorian era, but by the year 1850, the proportion of people living in cities had increased to 50% due to urbanization. The social classes began to separate from one another, with the middle class being the one which stood out the most and had the biggest number of people. As a structure, the society worked on the basis of the independence and order of its sections. The leading part was the *middle or aristocratic class*, who represented the “ruling” sector and served as the leaders of the British public. They were also considered the ideal image of a Victorian gentleman, the head of a household, and a financially and socially oriented individual. That is not to say that they were necessarily bigger in numbers. However, in

a capitalist society, their word and influence meant a great deal more than the ones of the lower class.

The *lower class* consisted of simple people with low-paying jobs, such as farmers, factory workers, miners and others. The lowest social group was the *underclass*: people living in poverty, beggars and the homeless, the mentally or physically ill and criminals. They were often perceived as “mad cases”, uneducated and “filthy” by the upper class and for that reason, the public and especially the nobility turned their eye away from them. This low social class was often hidden, since middle-class Victorians dared not to even mention or discuss their own bodies, bodily function and especially their sexuality (specifically the women’s). Anything related to that was separated from the public eye, the result of the privatization of industrial capitalism and the growing changes in men’s and women’s positions in the world (Davidoff 89).

A major theme brought up in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is human self-expression, desire and sexuality, i.e. topics which even in the early 20th century were almost taboo; people would avoid them, and definitely something the middle and upper classes were deeply offended by. Another reason for Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* receiving negative feedback it did at the beginning, was the overall number of controversial topics he chose to highlight in his writing and perhaps the fact that his characters shared qualities with what was often associated with the lower-class and dangerous individuals.

### 3.3.1 The Upper Class

Great Britain's upper class consisted of the *royal family, lords and ladies, barons, earls, dukes and duchesses* and other titled members of the community. Additionally, the gentry was also a class, comprised of the landowners who were extremely wealthy and were living a life of luxury. Along with other aristocrats the landowners were a part of the highest class in Victorian England. Another distinct feature of this class was that these citizens rarely ever worked and did not have stable running employment, since they usually inherited their lands and properties and with them the power to be employers and superior to others.

The middle part, which had a certain amount of wealth but not enough to qualify as nobles, made up the second social class in England. The third class in Victorian society was the upper working class, which included families that worked in skilled rather than manual labour. Those who were employed and regularly worked manual labour made up the fourth working class.

The middle and upper classes were the leading groups of society and in a way dictated the values and set trends that they enforced in their everyday life. In a lot of cases, they were also landowners and sources of employment for many. By the year 1850, around 750 000 women and also some men had jobs in the form of residential domestic service and in the late Victorian era, this number reached over a million (Davidoff 94). These figures alone speak about the practices of middle-class or upper-class households, and since usually most of them relied on the service of maids and butlers, they consequently became a common source of employment for citizens of the working class.



### **3.3.2 Roles of Upper-Class Women**

Nineteenth-century women who were fortunate enough to be born into wealthy and distinguished families had to put up with similar expectations as poor or working-class women. Since childhood, they were brought up with their main purpose being to produce an heir to their husband, take part in his interests and care for the household. As might be expected they did not need to maintain the house manually since the upper class commonly employed servants. However, upper-class or noble women were also supposed to set an example for others. Their main function was to be ladylike, to be admired and to demand respect. Responsibilities of a lady were quite limited, given the fact that thanks to a successful marriage they did not need to have a job or were not allowed to gain additional knowledge outside their home; moreover, some universities were still reluctant to accept women. As stated before, upper-class women had a staff of servants at hand to take care of their everyday tasks, so the lady's main "job" was to oversee that process.

A common daily activity for women during the Victorian period was paying visits and organising dinner or tea parties. It was a unique opportunity where noblewomen could use their homemaking skills, for example organizing the party, occasionally helping with food and decor preparation and accepting and entertaining guests. It also offered a great chance for them, as the wives of the heads of households, to show off their taste, discuss current trends, and the latest gossip and gain more contacts in the elite circles in the process. Having many valuable contacts was very important for the upper classes since it was an opportunity to not only gain new information but to also continue upholding their class's values and practices. Lastly, from the point of view of the husband, his wife's most important role was of course to produce him an heir, preferably a son, and be supportive of his activities and stand by his side in society.

### **3.3.3 Roles of Upper-Class Men**

Dorian Gray is described as an upperclassman and is meant to represent the role. Those, who similarly to ladies, were fortunate enough to be members of the nobility, did not typically take part in manual labour. Instead, they inherited or bought lands, hired farmers and servants, or they owned their family businesses. Those usually included industrial factories, railroad companies or shops. Furthermore, they could make investments to increase their profits and gain additional influence. Because having a lot of contacts was important to the upper class, some noblemen took interest in politics and would use their wealth and status to influence others and make their mark in the community.

Another role of a Victorian man was to demonstrate a sense of power and elegance and to be seen as a gentleman. The patriarch of the family was essentially supposed to uphold the family name, by providing for his household and with the support of their wives, the husbands were able to focus on their employment and social activities. Since men of the upper class typically did not need to work because of their family wealth and investments, they were able to devote more of their time to making connections in society, attending events or spending said money. As was mentioned previously, any public talks about taboo subjects or the use of explicit language were frowned upon by the nobility. As it can be seen portrayed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, characters like Henry Wotton's family take these standards very seriously, showing how the upper class further detached itself from the working and lower class, through their strongly enforced rules and standards.

### **3.4 The Analysis of Victorian Society in The Picture of Dorian Gray**

#### **3.4.1 The Picture of Dorian Gray as a Gothic Novel**

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a philosophical novel, however, it is also classified as a primary representative of late-Victorian Gothic fiction for its abundance of exemplary Gothic themes. The plot follows the story of the main character Dorian Gray's descent into darkness and immorality. Being set in the late 19th century, the author sources from real-life influences to provide structured characters and depict the Victorian society that was familiar to him. In addition to that, Oscar Wilde incorporated mystique and the supernatural into the novel as well. He arguably sourced from his interest in folklore and myths and the influence of his upper-class upbringing.

One of the best approaches to understanding a particular society of the past is to study its culture and examine its literature because texts reflect the social and political scene of that time. The Victorian times brought back Gothic themes, which were then reflected in artistic and literary works. In their works, Gothic authors explored dark corners of human nature as well as debated the meaning of life. These texts often upset the public, since they focused on darker tendencies, often describing the criminal nature of seemingly normal people, as well as highlighting the role of pleasure and existentialism.

This story is rich in Gothic elements, the main being the depiction of Dorian's rotting soul and its decay captured by the portrait. Another interesting feature is the way Dorian's fear and trauma are portrayed. His fear follows him everywhere and the reader often finds the main character avoiding confrontation with his own corruption, further enhancing the chilling atmosphere which fills the story. Not only does *The Picture of Dorian Gray* show the rougher side of the Gothic, Oscar Wilde's writing also gives the

story an aesthetic edge. The characters provide their opinions and judgements of art and beauty and share their philosophies, many of similar to Wilde's own. Most of the various philosophical questions are not necessarily answered by the characters or the narrator, which leaves the readers to make up their own minds. The many thought-provoking topics which Wilde incorporated, include questions of faith, the afterlife, sexuality and homosexuality, which definitely shocked readers and critics alike.

#### **3.4.1.1 The Origins of Gothic**

With the novel being labelled as a Gothic novel, we need to ask what the phrase in fact means. As is the case with most artistic movements, "Gothic" not only describes a movement, it can refer to many other areas such as architecture, literature, music and art. Before Oscar Wilde's time and during the beginning part of the eighteenth century, the word Gothic carried various and typically negative connotations. Gothic was mostly known for the Germanic Visigoth tribe's invasion of the Roman Empire, which heavily contributed to the Empire's demise. From a literary perspective, Gothic could be seen as a reaction to the Augustan literature. In the era of Augustan literature, authors wrote mainly poems or satirical novels and wrote mainly about social and political topics as opposed to the more uncivilised and untamed style of the later Gothic writers.

The term Gothic fiction usually describes writers whose works were published between the 1760s and 1820s, such as Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Gregory Lewis, Horace Walpole and others (Punter 7). Early Gothic works followed an archetypal pattern which expressed interest in the past, incorporating it into an archetypal environment of usually haunted castle ruins, abandoned houses or mansions. This setting typically evoked anxiety and caused feelings of uneasiness in the readers while also intriguing them, making them more invested in the story. The plot was typically in control of a prototypical

“Gothic villain”. In his study, David Punter describes a traditional Gothic antagonist as follows:

awe-inspiring, endlessly resourceful in pursuit of his often opaquely evil ends, and yet possessed of a mysterious attractiveness, he stalks from the pages of one Gothic novel to another; manipulating the doom of others while the knowledge of his own eventual fate surrounds him like the monastic habit and cowl which he so often wore (Punter 9-10).

#### **3.4.1.2 Villains and Obscurities in Gothic**

A villain’s purpose could be divided into two categories. Firstly, in Gothic stories, the antihero serves as the manifestation of evil, giving evil a “face” and by doing so making it more immediate and personal. Villain characters were typically designed to not only make the readers scared but to also evoke a sense of urgency, despair or anxiety. Because the main character of the Gothic era was commonly a heroine rather than a hero, a villain then filled the role of an aggressive and masculine male or monster.

Secondly, the antihero’s other role was to serve as a bad example and represent what was considered bad about society or the past and exaggerate the influence of evil. For that reason, they usually took on the form of either vampires, werewolves, ghosts, or other paranormal monsters or they were simply humans and they portrayed the monsters of the real world, and there was traditionally a disturbing psychology behind these characters’ agendas. Naturally, in order to contrast with the villains, the story’s hero then had to represent the opposite qualities, such as bravery, strength, endurance and innocence. Gothic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was generally concerned with topics such as uncovering old dark mysteries, family drama and secrets

and the problems of ancestry. Furthermore, mystical and supernatural elements dominated Gothic literature. Novels and horrors like *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* revolutionised the genre by exploring unsettling and sometimes even grotesque themes such as murder, mystery, the paranormal and secrecy.

The techniques that Gothic authors as well as Wilde used to evoke extreme emotions of anxiety and fear are called horror and terror which can get mixed up. Nick Groom distinguished "seven types of obscurity" in literature:

1. *meteorological* (mists, clouds, wind, rain, storm, fog, darkness, shadows, gloom);
2. *topographical* (impenetrable forests, inaccessible mountains, chasms, gorges, blasted heaths, icefields, the boundless ocean);
3. *architectural* (towers, prisons, castles covered in gargoyles and crenellations, abbeys and priories, tombs, crypts, dungeons, ruins, graveyards, mazes, secret passages, locked doors);
4. *material* (masks, veils, disguises, billowing curtains, suits of armour, tapestries);
5. *textual* (riddles, rumours, folklore, unreadable manuscripts and inscriptions, ellipses, broken texts, fragments, clotted language, polysyllabism, obscure dialect, inserted narratives, stories-within-stories);
6. *spiritual* (religious mystery, allegory and symbolism, Roman catholic ritual, mysticism, freemasonry, magic and the occult, Satanism, witchcraft, summonings, damnation);

7. *psychological* (dreams, visions, hallucinations, drugs, sleepwalking, madness, split personalities, mistaken identities, doubles, derangement, ghostly presences, forgetfulness, death, hauntings) (Groom 77-78).

Some psychological, material and spiritual themes can be found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The thought of Dorian's painting changing with time and each sin he commits evokes a terrifying picture in the reader's mind and is easily associated with evil itself, the rotting picture of Dorian is also often compared to a monster. Another element gothic element seen in the novel is the meteorological type. Since the story is set in late Victorian London, the streets are often described stereotypically as Victorian, gloomy and dark, evoking another unsettling feeling yet further intriguing the reader.

While it is unknown whether *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was primarily intended to be scary or to evoke fear, Wilde still managed to successfully evoke those feelings through his text. Dorian Gray serves as a terrifying example of what too much indulgence and giving up one's soul can do to a man.

### 3.4.1.3 The Gothic Setting of the Novel

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a Gothic environment is portrayed in many different ways. The best way to analyse the Gothic elements is by first examining the setting of the book. As the story opens, Wilde introduces Late Victorian London, where most of the plot is set. The city is described in a gloomy way, having characteristics of a typical Gothic environment, such as being “horrid”, “grey” and “dark”. Just as Victorian society was separated, the capital city is split into two sides —East End and West End; they display opposite qualities, the former being prosperous, the latter on the decline.

Dorian Gray’s large townhouse is located in the posh Grosvenor Square in the West End, which is a completely upper-class area. His house is not exactly a typical Gothic mansion or castle but it does exhibit Gothic attributes. The Grosvenor Square home immediately gives off a sombre and mysterious feel. From the beginning, a reader might suspect there is a dark secret in the house’s history, one of the frequently used themes in the Gothic genre. This feeling is mainly evoked by Dorian’s old schoolroom in the house, located on the top floor and locked by a key only the house master, Dorian, carries. An important part of a character’s villain arc is his childhood which usually happens to be traumatic and lonely. The description of the study room makes the reader think of an old Gothic room that has fallen into disrepair because it is rarely ever used. It is the room that has been associated with Dorian throughout his entire life. Dorian indeed spent his sad childhood days on his own in this strange study room. Later on in the story, Dorian Gray gives the room a new and more sinister purpose, to hold his secret painting locked away inside. And whenever he enters the attic again, Dorian is reminded of his old misery and current mistakes.



To mention a final Gothic element of the house, the library serves as another place for Dorian to hide and disguise himself. He even hides Basil's possessions there, after he kills him. The library's secret spaces are also convenient, and just as is common in Gothic fiction, the usage of secret trapdoors and hidden passageways further contributes to the never changing mysterious mood surrounding Dorian Gray's house. Dorian likes to pursue decadent activities in the city as well, usually accompanied by Harry Wotton. Oscar Wilde depicts their outings as happening often at night, which further contributes to the suspicion that Dorian and his friends are taking part in prohibited or immoral activities. Gray also often disguises himself to blend in with the working-class citizens, because it is taboo for an upper-class man like himself to be seen amidst poor and often ill-mannered people. The usage of disguises is another typical means for Gothic fiction characters to blend in and go about their illegal activities without being detected. In Victorian fiction, characters who are attributed this behaviour are usually the book's antagonists.

#### **3.4.1.4 Dorian Gray as Gothic Monster**

There have been various debates and theories about whether Dorian Gray is an actual villain, especially in the context of Victorian Gothic. Some critics and readers claim that he is not fully a villain and the story's antagonist, but an antihero — a main character who is the hero but is portrayed without having the conventional literary qualities, such as courage, morality and chivalry.

It is entirely up to the reader's interpretation of the story, however, this work argues that as protagonist Dorian Gray's immorality and sins advance over time, he descends into the role of an antagonist. The characters of Gothic fiction reflected the Victorian mindset. Thus, it is only natural that society would label Dorian as a villain,

given the fact that he did not show enough restraint from pleasures and sin, a quality which the civil and gracious Victorians valued a lot. But perhaps what makes Dorian seem like the villain is his literary role as the monster. To specify, Gray's portrait plays the role of the monster in this story. However, it also works as Dorian's conscience.

With his evil counterpart, the monster, Wilde challenges the ideal of what a good and respectable young man should be like. The novel demonstrates how shame's negative repercussions are connected to the degeneration and corruption of the human soul. As Dorian's portrait both creates and generates his guilt, the negative consequences only intensify and gain power. In addition to shielding him from the negative effects of his immoral lifestyle, the painting also mocks him by showing him a reflection of who he really is. The idea of shame is based on the conflict between hiding and being exposed. Dorian's internal humiliation fuels his descent into villainy, despite the fact that it is externalized in the image. Dorian Gray's double — the portrait-, also works as a mirror to show Dorian the real monster, it is a means for Dorian to see his true self, which then creates an internal conflict between who he wants to be and who he actually views himself to be on the canvas.

If Dorian Gray is to be considered a Victorian villain, he then would not fit the standard archetype. It is evident that over the course of the story and Gray's continuous exposure to Henry Wotton's influences, Dorian becomes increasingly more flawed. Regardless of that, it does not deprive him of his conscience, which later "saves" him when because of his conscience he destroys his painting counterpart. Conscience allows Dorian to feel shame, which is shown throughout the story, in one way or another. The birth of Dorian's shame of course starts with Lord Henry who expands Dorian's limits and exploits his youthful beauty and impressionable spirit. By planting extreme and

controversial ideas, Lord Wotton achieves his goal of isolating Dorian and making him dependent on Henry Wotton's counsel.

Dorian Gray's conscience haunts him frequently. He gets worried when he considers that his guilty conscience might one day dominate him. In the scene where Dorian is waiting for Alan, terror overcomes him as his conscience haunts and mocks him again.

The suspense became unbearable. Time seemed to him to be crawling with feet of lead, while he by monstrous winds was being swept towards the jagged edge of some black cleft of precipice. He knew what was waiting for him there; saw it, indeed, and, shuddering, crushed with dank hands his burning lids as though he would have robbed the very brain of sight and driven the eyeballs back into their cave . . . horrible thoughts, time being dead, raced nimbly on in front, and dragged a hideous future from its grave, and showed it to him (Wilde 151).

Gray also faints out of terror when he discovers Sybil's brother, James Vane, is seeking revenge on him. This would suggest that Dorian is developing a weakness over time and that his sinful behaviour is taking a toll on him and his psyche. But not all of Dorian Gray's sinister behaviour is conditioned by the cursed painting. Firstly, when his obsession with immortal life first began, he showed little to no remorse for his wicked actions. Even after the "love of his life" Sybil Vane dies, he is grief-stricken but mostly guilt-ridden. He eventually copes with her death well and manages to get over the heartbreaking fact quickly, once again with Henry Wotton's help.

Secondly, Dorian's role as the story's villain is also confirmed by the way his sinful behaviour and awful treatment of people affect those around him. He becomes the cause of the suicide of two people, including his lover Sybil Vane, he murders Basil Hallward, slowly loses his morality and indulges in all manner of vices which villainize him.

#### **3.4.1.5 The Most Important Gothic Themes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

As was mentioned previously, the Gothic art movement allowed for more explicit and darker topics to resurface in the arts than was seen before. Themes such as death, immortality and spirituality were commonly discussed in stories and can also be noticed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

“How sad it is!” murmured Dorian Gray with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. “How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that -- for that -- I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!” (Wilde 27).

The scene where Dorian sells his soul to the painting in exchange for eternal youth is a fitting example of one of the obscurities in Gothic. Dorian basically breathes life into the canvas, so the canvas ages and decays instead of his beautiful body, allowing him to maintain his youthful look and good health. This scene serves as a perfect representation of the spiritual type of obscurity in Gothic novels. In this scene, the supernatural and mystic come into play for the first time in the book. Dorian Gray only had to make a

simple wish, and as soon as he completed it, an unseen force sealed his wish upon the picture. In the novel, Gray doesn't specifically ask the Devil to give him eternal youth, and there isn't even an implicit statement that would support that claim.

Although this is merely an interpretation of one of the story's supporting characters, Gray apparently sold his soul to the devil. It can be interpreted as Gray making a wish upon the picture. By doing so he unleashes a wicked force that fulfils his sincere desire to live forever young, which goes against the natural course of things established by God. Hence it can be presumed that some ungodly force heard Gray's selfish wish and simply granted it, exchanging his mortality for the portrait's immortality. This level of mystique and psychological writing is not uncommon for Gothic and definitely contributes to the claim that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a work of Gothic fiction.

Another topic which was common in Gothic but also rejected and criticized by the audience was death. Mentions of death are very frequent in the story and it is the fear of death and ageing which is Dorian's main motivation to sell his soul. All death scenes, especially the murder of the painter Basil Hallward are the main contributors of horror and terror in the book because of how explicit they are.

Hallward stirred in his chair as if he was going to rise. He rushed at him and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man's head down on the table and stabbing again and again. There was a stifled groan and the horrible sound of someone choking with blood. Three times the outstretched arms shot up convulsively, waving grotesque, stiff-fingered hands in the air. He stabbed him twice more, but the man did not move. Something began to trickle on the floor. He waited for a moment, still

pressing the head down. Then he threw the knife on the table, and listened.

He could hear nothing but the drip, drip on the threadbare carpet. (Wilde 144)

The gruesome scene where Dorian murders his close friend evokes many feelings. Horror but also feelings of pity because of how awfully Basil is dealt with. This representation of death is one of the reasons why Wilde's works were badly received and got so much critique in the late Victorian times.

In Victorian times, the idea of "Englishness" was explored even more seriously than before. It greatly stressed the purpose of superiority and Great Britain's high self-esteem. Morality or respectability was recognized as a very important quality, further strengthened by the nation's seriousness and poise. This seriousness and high esteem then became common targets of Victorian Gothic authors, who mocked the nation's superiority and exaggerated values. Oscar Wilde was the leading figure of the opposition who did not believe that people should be so serious and humourless all the time. This can be seen in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which he cleverly subtitled *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*.

This superiority and high-standard values are visible in the behaviour of some of Dorian Gray's closest acquaintances. For example, Lord Henry Wotton's uncle, Lord Fermor whom he goes to visit, upholds the same standard most upper-class people did. He mentions how Dorian's mother "made all the men frantic by running away with a penniless young fellow, a mere nobody" (Wilde 33). It was a common belief among the upper classes that a man or woman with no prospects and money was considered a nobody in society and should only remain among their peers. This is one of the most prominent instances where this kind of class separation and its major differences are represented in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

### **3.5 Victorian Society and its Representation in the Novel**

As Wilde's novel describes throughout the story, during the Victorian times, social classes and their values played an important role in the lives of the citizens. Perhaps the main reason why *The Picture of Dorian Gray* achieved such high recognition over time is because it serves as an example of Victorian interactions between social classes and moral standards. It is because the story not only describes social classes as a whole but is mainly centred around the upper-classman Dorian, Lord Henry Wotton, the painter Basil Howard and their peculiar friendship, that it is arguably one of the most unique representations of the Victorian era found in fiction. While the book presents a look at the separation between the upper, middle and lower classes, with respective characters representing each class, it also calls attention to how an individual's moral compass and actions can change or develop depending on the expectations of their social class.

#### **3.5.1 Lord Henry Wotton**

Lord Henry Wotton can be considered a fitting representative of the upper class of Victorian England in the story. As an exceedingly wealthy and distinguished member of the aristocracy, Lord Wotton not only embodies the values and practices of his class but he also likes seeing them enforced. These happened to be the worst kinds of behaviours in most cases, such as gambling and alcoholism. Wilde also describes Wotton as a very privileged gentleman, who like other upperclassmen of that time, does not need to worry about serious obligations or any kind of labour. It is crucial to first examine Henry Wotton's aristocratic tendencies and persona, in order to fully understand how he represents the upper class in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Lord Henry is introduced as an already established and influential member of his social class, his character is distinctive by his sophisticated manners and taste, eloquent

speech and philosophical insights he provides almost everyone with. However, Wilde does not make Henry too much of a world-shaker, “I don’t desire to change anything in England except the weather” (Wilde 40). Clearly, Henry likes to comment on and criticise society and politics but does not use his influence, like many other upperclassmen, to make a change since he clearly does not truly want the situation to change and for him to lose his benefits. In addition to that, Henry’s high social status grants him a lot of privileges. He has access to exclusive social circles where he gains contacts and further enforces his practices and ideals. Thanks to his high social standing and family name he is granted power and influence, which he then likes to utilize to manipulate the actions and opinions of others around him, especially young Dorian Gray. It is also Henry Wotton’s charm and mysterious personality which captivate Dorian, allowing Wotton to extend his influence through Dorian and manipulate the boy teaching Dorian what he knew best, the ways of the aristocrats and also the worth of youth and beauty and leading him down the path of a life full of hedonism and debauchery.

In contrast to that, Henry tries to hide this persona from his wife Lady Victoria, since he does not want his wife to know about his doings outside of their family. As Lady Wotton says to Dorian, “I always hear Harry’s views from his friends. It is the only way I get to know of them” (Wilde 44). It is apparent that Henry tries to maintain a respectable image of what he as an aristocrat needs to be like and needs to keep his family’s status in the upper social class. During Henry’s time especially, a man’s reputation was seen as the most important part of a family’s patriarch in the highest classes, with family being the fundamental component of the British class system. Moreover, not just Lord Henry himself but also his wife Victoria and his aunt Lady Agatha could be considered suitable examples of Victorian class and upper-class privilege represented in the book. What should also be understood from Wilde’s description of those upper-class characters, is



how the sometimes immoral behaviours of families of status like the Wottons, were generally excused or overlooked by the public because of their deep-rooted influence in society.

### **3.5.2 Basil Hallward**

Basil Hallward is the artist who paints Dorian's picture and who realises his potential after creating the masterpiece. As is expected, he is a complete contrast to the character of Lord Henry, as he is considered the book's representative of the middle class. Basil happens to be very philosophical and harbours the same love for art and its beauty as his hedonistic friends, but unlike them, his aesthetic ideals carry a streak to morality as well. Basil's sensitivity allows him to look past Henry Wotton's persistent influence over Dorian and Basil continuously tries to protect Dorian from the harm that adopting Wotton's ideals could do to him. Over time Dorian Gray becomes Hallward's muse and his secret admiration of the boy changes his view of art as a whole. Painting Dorian's picture gives him a new way to express himself as an artist and he even admits to having become enamoured with Dorian's beauty and youthful innocence. He captures the boy's beauty in the picture but he is also afraid he managed to capture his own feelings of admiration in the process.

At the beginning of the novel, Hallward explains to Henry Wotton: "I have put too much of myself into it" (Wilde 6), when Henry asks why not exhibit the painting at an art exhibition. Apart from his general detachment from the art piece as an artist, he also believes that as the subject of the picture, Dorian Gray should be its true owner. Nevertheless, Hallward's reasons can be interpreted differently entirely. In the process of painting Dorian's picture, Hallward tries to conceal his admiration of the boy's appearance. He first paints Dorian as an image of antiquity, a romantic figure from

mythology. When the final version of the picture is finished and Dorian is painted as Basil truly sees him, the painter fears he may have projected too much of himself onto his art. This can be seen as a self-insertion on Oscar Wilde's part, who was known for and also persecuted for having homosexual relationships. Basil is a representative of the Victorian middle class in the novel. He struggles with being recognized as a talent among artists, who were already underappreciated in England at that time. He also struggles with his own feelings for Gray and being judged for them. As an artist, he deems it important he stay true to his values and authentic in his art. However, Basil feels that in the painting's authenticity, he may have betrayed too much of himself and that love he harbours for Dorian is too apparent in the picture. Hallward eventually realizes that art will always be more abstract and subjective than it seems and so his feelings about Dorian remain unchanged.

The importance of Basil Hallward's character lies in the interpretation of his arc. Firstly, even though he represents middle-class masculinity in the novel, Hallward's character brings a sense of gentleness, creativity and sensitivity. Without realising, the artist slowly becomes more obsessed with the image of Dorian captured in the painting, wanting to preserve this image only leads Dorian further into the manipulations of Henry Wotton. As Baker notes about Basil, "The artist's good resolutions, however, come too late; the harm has already been done. For Hallward's concession to his own egocentric desires has, in effect, corrupted the ideal" (Baker 352). Towards the end of the novel Dorian puts the blame on Hallward, claiming that he pushed him into vanity by showing him his beauty and the importance of Dorian's youth.

Secondly, Basil typically ends up being the one caught in the middle of Dorian and Henry's changing friendship, trying to preserve Dorian's soul and innocence and turn him away from Henry's influence. While Basil believes that Lord Wotton's influence

cannot do Dorian much good, he still hopes that Wotton's cynicism is a pose, a common tool of the aristocracy.

After finishing his masterpiece, Basil's artistic work becomes average again and he is never able to capture such beauty and perfection in his art as he did with Dorian's painting. Hallward's tragic death at the hands of Dorian symbolises the ease with which the upper classes could get away with terrible acts and behaviour by means of their influence over other people. It is Alan Campbell in the novel, a former friend of Dorian's, who after being blackmailed by Gray and without having another choice disposes of Basil's body. The purpose Basil's character arc serves is therefore not only to highlight the upper class's exploitation of the lower but also to show an example of a good artist vanishing in the sacrifice for art.

### **3.5.3 Sibyl and James Vane**

Sibyl Vane and her brother James are very important characters who represent the lower part of the social scene. The Vane siblings are considered representatives of the lower working class in the novel, with young Sibyl being a lowly actress, who performs in a cheap London theatre. The Vane family aspires to rise in their social status but still are considered quite poor. Sibyl Vane and her brother symbolize the other side of the double standard of the Victorian era and their tragic story shows that status was everything for Victorians and those not esteemed enough faced rather harsh living consequences. Henry Wotton's thoughts on the situation of the lower classes are as follows:

Yes, we are overcharged for everything nowadays. I should fancy that the real tragedy of the poor is that they can afford nothing but self-denial. Beautiful sins, like beautiful things, are the privilege of the rich (Wilde 73).

Henry clearly believes that only people of his status and position can afford to embrace pleasure and beauty. Poor people on the other hand can only feel comfort from self-denial about their bad situation. Sibyl Vane proves to be an exception to this, perhaps due to her young age. She maintains a sort of childlike wonder about the world and naivety and seems almost unphased about her family's poverty.

Throughout the novel, Sibyl represents imagery from the way Wilde describes her physical aspect and also to her personality. Sibyl is depicted as a struggling performer, her physical characteristics are described mostly with artistic descriptions, and her worth reaches its peak only when Dorian Gray approaches and appreciates her. Sibyl Vane finds reassurance in her work through men, such as Dorian, showing admiration and interest in her. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sibyl's role in representing young Late Victorian women is one of a framed art piece. As was mentioned previously, women's role in society was to accompany men, take care of their household, and most importantly, present themselves in an innocent and appealing manner. Sibyl is indeed a beautiful young girl but like most women of the time, serves unfortunately no other role than to provide entertainment for other male characters. Dorian falls in love with Sibyl through her artistic performance, which for her is a continuous pretence, which she is unable to replicate once she has experienced love for Dorian. It is also why Dorian eventually loses interest in being with her, because of her failure during a performance but also because she no longer provides him with the artistic delight he previously saw in her. She is no longer his muse, only the characters she portrayed were whom Dorian fell in love with, and Sibyl's worth is once again reduced to what it was before Dorian perceived her, the loss of her 'Prince Charming' pushing her to commit suicide. It is apparent that Dorian was only interested in the image of a woman she represented, and when she was no longer

able to, his response was that she “killed his love”. In Sibyl’s character arc, Oscar Wilde portrays her as a woman seen as an object of desire which has destructed itself. Since Vane remains romantically interested in Dorian, while Dorian’s feelings are constructed based on mere visual aspects, Wilde proves Dorian’s inner biases against women, showing he feels that they are inferior to men on both emotional and intellectual levels. Sibyl Vane remains a sad example and reminder of how some young women were treated during the late Victorian times.

Sibyl’s brother James meets a tragic ending as well, by getting involved in Dorian Gray’s affairs. James Vane can be seen as the most unartistic and non-aesthetic character of the novel. He stands out already based on his introduction alone, he is a sailor, strong and determined to protect his sister at all costs and be able to provide his family with a comfortable life. He disagrees with Sibyl’s choice to pursue an acting career and be on display for everyone. Unlike the more noble characters of the story, James has a very honest way with words and will not pretend to be happy and supportive of her relationship with Dorian Gray. Despite his unsophisticated nature, James’ brotherly love for Sibyl is one of the purest displays of love in the story, being based on genuine care and concern for her safety. Even after her death, his desire to avenge Sibyl and kill Dorian has a serious intent to it, as is displayed by how mortified James is when he believes he murdered the wrong man. The argument for James being an important asset to the representation and inclusion in the book is proven by his disdain for the upper classes. James Vane’s character contrasts with Sibyl’s by their different approach to the upper class. While his sister understands her position in society, she still allows herself to dream of the perfect nobleman to be married to and seen by, unlike James. In the story, he shows disregard for their politics and while his mother Mrs Vane would like for him to become a lawyer, giving him a social advantage, James makes his own way in the world. It is important to

note that James cleverly points out that any aristocrat wanting to court Sibyl probably has harmful intentions and would, as he says, “enslave” her. This suggests his stance on the power and control the upper classes generally had over the lower, and how imbalanced and unfair society might have been, especially to unmarried and inexperienced young women. This resentment towards the nobility might also stem from the fact that his own father, an aristocrat, had an affair with his mother, leaving her to carry the social stigma of being a mother with children out of wedlock. James Vane’s backstory shows a good example of the novel’s motives of the superficiality of people, the inequality of Victorian society and the carelessness of the rich, which proved to have noticeable effects on other citizen’s lives.

After a period of time of Dorian being mad and paranoid and seeing James’ face everywhere, James dies without getting the revenge he wanted. The inability to resolve his issues with Dorian can be seen as Wilde’s way to further add to James’s misery and bring a tragic end to his unfortunate situation. His death is a result of an accidental shot by a member of a hunting party in the park. James dies because of a careless act of a member of the upper class, an incident which gets swept under the carpet and goes unpunished.

However, Jim Vane’s death presented an opportunity for Dorian to redeem himself. After discovering the victim’s identity, Dorian feels safe again but with uneasy feelings of regret. This brings him to vow to Henry Wotton to improve himself and live morally again. When Dorian checks if his painting changed for the better, he notices it remains the same vile mirror of Dorian’s sin and decadence but with a new addition: “He could see no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite” (Wilde 201).

## **4 Dorian Gray as a Representative of the Decadence of the Upper Class**

### **4.1 Decadence in the Late Victorian Era**

The word “decadence” has been used in a significant amount of works of the Victorian *fin de siècle* literature, and can be seen in poetry, prose and drama of the late eighteenth century. Goldfarb contends that late Victorian decadence describes the sort of poetry and prose which does not focus on philosophical, historical or intellectual problems, but rather stresses the importance that is sourced from experience and from indulging in life’s pleasures. This has caused decadence to gain a very negative connotation over time since it is dominated by encounters with immoral and even evil experiences. Decadence in literature does not put stress on morality or the impacts of forsaking it, nor does it insist on any ethical responsibility (Goldfarb 373).

Decadent literature its characters are primarily concerned with the topics of the morbid, grotesque, the beautiful in terms of the unnatural and the depiction of order in chaos. It is defined by the conscious disdain for everyday social conventions and practices. For example, marriage, truth and moral consequences since decadence puts beauty as its leading principle in life. A lot of Victorians believed that acts of sin and depravity would have a visible impact on those who took part in such activities. The notion of living a double life was a very intriguing topic in the Victorian and late Victorian times. The face people presented when in public was accompanied by their opposite side, which had more freedom to be immoral and to a degree even evil. This darker side often had to be suppressed by the more respectable individuals of society, in order not to taint their name with allegations of their inappropriate activities, such as visiting brothels and nightclubs as Lord Henry does. Dorian who had the secret ability to remain physically unchanged by his immoral behaviour was therefore spared the attention and suspicion

from the public, being able to indulge any vice he wished. It also enabled him to maintain his status in society, without a single imperfection showing on his face. The notion of a double life, where one was respectful on the outside but shameful on the inside, was a problem which concerned Victorian society and was displayed in its literature. People would question whether their representatives, scientists, members of the church and others were truly upholding moral standards or were secretly devoted to depravity in their private lives. One of the reasons why *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was not well received at first by the public and critics was that it brought attention to this problem and also explored it in depth as shown on the character of Dorian Gray.

## **4.2 Dorian Gray's Decadence**

To understand how Dorian Gray represents upper-class decadent behaviour, it is important to first recognize Dorian's fall and how he became decadent in the story. Dorian's change of character did not happen in an instant and was the result of continuous exposure to Henry Wotton's influence. Of course, even though Henry caused a lot of damage by manipulating Dorian's naive nature, he is not the only person responsible for Dorian's descent into sin. Dorian felt himself driven into a corner by having Basil Hallward remind him how fleeting youth and beauty are, making him vain. Upon seeing his picture and realising that his best quality will fade over time, Dorian naively makes a deal with the Devil and sells his soul in exchange for an eternity of beauty. From the moment Dorian realises that his painting takes on all of his diseases and ailments, he loses his innocence and so begins the man's fall.

One of the earliest instances of Dorian's decadence happens quite early on in the story. As was explained earlier, when Dorian loses interest in Sibyl Vane his treatment of her is completely opposite of what it was when he still considered her his muse. In a similar way to Basil and Henry's objectification of Dorian, Sibyl gets objectified by the



men and Dorian as well. For him, she represented an object of desire and artistry. When Henry and Basil meet Sibyl, she is not even being described as a person: “The curves of her throat were the curves of a white lily. Her hands seemed to be made of cool ivory” (Wilde 77). This kind of objectification further proves the idea of physicalness and decadence in the Victorian era, especially with Sibyl being treated as a part of the men’s collection of desirable objects. When the end of the Victorian era came, English nobility began getting worried about the state of their affairs and public image. They wanted to collect beautiful things and accumulate wealth, as well as present themselves in an intellectual and well-defined manner. Since Sibyl no longer sparked Dorian’s artistic interest or interest on the whole, she no longer serves him any purpose and does not satisfy his upper-class standard of decadence. With theatre being a decadent setting, Dorian expressed his wishes to explore Sibyl’s talents in his own, more sophisticated production, targeted at the upper-class audience. But without a theatre, Sibyl lacks any valid reason for Dorian to feel love for her and to have a place among his “collection” of decadent beautiful things.

At the beginning of the story, the picture of Dorian Gray serves as a mirror of his evil side. Over time with the progress of Dorian’s decadent behaviour, this side takes over, its reflection becoming beyond recognition, disturbing and vile. At first, Dorian is horrified when he realizes that the painting changes but he soon realizes he can utilize this curse for his own immoral purposes without facing consequences. One of Dorian’s first sins is definitely vanity. From the early chapters of the book, Dorian is persuaded that his youth and good looks can get him anything in the world he desires. This eventually gets into his head as he naively adopts Henry Wotton’s thoughts and standards. Dorian quickly becomes obsessed with staring at his painting, both terrified that somebody might discover his secret but also addicted to seeing the effects of his doing

reflected back to him. He deliberately seeks out experiences that will cause further transformation of the picture he has hidden in his house.

After Dorian's heartbreak and after he copes with the guilt over driving Sibyl into committing suicide, the change in his character becomes very prominent. He starts being unnecessarily cruel, and heartless and abusing his influence over other people like he learned from Henry's behaviour. This also leads him down the road to drug abuse, sexual promiscuity and later even murder.

Another one of Dorian Gray's sins is his eternal youth. It can be seen more as a curse than a blessing and as the story progresses, Gray realizes this. Unsurprisingly, his abuse of this newfound power comes to him naturally. Dorian abuses the concept of time and tries to experience and indulge in as many pleasures life brings him. He is trapped in his youth and cannot move on nor improve. Never growing older also means that he does not get to experience the wisdom that aging brings, especially since he spends most of his time being involved in exploring the limits of hedonism and depravity. In the end, Dorian becomes aware that all of his decadence and endless youth are his sins, not a blessing. In the eleventh chapter, the narrator muses over the fact that people jealous of Dorian and spreading rumours about him were fascinated by him, much like he is. "There was something in the purity of his face that rebuked them. His mere presence seemed to recall to them the memory of the innocence that they had tarnished. They wondered how one so charming and graceful as he was could have escaped the stain of an age that was at once sordid and sensual" (Wilde 117).

Arguably the most profound decadent behaviour Dorian displays is his inability to take responsibility for his own actions. Even after his long abuse of power and excessive debauchery, Dorian does not recognize his role in the moral decline he underwent, and as can be seen in the quote above, he also likes to put the blame for his

transformation on others, whether friends or foes. The person most responsible is arguably Henry Wotton who recognized Dorian's innocence and the ease with which he could be manipulated and used them against him. Dorian believes also his painter Basil Hallward is responsible for his sinful escapades since he implanted the seeds of vanity in Dorian's mind and made him fear the potential loss of his beauty. Be that as it may, the heinous acts which Dorian commits after he gives up his soul are his sins, as proven by the painting's terrifying form, sins which he does not take proper responsibility for until the end of the novel.

## 5 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore in which ways Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* represents the then Victorian society and to analyse the Victorian presence in the story. After the introduction, the second part of the thesis introduced the author Oscar Wilde and his artistic output. Through examination of Wilde's life, it is possible to see the development of his unique artistic expression and the influences on his literary contribution. The main aim of this section was to provide the biographical facts related to the topics of Victorian presence in the novel. Learning about Oscar Wilde's life not only proves the similarities between the characters and Wilde but also gives perspective about who he was as a person and a thinker.

The third part dealt with the different aspects of Victorian society and its social classes and values. It introduced the issues of Victorian England's politics, social and economic situations and their influence on the lives of the people of that time. The third part of this thesis then distinguishes between and compares the different social classes of late nineteenth-century Britain, their values, ideals and differences. The chapter then focused on introducing the problematics of the two genders and their different Victorian values and opportunities.

Further, this work analysed *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a Victorian Gothic novel, by first introducing its properties and history and then focusing on the specific gothic elements within the story. As Gothic is still a very popular genre in literature, it is important to recognise that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* carries many resemblances of a gothic novel, when arguing that it is a fitting representation of the literature of the Victorian times. The end of the third part points out the different gothic influences in the book, including its general mystery, and the role of the supernatural and grotesque elements; and describes how Dorian Gray fits the profile of a gothic antagonist.

The main part of this thesis is centred around the main characters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and introduces them briefly, as well as their position in the story related to Dorian Gray. The third part's main aim was to discuss and prove that these characters are according to examples from the text, fitting representations of Victorian society and its classes in Wilde's novel. Since the novel is mostly centred around the nobility, this thesis argues that the lower class also plays an important role in the development of the story, by serving as an example and the result of the upper-class influence. The final section of the thesis analyses Dorian Gray's character more deeply, through examining his personality through the lenses of decadence, and by using the example of Sibyl Vane's involvement with Dorian Gray to prove the immoral effects of decadent behaviour of the upper class.

To sum up, it needs to be understood that the tragic story of Dorian Gray is an exaggerated one, filled with supernatural elements and Faustian influence, and with decadence being used in the book as a way to legitimize the characters' shameful actions. Nevertheless, to this day Oscar Wilde's story teaches that no matter how tempting immorality and decadence might be, they have a disastrous effect on one's soul.

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