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The Importance of Being Dorian Gray

Aesthetics and the Gothic in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Its Relevance to Late Capitalist Societies

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This essay examines Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the context of Gothic fiction, aesthetics and the novel's significance to late capitalistic societies. It examines the Gothic elements of the story, the characters' preoccupation with aesthetics, the contrast therein, and the book's significance as social commentary to late capitalist culture, where beauty and youth are obsessively craved and sought after. The essay aims to show that the manner aesthetics are utilized by Wilde in the book and how they are brilliantly amplified by its Gothic settings, reflecting an element of beauty worship set against an increasingly dark reality that still speaks to late capitalist societies in powerful ways.

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1. Introduction

A hundred and twenty one years have passed since Oscar Wilde published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (herein after *The Picture*), with its controversial themes of hedonism, duplicity and worship of youth and beauty. While the decadence and homo-eroticism that shocked his contemporaries upon its original publication would hardly raise an eyebrow today, the theme of youth and beauty worship remains extremely relevant in late capitalist societies. Today, both the young and the aging can relate to the book's protagonist, Dorian Gray, who could not imagine becoming old.

The book is influenced by themes and movements such as what is today known as modernism, as well as Gothicism and aesthetics, to name but a few. My analysis is limited to the Gothic elements of the book, as well as Wilde's narrative of Walter Pater's theories of aesthetics. Those two focal points are then further examined with the aspect of the youth and beauty obsession in late capitalist societies. Wilde was influenced by Walter Pater's notions on aesthetics and the major characters in the book are frequently used as narrators of Wilde's thoughts on that issue. The Gothic elements that frame the book and its main events, for example Basil's death and the creation of the magical portrait, serve as a gruesome and dark background to further Wilde's aesthetic narrative.

In late capitalist societies there is a growing trend of cosmetic surgeries and increased use of beauty products. This focus on being young and beautiful is an obsession in the vein of Dorian Gray's fear of aging. The modern man and woman spend an increasingly greater amount of money on maintaining the ideal mirrored image of themselves, whether those demands or expectations come from themselves or the society. This reality of late capitalist

society is reflected in the main characters want for youth and beauty, and the Gothic framework of the book serves as a contrast to this aesthetic focus.

With added peer pressure and focus on status symbols, the world has become a trickier place to navigate. Today, people are, in some sense a lot more visible within their own social circle as well as others, mainly due to social networking, online dating sites and video uploading sites. In these late capitalist societies, people are no strangers to advertisements and celebrity endorsements, things that in 1910 were only just beginning with actress testimonials on "fashion and beauty products" (Schweitzer 257).

Since the late 19th century, a great many things have changed and become more visible, yet the story of Dorian Gray is still one of relevance, as everyone surely knows the lengths people go to, to achieve and maintain beauty. The everlasting youth and beauty that Dorian Gray was granted unawares through supernatural means is now possible to achieve, for some time at least, with beauty therapies and cosmetic surgeries. The message of the story, that everything comes with a price, resonates better with the everyday man or woman. This moral of the story is perhaps a simple one but as Wilde himself wrote: "All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril" (6).

Following is the exploring of the aesthetic focus of *The Picture* against its dark Gothic background and how the novel's subject matter is relevant to late capitalist societies.

2. Gothic Elements of *The Picture* and Their Relation to Aestheticism

Wilde was a famously dedicated believer of the aesthetic writings in Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*. The views on aestheticism as presented in Pater's writings permeate Wilde's novel. Pater writes:

> Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness. To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics. (xix)

Pater is correct in his observation, beauty is subjective and to each his own. However, he speaks of a "special manifestation" (xix) of beauty or its formula: that there is in fact some standard or perceived ideal that people can strive to achieve. According to Concise Oxford, beauty is a "Combination of qualities, as shape, proportions, colour, in human face or form, or in other objects, that delight the sight" (qtd. in Synnott, "Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks Part I" 610). So while beauty is somewhat quantifiable, it is also ultimately subjective and how it appears, is the study of those that ponder aesthetics. How we see beauty and what it can hide is what Wilde is trying to narrate in *The Picture*.

By looking at that question from the point of view of his characters, Wilde's novel incorporates a study of Pater's theories and ponderings of aesthetics. *The Picture* becomes a rich story of decadence, self destruction, as well as youth and beauty worship, blended in a heady mixture of the mysterious Gothic and twisted aestheticism. The Gothic elements Wilde uses are not severe and not as dark as in other Gothic stories of the era. Both Robert Louis

Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are far more sinister and dark in both their characters' descriptions and setting.

Wilde describes many beautiful places, objects and people in the story, but affords them with an eerie quality, normally not evident in aesthetics portrayal. John Paul Riquelme maintains that by twisting the portrayal of the Gothic elements and the aesthetic is how "Wilde simultaneously aestheticizes the Gothic and gothicizes the aesthetic" (610) as well developing a narrative that incorporates his view of the aesthetic writings of Walter Pater.

2.1 Gothic Elements in the Story

The definition of Gothic literature can be hard to pinpoint, due to what Jerrold Hogle refers to as an "uneasy conflation of genres, styles, and conflicted cultural concerns" (2). However, Hogle concedes that there are some "general parameters by which fictions can be identified as primarily or substantially Gothic" (2).

To summarize, the setting for these stories is nearly always in an antiquated space, such as a castle, abbey, crypt, graveyard, theatre or a large old home. There within the chosen setting, are concealed secrets of the past that disturb the characters being portrayed in the stories (3). These disturbances can take many forms, for example ghosts, monsters or anything that assaults from the outside, to shed light on some unresolved crime or conflict that cannot remain under wraps (3). Gothic stories also tend to "play with or oscillate between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural" (3). By looking upon these features and applying them to *The Picture*, we can see they fit quite well.

By examining the setting of the novel, which mainly takes place in London, and seeing how that compares to the parameters previously mentioned, there is a certain pattern to be found. London is not an antiquated space like the ones mentioned above but none the less a

city notoriously often described as grey, rainy and foggy, which does add an air of coldness, mystery and obscurity. Further elaborating on setting, Riquelme explains that in time, writers of Gothic fiction went from writing about "foreign locales" ("Toward a History of the Gothic and Modernism" 587) and repositioned "the antipastoral setting and its implications much closer to home" (587).

Wilde was one of the authors that repositioned the setting and placed the story in his own backyard, using this aforementioned drearier element of London to his advantage. During the progression of *The Picture*, every time something evil is about to take place, the streets or weather of London seems to foreshadow its coming or amplify what has taken place. For example, when Dorian has cruelly rejected Sybil Vane, the description of his surroundings is ominous, "Where he went to he hardly knew. He remembered wandering through dimly-lit streets, past gaunt black-shadowed archways and evil-looking houses" (Wilde 103). In chapter twelve the weather foreshadows the dark events of the night ahead, as Basil and Dorian meet on the streets, in the mist, during a "cold and foggy" night (169). Later in the chapter, Dorian will murder Basil, thereby actualizing the ominous tone set in the beginning.

The next feature of Gothic fiction listed by Hogle resonates with *The Picture* and deals with the placement of the painting. Dorian lives in the grand old home he inherited from his grandfather. In this house there is an unused room that Dorian chooses is chosen to keep his secret. The room is placed at the top of the house, where one would normally have an attic, with all its spooky connotations. While the room is described as big and properly furnished, the servant, who Dorian calls upon for the keys, states that the room is "full of dust" (Wilde 137) and "cobwebs" (137). Thus this hiding place of the secret painting is given an air of neglect and dilapidation, which in turn adds a fitting setting to this dangerous object. This

helps establish the Gothic element in the story, which fluctuates from obscure to obvious, moving between subtle changes in the weather to dark and dreary places in the depths of London. The painting itself begins to haunt the main character, its changing image often horrifying Dorian, "He drew back with a shudder. What was that loathsome red dew that gleamed, wet and glistening, on one of the hands, as though the canvas had sweated blood?" (Wilde 199). It is perhaps an unusual form for such a haunting to take, as it is an unanimated object that haunts Dorian with its transformation, but there is clearly life in the portrait, though the reader never actually witnesses it changing nor sees it move. It clearly has power over Dorian, as we can see when he kills Basil,

> Dorian Gray glanced at the Picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips. The mad passion of a hunted animal stirred within him. (182)

Perhaps this is just Dorian being the monster he has become but the portrait has such far reaching impact in the novel, that it seems foolish to dismiss the powers it must possess. It starts as an object that is created with all the lofty aspirations of an artist that clearly values the aesthetics in life. Upon its completion it is a beautiful object portraying, by all accounts, a beautiful man. Thus the portrait, an aesthetic object impregnated by the Gothic nature of the supernatural, not only haunts Dorian Gray but influences his very life.

Wilde portrays aestheticism alongside the Gothic in the book and hence his aristocratic characters move around and visit spaces that are beautiful and not antiquated. He offsets the beautiful places and objects described, such as a "costume ball" (Wilde 156) and "rose-pink

and wine-yellow topazes" (156) by every now and again placing his characters in settings that add a more Gothic air to the proceedings. For example, the theatre in which Dorian first sees Sybil Vane is described as "horrid", "vulgar" and "tawdry" (60), putting into the mind of the reader something lower class and in ill repute. The theatre is a place devoid of the elements of beauty and finesse that generally surround the major characters. The theatre then becomes the scene for Dorian's first real act of cruelty, which is meted out with all the high handedness of someone believing himself to be better than his fellow man.

In *The Picture*, there is no horror story monster or a ghost from the past, as is the case in Gothic novels like *Frankenstein* and *Jane Eyre*. With his behaviour, however, Dorian does become a monster, both to himself and others. He is, for example, a monster to the Vane siblings, and to Alan Campbell. Dorian's actions, which are merely alluded to, also affect other nameless victims in and out of his social circle. While giving into the hedonistic values expressed in the "poisonous book" (Wilde 146) given to him by Lord Henry and never named in the text, Dorian acts cruelly and with selfishness towards others. His actions then alter his double in the portrait, terrifying him to his core, thus making him, his own monster. Riquelme states that Dorian has in fact a "darkly narcissistic desire to watch himself become something bestial" (Toward a History of Gothic and Modernism 599). Dorian cannot stop tracking his own transformation and doing so has a great effect on his psyche. The description of his visits to the locked room where the picture is hidden is a prime example of the changes in him,

> Looking now at the evil and ageing face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured by his own beauty, and more and more interested in the corruption of his soul. (Wilde 148)

Dorian's ego grows, and much like Narcissus before him, his heightened self belief in his own ability or power will bring him down. The portrait sheds a light on whatever crimes or sins Dorian has committed by showing things such as bloody hands after he has committed murder (199). However the portrait will eventually also bring him down as is foreshadowed in this line, "it was here the fatal portrait was to be hidden away" (141).

The magical portrait is presented to us as a real and actual object that is in the real world yet endowed with the magical properties that allow Dorian to maintain his youth and beauty. Its existence implements the Gothic allusion to the paranormal, by fluctuating between the supernatural and conventional reality (Hogle 3). There is no explanation offered for the existence or origin of the magic behind the portrait, but we are repeatedly told of how it absorbs the age and sins of Dorian Gray. After Dorian rejects Sybil, he sees that on the picture "the expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth" (Wilde 105). Additionally, during the dramatic conclusion, where Dorian stabs the portrait to rid himself of its haunting presence, it is he who is killed. It is that conclusion to the story that cements the magical power of the portrait, for as Dorian kills it, he kills himself.

Another common trait in Gothic fiction is the portrayal of some doubling or duality. Karl Miller believes that "the doubling characteristic of Gothic Fiction evokes the mixed, ambiguous, character of human experience, which holds the potential for both destructive and creative transformation" (qtd. in Riquelme, "Toward the History of Gothic and Modernism" 591). All people will have experienced a person with a dual nature, capable of both very good and very evil, and reading about these types of characters will then resonate with the reader further than a reading of one that has no inner conflict between these binary pairs. This means that such characters contain the power to affect the way you view your life, by offering

cautionary tales of those who are given all they desire and/or give into the duality of their nature. Dorian's duality, his capacity for both good and evil means it is possible to see both the best and the worst in him. That gives the reader ample opportunity to empathise, criticise or feel some reaction to the words on the page. Gothic Fiction is ideally placed to evoke strong response in the reader, because it delves into horrifying actions or situations that are hard to ignore.

There is then a further distinction within the Gothic fiction, which Hogle refers to as "terror gothic" and "horror gothic" (3). This was first defined by Ann Radcliffe in *On the Supernatural in Poetry*. Hogle explains this distinction thus:

> The first of these hold characters and readers mostly in anxious suspense about threats to life, safety, and sanity kept largely out of sight or in shadows or suggestions from a hidden past, while the latter confronts the principal characters with the gross violence of physical or psychological dissolution, explicitly shattering the assumed norms (including the repressions) of everyday life with wildly shocking, and even revolting consequences. (*Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* 3)

When looking at the description, The Picture of Dorian Gray seems to fit within the parameters of the so called "terror gothic" (Hogle 3). What with the books slow pace and suspense that it builds throughout. But upon examining the parameters of "horror gothic" (3), there are elements of that category that fit Dorian Gray as well. The portrait does confront Dorian's psychological state every time he looks on the ever-changing image on the canvas. In terms of shattering norms, supernatural objects have a tendency to jar against what normally is accepted. The portrait clashes against

the normality of the life that Dorian led. His disbelief of its power is evident but he cannot deny the changes taking place on the canvas. It forces him to examine his life. At first he wants to be better only to then absolve himself from responsibility. Where his life would have been like those bored aristocrats around him, a normal progression of social events, courtship, ennui and snobbery, he is afforded something that shocks the simple balance of his world. The portraits effect on him change his behaviour, which is up to a point shocking enough to shatter norms of those he associates with. Neither Alan Campbell nor Sybil Vane recover from their dealings with Dorian and take their own lives. Such is the extent of damage he manages to inflict with his cruel and selfish behaviour. In that sense, elements of both "horror"(3) and "terror Gothic"(3) can be applied to *The Picture*.

Wilde's foray here into Gothic writing remains, much like the genre itself, not fixed into any set characteristics but rather a clash of imagery designed to afford a darker quality to a narrative (Riquelme 627).

2.2 Aesthetics Against the Framework of the Gothic Elements

While *The Picture* is for the most parts a narrative on aesthetics, beauty and its multi faceted aspects, the Gothic elements of the book are rich, forming a diverse framework for the aesthetic to lean on. John Paul Riquelme explains why the two intertwine to such a degree: "The tendency of Gothic writing to present a fantastic world of indulgence and boundary crossing and the tendency of the aesthetic, in Pater, to press beyond conventional boundaries and to recognize terror within beauty" ("Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic Gothic" 610).

Wilde certainly presents us with the terror that inhabits Dorian's psyche. With every passing page he is transformed into something more horrifying or loathsome, yet maintaining

his outward beauty. Dorian himself is a manifestation of Pater's notion of terror within beauty and the books greatest contrast of aesthetics and Gothic elements. He is two characters in one, the beautiful aristocrat and his mythical evil twin; evil lives in him and we see it in his image on the canvas but it is never revealed on his face until the final page. It is hard to state with certainty if Dorian would have become what that monster if it was not for the power of the portrait and Lord Henry's influential views. His family had a history of "passion and violence, as well as class antagonism and a disregard of conventional behaviour" (628). Riquelme seems to believe that due to that history, Dorian's nature was not inherently good, "The novel's narrative concerns a dark and darkening recognition that transforms Dorian's life by actualizing a potential that was already there in his family" (610). It is perhaps a criticism on British society, which the Irish Wilde would have viewed with some antagonism. Riquelme agrees that "Wilde's transformation of aesthetic theory is fused with anti-British attitudes"(613), and that "Wilde has turned the critical direction of the Gothic inward, toward England"(614). Based on the story's subject matter, setting and its characters, it is not entirely unbelievable that Wilde was, as well as writing his views on Pater's aesthetics, also criticizing the society in which he lived.

> By echoing Pater's writings frequently and strategically, Wilde projects the story of contemporary Narcissus as one truth about Paterian aestheticism. He echoes Pater not in order to agree with the older British writer's views but to present them darkly, in shades of gray, as at base contradictory in destructive and self-destructive ways. (617)

Wilde, in this instance and in others such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, seems to delight in creating moral ambiguity or have his characters immersed shades of gray. Here he manages to create that gray area, by infusing aesthetics and the Gothic,

creating a beautiful monster such as Dorian Gray. Even if Wilde does not agree with Pater in earnest, there is no doubting that aesthetics are something he firmly believes in. Riquelme explains, "As the reader soon discovers, the narrative is permeated by the aesthetic, since it concerns throughout the desire to create, experience, possess or destroy beauty" (617).

However writing only about aesthetics is not enough to satisfactorily create drama or contrast. It is therefore he intertwines it with the Gothic element, "Wilde has merged the aesthetic with issues that regularly arise in Gothic writing, issues that are anthropological, aesthetic, and scientific: the creation of the new and the character of the human" (618). That creation of the portrait and the affects it has on Dorian's psyche is evidence of this merging. The reader gets to follow Dorian on his journey and watch as he sinks into debauchery and hedonism, exploring the human character along the way. Another way that Wilde has contrasted the aesthetic and the Gothic is in regards to matrimony. Riquelme observes that "Wilde merges aesthetic narcissism with the Gothic tradition's representation of marriage's difficulty or even impossibility" (621). The only real marriage we are introduced to in the novel, Lord Henry's, fails. Lord Henry is also the man that explicitly tells Dorian not to marry at all (Wilde 57). Dorian believes that he is unlikely to marry because he is so much in love (58), which is peculiar as that is usually the precursor to a marriage. But perhaps, as Narcissus, Dorian simply loves himself too much (Riquelme 620-621). These examples are evidence that show the depth of thought Wilde put into immersing the Gothic and the aesthetic within each other.

3. Beauty and Aesthetics in Dorian Gray

A few pages into *The Picture*, Lord Henry utters these important words: "Because you have the most marvellous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having" (Wilde 29). In this sentence lies the story's crux and it sets the scene for the unveiling of Dorian's portrait, which will alter Dorian's life dramatically. Firstly, these words instil the fear of aging into Dorian Gray, which in turn opens the door for him to plead with unknown forces to be spared and the painting to suffer. As the story progresses and we see how everlasting youth and beauty affects Dorian and how his personal deal with the devil affects the lives of others, we get a taste of the price of unnatural beauty. Beauty corrupts Dorian, as his is unnatural, it will not alter and the certainty of that knowledge makes Dorian reckless and more selfish. He can be cruel, he can treat people with indifference and dismiss them out of hand and their pain has little effect on his thought and actions. It removes the need for ethics in his life and allows him to live as an aesthetic self, unchanging as a piece of art.

The Picture is in many ways Wilde's ode to aesthetics, which was a movement that influenced the man as much as it did his canon of works. Pater's writings on the subject, mentioned here previously, had a great deal of effect on Wilde's point of view. The characters of the book spend a certain amount of time appreciating or rhapsodising about the nature of beauty and art, thereby narrating Wilde's own thought on aesthetics. To understand the aesthetic narrative portrayed in the book, it is important to analyze how the three main characters see the world in terms of youth and beauty.

3.1 The Major Characters and Their Views on Youth and Beauty

While there is only one protagonist in the story, there are two other male characters that have an immense effect on what takes place. These three men share commonalities such

as background and an elevated place in society: Henry Wotton is a Lord and Dorian's mother was a Lady: Dorian himself was raised by his affluent grandfather. Basil may is not be titled, but it is clear that he has money and a good reputation as an artist. Thus they all have money, respect and are very much privileged. However, they do not share the same outlook on life and introduce contrary views on, for example, youth and beauty. The significance of this contrast, ultimately leads to a deadly confrontation between Basil and Dorian.

Basil Hayward is the first example in the story of a man believing the credo of aesthetics. He is an artist and greatly values beauty; it inspires him and his paintings. But in his eyes, art is more important than beauty, even if art springs from that beauty. He expresses this view to Lord Henry at the beginning of the novel: "I won't tell you that I am dissatisfied with what I have done of him, or that his beauty is such that Art cannot express it. There is nothing that Art cannot express" (Wilde 17). Basil willingly and significantly admits to Lord Henry that he has put a part of himself in the picture. It is perhaps this action that inadvertently gives the painting life, much like the artist in Poe's story, "The Oval Portrait". The artist of the story obsessively paints his new bride and manages to make her so life like and so realistic that he in fact robs her of her very life, as she dies upon completion of the picture. Basil is the first man Dorian leaves behind after falling under Lord Henry's spell and the first person that actually falls directly by Dorian's hand. In Basil's quest to realize beauty through art he gives so much of himself that by the end, his character's body is literally obliterated by the chemicals of Alan Campbell, leaving behind only what lives on the canvas. His contribution to Dorian's character is not the devious implantation of ideas, that Lord Henry provides, but a part of himself encased in an object, that all throughout Dorian's life radically affects his actions and behaviour.

Lord Henry Wotton's character is, by far, the most vocal on the subject of youth and beauty, endlessly praising aesthetics. The entire novel and the views of the titular character are coloured by his views on the subject. Lord Henry has a great deal of influence over Dorian, such that it changes the trajectory of the plot, though only because of the groundwork laid by the creation of the picture. Their close relationship, as well as Dorian's bond with his magical portrait, sets the stage for Dorian's repeated misadventures in human relationships. This affect that Lord Henry has on Dorian, develops very soon after they have met; Lord Henry's charismatic persona and speech about the fickleness of youth and beauty have an immediate and profound effect on Dorian. He is after all, both young and naive and soaks up the knowledge and purported wisdom of the elder and more experienced Lord Henry. Soon enough, the relationship and connection that Lord Henry has to youth and aesthetics becomes melded with Dorian's, becoming nearly one and the same. This melting pot of ideas that were Lord Henry's and become Dorian's, both overwhelm and excite him, not to mention change his life. John Paul Riquelme maintains that Dorian is revealed "to be an empty echo, one without a mind of his own"(621), and that "Dorian's behaviour and his thinking are, by contrast, chosen for him, just as he chooses and manipulates the action and thoughts of others" (621).

After the events of their first meeting Dorian becomes an everlasting emblem of aesthetics, but he is set against the gruesome consequences brought on by the magic portrait providing one more realisation of the contrast between the story's aesthetics and the Gothic. By grabbing hold on Lord Henry's idea that his youth and beauty are not only immensely valuable but fleeting as well, Dorian is thrown into a life of aesthetics with all the darkness of the Gothic used to further illuminate his unnatural beauty. The words that change Dorian's life are in this soliloquy by Lord Henry:

> Some day when you are old and wrinkled and ugly, when thought has seared your forehead with its lines, and passion branded your lips with its hideous fires, you will feel it, you will feel it terribly. Now, wherever you go, you charm the world. Will it always be so?... You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr. Gray. Don´t frown. You have. And Beauty is a form of Genius – is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation. It is of the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or spring-time, or the reflection in dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It cannot be questioned. It has its divine right of sovereignty. It makes princes of those who have it. (Wilde 29-30)

Lord Henry finds great value in beauty, calling it all powerful and unquestionable. He clearly tells Dorian that he is beautiful and charming but that it will all be taken from him. He shocks young Dorian and makes him actually wonder if in fact he has a power that he is doomed to lose with the passing of time. There is certain world-weariness to his speech, as though he has seen beautiful people elevated and adored in true aesthetic fashion, only to fall from grace as age diminishes the full force of that beauty. Lord Henry even seems to insinuate that losing a beauty, that once you had, makes you a dull monster, something straight out of Gothic fiction. If Lord Henry's first soliloquy adds a sprinkle of doubt to Dorian's easy relationship with himself, his second makes him really question what he has and how it will be lost:

> "Yes, Mr. Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away. You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you, or have to content yourself with those mean triumphs that the memory of your past will make more bitter than defeats" (Wilde 30)

Lord Henry paints an ominous picture for young Dorian to face. He even goes so far as to equate the loss of beauty with the loss of a meaningful life, and that all that is awaiting Dorian is a bitter disposition with the only joy deriving from reliving past glories (Wilde 30). In his frequent speeches on aesthetics Lord Henry does come across as quite nonchalant, never displaying a great passion for what he is speaking of. Dorian has great passions and ends up as a rather horrid person, but every now and again he seems to regret his actions and resolve to be better. One of those times is near the end of the novel; Dorian states:"I have done too many dreadful things in my life. I am not going to do anymore. I began my good actions yesterday" (240). But at that time as well as many others, Lord Henry is around, content in his role as the devil's advocate, "I can finish your idyll for you. You gave her good advice, and broke her heart. That was the beginning of your reformation (241) and ready to praise the aesthetic way of life. For as Lord Henry would have a person believe then, and studies such as Kaczorowski's of 1989 (qtd. in Synnott, "Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks – Part I" 609) seem to indicate now, it is better to be beautiful.

As previously stated, Dorian adopts his view of the world from Lord Henry. We never really get to see who Dorian was before he comes under Lord Henry's influence, except through the eyes of others. Basil describes him thus: "He has a simple and beautiful nature" (Wilde 21); and Lord Henry thinks upon seeing him: "All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world" (Wilde 23). These descriptions seem to indicate that Dorian was someone entirely innocent and unaffected; the reader then witnesses as Dorian's world view shifts:

> The few words that Basil's friend had spoken by chance, no doubt, and with wilful paradox in them-had touched some secret chord that had never been

> touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses. (Wilde 26)

Within Dorian, there awakens something indicating that while he is "unspotted" (23) and pure, that he too, as most humans, is a complex being capable of change. In one fell swoop Dorian's unspotted view of the world has altered. When he later gazes upon the finished portrait of himself, the reader is afforded a glimpse into Dorian's mind, which is uneasy and confused after taking in Lord Henry's words:

> Then had come Lord Henry Wotton with his strange panegyric on youth, his terrible warning of its brevity. That had stirred him at the time, and now, as he stood gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness, the full reality of the description flashed across him. Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. The scarlet would pass away from his lips, and the gold steal from his hair. The life that was to make his soul would mar his body. He would become dreadful, hideous and uncouth. (Wilde 33)

Dorian marvels at the beauty that he never realized he had and at the same time yields to the cynical warnings received from Lord Henry. He is certain that this beauty shall pass and he will, upon that time, be less than nothing. When Dorian realizes what connection there is between him and the picture. He, at first, means to use the picture to help him be a good person, "he would not sin. The picture changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience" (Wilde 107). But merely hours later, after learning of Sybil's suicide, he has given up on that notion and accepted that he could do all that he wanted and remain unblemished;

> Not one blossom of his loveliness would ever fade. Not one pulse of his life would ever weaken. Like the gods of the Greeks, he would be strong, and fleet, and joyous. What did it matter what happened to the coloured image on the canvas? He would be safe. That was everything. (Wilde 124)

These words allude to the parallels between Wilde's Dorian and Greek mythology's Narcissus. The pride that both had in their appearance, brought them both to their ends, albeit by different means. Dorian has accepted that he can be beautiful forever and the value that he affords to this discovery is immense, it is "everything" (124).

Days later, Lord Henry gives him a book, which further leads him on to the path of mischief. He is under its influence for years to come and never really tries to break free (Wilde 147), from the wild aesthetic abandon it seems to preach. Dorian becomes more cynical, and while he makes certain to maintain his standing in society and host gatherings (149), he frequently goes on mysterious jaunts and becomes increasingly more obsessed with his magical self-portrait (148). The disparity between his beauty and his aging self amuses him. He derives great pleasure from the way the painting assumes his wrinkles and wicked ways (148), indicating a disassociation from reality. Dorian is becoming more and more of a monster, his duality of nature providing a sharp contrast within his character. His outer beauty remains but his inner evil and ugliness grows. His beauty seems to shield him from the havoc his behaviour seems to wreck, and his friends Basil and Lord Henry remain loyal to him. When Basil visits Dorian, when many years have passed, a visit that will result in the formers death, he says: "But you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvellous untroubled youth – I can't believe anything against you" (Wilde 172). Thus Basil maintains that loyalty to Dorian, until the very end of his life, where he is forced to see the truth behind Dorian's mask. Dorian does eventually grow more conflicted about his portrait.

Where he used to mock it and enjoy his superiority over its image (Wilde 148) he now fears it as it shows him exactly what he is like in reality (175). Yet he cannot live without it, the portrait enables him to live his life without repercussions.

Though they are inherently different, these main characters are cut from similar cloth and each role is essential to the story's progress. For without Basil, there would be no magical portrait, without Lord Henry there would be no aesthetic narrative and without Dorian, no Gothic monster to touch and twist the world around him. In the words of Jerusha McCormack, "Dorian himself becomes an artefact, neither alive nor dead: one of the fabulous undead, such as Dracula, who must draw life from others" ("Wilde's Fiction(s)" 113). These three characters represent a holy trinity of sorts, each propping up an essential element of the story. Their view of life is one that late capitalist societies hold dear: beauty matters and there is nothing like youth.

3.2 The Perpetuation of "the beauty mystique" in the Story

In *The Picture*, the major characters spend much time on an aesthetic narrative, endlessly wondering about beauty and its unquestionable power (Wilde 29-30). The descriptions in the story often seem to indicate that the characters, at least extrinsically, perceive that with beauty there comes goodness and with ugliness there is evil. This equation can be traced to Plato and has been conveyed by many others, such as Homer in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (Synnott, "Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks - Part I" 611). Anthony Synnott calls this "the beauty mystique" (608). Synnott goes on to explain:

> The beauty mystique, in its simplest form, is the belief that the beautiful is good, and the ugly is evil; and conversely that the morally good is physically beautiful (or 'good looking') and the evil is ugly. Thus the physical and the

metaphysical, body and soul, appearance and reality, inner and outer are one. (611)

This concept of the beauty mystique is widespread in both *The Picture* and in other literary works and visual media such as film and TV. As the villain Therstis in *The Iliad* was ugly, so are most characters that are cast as villains (611). The characters who become the hero or heroine of the story, however, are generally beautiful. Of this there are many examples, take for instance the book *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, after which there has also been made a movie. The hero, Harry Potter, is described as "skinny"(Rowling 27) with "black hair and bright green eyes" (27) while his cousin Dudley, who is a mean bully, is described as having "a large, pink face, not much neck, small, watery blue eyes and thick, blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head" (28). In *The Picture*, the beauty mystique crystallised in the tug of war between the Gothic and the aesthetic. For nothing in Gothic fiction is ever beautiful, the monsters, like Frankenstein, are ugly and the places, like those wild moors of *Wuthering Heights* are dark and dreary. It is not a setting for something good to take place. As a contrast to the Gothic darkness, the aesthetics in *The Picture* are ever focused on the greatness of beauty, and it is often equated with goodness or innocence. The characters in Wilde's novel perpetuate and seemingly believe this equation. At least, they continually regard Dorian as innocent and pure despite his behaviour. The beauty mystique adds to the duality of Dorian's character and as shocking rumours start to haunt his step, his fellow characters seem in constant disbelief; he cannot be bad because he is so beautiful (Wilde 147-148).

Wilde has in fact, implemented a certain contrast into Dorian's character, as he does not embody this equation. "The enigma was how Gray could be so evil, so debauched, and yet be still so good looking; only the picture could resolve the contradiction" (Synnott "Truth

and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks- Part II" 58). The portrait was in fact his real self. If we look at conversations between the other characters, their conversations with Dorian Gray or even his own observations, the correlation they believe is between beauty and goodness seems very clear. However the novel in its entirety upsets that correlation because Dorian does not fit into the equation. Basil clearly states that there is no getting away from the evil within:

> Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even. (Wilde 172)

Basil is certain vices show upon the sinners face and the sinner is thus blemished and unattractive. So the rumours that he hears of Dorian simply cannot be true, for as he adds: "But you, Dorian, with your pure, bright innocent face, and your marvellous untroubled youth – I can't believe anything against you" (172). Basil is ready, based on Dorian's innocent and beautiful face, to believe rather what he sees than what he hears. His concern for Dorian is not because he believes him to be guilty but rather because he fears for Dorian's social standing, were the rumours to spread. The evil of Dorian's actions have not made him ugly and therefore Basil is certain Dorian is innocent. For "the equation is reversible: the ugly are evil, but the evil are also ugly" (Synnott "Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks Part II 56). Dorian himself describes a man of low character that he meets in the theatre where he falls in love with Sybil Vane:

> A hideous Jew, in the most amazing waistcoat I ever beheld in my life, was standing at the entrance smoking a vile cigar. He had greasy ringlets, and an enormous diamond glazed in the centre of a soiled shirt. (Wilde 59)

Later on this same man is described as "a brute" (64) and mentioned that he holds his actors somewhat hostage by buying up their debts and making them work them off in the playhouse for however long that may take. Thereby displaying how the beauty mystique is perpetuated, if the character is described as ugly or unattractive, they must not be a very nice person. Late in the book Dorian confesses to one of his paramours, Hetty Merton, that he is in fact "wicked" (251). She laughed at him, "and answered that wicked people were always very old and very ugly" (251). So no matter if the characters are old and experienced, such as Basil or if they are young and naive as Hetty, all believe that looks accurately determine character. That aesthetics are the accurate measure of a man. Lord Henry, that pontificates on all things aesthetic is perhaps the only character, besides Dorian, that has some doubt that beauty equates goodness as he states "that it is better to be beautiful than to be good" (223). Lord Henry here seems to rate aesthetics higher than ethics, much as is described in Walter Pater's writings of aesthetics. Lord Henry then adds, perpetuating in some sense the reverse beauty mystique equation, "that it is better to be good than to be ugly" (223), giving off the appearance that he tries to be a good person, so not be an ugly person. He goes on to explain how he feels that committing crimes is essentially beneath him and those of his social standing:

> All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is a crime. It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder. I am sorry if I hurt your vanity by saying so, but I assure you it is true. Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. I don't blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime was to them

> what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations. (Wilde 244)

It is possible that Lord Henry's elevated rank in society is causing him to casually dismiss his peers being possible of committing something as vulgar as murder. It is however much more likely that Wilde is again, using the beauty mystique to contrast the goodness of aesthetics against the evil ways of the Gothic. By doing that, the aesthetics are further augmented and become even more idealistic and beautiful. While the Gothic backdrop adds certain realism and darkness as well as it makes the line between ethics and aesthetics more blurred, the duality of Dorian's nature, is of course too, mirrored in this contrast.

Lord Henry, a believer in this equation, also states in the novel that people should be judged by appearances:

> People say sometimes that Beauty is only superficial. That may be so. But at least it is not so superficial as Thought is. To me, Beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible. (Wilde 30).

It is perhaps easy for Lord Henry, or, for that matter, anyone, to look at the world from only a superficial point of view. See only what your eyes show you; believe only in what you see. It is however not an accurate representation of how the world works. No amount of beauty can guarantee goodness and ugliness is certainly not a clear indication of evil. While studies have shown that there are certainly benefits from being perceived beautiful (Webster & Driskoll "Beauty as Status" 141-143), and according to the beauty mystique, therefore good, the truth remains that in this world beauty is bought and sold, and no way of knowing if there is truth in the beauty mystique.

4. The Relevance of the Story for Late Capitalist Societies

The Picture is a book that offers the reader an opportunity to see what happens when the protagonist gets his highest wish granted. It is a good way learn that your actions have consequences, or as Robert Kastenbaum so elegantly puts it, "Dorian Gray is a compelling representation of both eternal youth fantasy and of the socio-cultural context in which he was engendered" (31). The book also manages to stay relevant even though it was written over a hundred years ago. Though, it is not strange that a book written in the 1890 should be this relevant as the 19th century marked the beginning of an industry concerning itself with appearance and beauty. With every passing year people have grown more and more obsessed with being beautiful and with maintaining its youth. There are an ever growing number of plastic surgeries, beauty therapies and beauty products being bought and sold. The cosmetic industry estimates sales of cosmetics, in the year 2000, to be about twenty four billion US dollars (qtd. in "Exploratory analysis of global cosmetic industry" 1264). Those are extraordinary numbers any industry, but this is only for products used to enhance the looks that you were born with and it is telling for these consumer driven societies. It matters little from what side the issue is approached; beauty is the best status symbol and people want it to feel like they have a chance in this world.

4.1 How Late Capitalistic Societies Mirror Dorian Gray's Want for Aesthetics

Today and in decades past, the amount of money people have to spend has increased and a consumer culture has taken a foothold, as the newest product on the market is immediately claimed by the eager consumer. These products should ideally be technologically advanced and preferably better than what the consumer's peer possesses. Everything is a

status symbol, from that new car to that new nose job. To be noteworthy, there has to be the perception of youth and beauty. Or as Lord Henry revealed to young Dorian Gray, "when your youth goes, your beauty will go with it" (Wilde 30). Thus youth and beauty has become the ultimate Holy Grail and people are willing to go to quite some lengths to achieve this goal.

Enter cosmetic surgery, an ever-growing industry that focuses solely on modifying what nature gave a person into what is more desirable at any given time. Reischer and Koo observe that "humans may be the only creatures that steadfastly refuse to let nature alone dictate their appearance. Indeed, our capacity for self-modification and adornment is a central and essential feature of our humanity" (297). Humans tend to want to look their best. Some make do with haircuts, make-up and simple adornments, and others take it a step further and go under the knife to permanently alter their appearance. Even if the goal for cosmetic surgery is ultimately beauty, the reasons for undertaking surgery are varied:

> For example, to register participation in a social group, to claim an identity in opposition to a social group, to signal significant change in social status - but the overarching theme and primary end of most body work is the pursuit and attainment of beauty, however it may be defined. (Reischer and Koo 297)

Ultimately it all boils down to social status, which seems to derive and be controlled by how beautiful a person is perceived by his or her peers. Webster and Driskoll allege that "folklore and intuition tell us it is fortunate to be beautiful and unfortunate to be ugly" (140), and that is perhaps not unusual as studies have showed that beauty has a direct affect on your quality of life (141-143). According to a list of studies, collected by Webster and Driskoll, attractive people are more popular, perceived to have happier

marriages, they are expected to do better in school, and their school misdemeanours are judged less severe (140). But their advantages do not end there. They are awarded higher grades on essays, they are likelier to be agreed with, are "perceived as having better mental health" (140), and come across better in interview situations. So when Wilde wrote his novel praising aesthetics and placing them within a Gothic context to both further amplify their affect and problematize the relationship of aesthetics and ethics, he was only saying what scientists have gone on to prove. A person benefits from being beautiful. Webster and Driskoll explain this at length:

> First, attractiveness produces a great range of effects- beautiful people have a great many advantages over ugly people- and those effects appear over diverse populations and in a wide range of situations. Second, the attractiveness effect mentioned here all have to do with skills at performing something: attractive people do something better than unattractive ones, whether it be producing a happy marriage, finding partners in adultery, writing essays, or getting people to agree with them. Third, attractiveness affects not only perceived abilities but also interaction, so that attractive people are actually more successful at producing mental health, selling soap, and wielding influence. Finally, the effects are reciprocal, in that attractive people are seen as better at most things and are more successful; and better and more successful people become, by virtue of those traits, more attractive to others. (143)

So the advantages are present, and people, perhaps understandably, seek beauty to be able to claim them. By going under the knife, you may put your life at risk, but that seems to be little deterrent for those that seek the quality of life afforded to those with perceived good looks.

Cosmetic surgery used to be seen as an "extreme form of beautification" (Reischer and Koo 298) but with every passing year the customers become more diverse "owing to its rapidly growing popularity and social acceptance" (298).

After Lord Henry highlights Dorian's beauty and asserts the ramifications of it fading, Dorian becomes desperate to maintain his youth and beauty. The ease with which he is affected is indicative of the fickleness of human nature and how strongly one's perception of oneself is affected by other people's opinions. It was true then as it is now and explains the lengths humans go to, to impress their peers. Dorian, in his need to always be beautiful, resorts to prayer and gets the fulfilment of his wishes. His portrait becomes a surrogate that will absorb the natural progression of nature, his face and body will retain their youth and beauty. Would Wilde have written about Dorian Gray in the 20th or the 21st century, the story would undoubtedly be different. Dorian Gray might have been addicted to surgeries instead of being in a love-hate relationship with a magical portrait. However, what would remain the same then and now is the human longing of becoming and being beautiful, both to fulfil a perceived society ideal and to impress peers.

5. Conclusion

The Picture is a remarkable story that is as relevant today as it was in 1890, and will for an indefinite amount of time be relevant still, for it explores a constant feature of human nature and the longing to be young and beautiful. Wilde's decision to write about aesthetics in the context of Gothic fiction is a part of what makes this book such an interesting read today. There is a constant contrast being offered to both further what he is saying about aesthetics as well as to make the line between good and evil, ugly and beautiful, ethical and unethical hard

to see. It tests the readers mind, forces them to come to some conclusion and pick the side that represents their views of life. It even toys with the line between love and friendship, and it was that aspect that most outraged people back in the 19th century. The outrage that it evoked in its prime will never be fully repeated, but the message of the story could still serve as a reminder to the people of today, showing them how unnatural beauty can come to its end.

It is clear that the cosmetic industry will continue to grow. Better methods of changing what is already there will evolve and people will continue to seek out ways to look younger and better. What is unclear is when people will realize the price of false or unnatural beauty and youth? It is good to keep in mind, that eventually, it is nature that wins the fight against aging. No one, not even Dorian Gray, can remain young and beautiful forever.

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