

Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray
Lecture 11
Aestheticism and Degeneracy

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Victorian Gothic Fiction



- "*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) is a superb example of late-Victorian Gothic fiction. It ranks alongside [Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*](#) (1886) and Bram Stoker's [Dracula](#) (1897) as a representation of how fin-de-siècle literature explored the darkest recesses of Victorian society and the often disturbing private desires that lurked behind acceptable public faces. The novel also examined the relationship between art and reality, highlighting the uneasy interplay between ethics and aesthetics as well as the links between the artist, his or her subject and the resulting image on canvas."
- Greg Buzwell, 2014. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-picture-of-dorian-gray-art-ethics-and-the-artist>



Hello, and welcome to week 11's lectures. In today's session, I'm going to examine Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in terms of ideas about Aestheticism and Degeneracy.

"The *Picture of Dorian Gray* is a superb example of late-Victorian Gothic fiction. It ranks alongside Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde' and Bram Stoker's 'Dracula', as a representation of how fin-de-siècle literature explores the darkest recesses of Victorian society and the often disturbing private desires that lurked behind acceptable public faces. The novel also examined the relationship between art and reality, highlighting the uneasy interplay between ethics and aesthetics as well as the linkages between the artist, his or her subject and the resulting image on canvas."

This particular novel by Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* belongs to the category of Victorian Gothic fiction. The Victorian Gothic is a mode that was also very popular during the turn of the century.

At the end of the 19th century, there was an exploration of the dark desires of society in a textual narrative, as well as in other kinds of narratives. And the Gothic mood was a useful way to explore the anxieties and the private desires of individuals that were hidden behind acceptable public faces.

The public face was different from the private self, and the individuals in the society increasingly came to recognize that disconnect or disjunction works such as R L. Stevenson's 'Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' and 'Stoker's Dracula', also explore such disjunctions in individuals. This novel also illustrates the dynamic relation between art and reality. It also focuses on the difficult relation between the notion of ethics and the philosophy of aesthetics. And we understand that in this particular novel, the Gothic exploits the darker side of the idea of aestheticism.

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Gothic Double



- "The idea of a double life – of outwardly playing a respectable role while inwardly pursuing an existence that crossed the boundaries of acceptable behaviour – is central to the plot of the novel. Dorian Gray, once he becomes aware his portrait will bear the scars of his corruption – thus leaving his actual appearance unstained – feels free to ignore the pious morality that pervaded the Victorian era. Rather like Dr Jekyll in Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Dorian is able to pursue his debauched activities knowing his respectable appearance and unblemished looks will shield him from accusations of depravity."
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The Picture of Dorian Gray explores the duality, the notion of double life. On the one hand, there is respectability and on the other hand, we have boundaries being transgressed. There is acceptable behaviour on the one hand and unacceptable and immoral behaviour on the other. And the novel explores the connection between the two.

Dorian realizes that it is his portrait that reflects the corruption, the scars of his soul. Whereas his own physical appearance is unblemished without any stain. When he realizes this fantastical reality he feels utterly free to do whatever he wants, and he quits his moral behaviour, his piety, and he indulges himself to the fall, and Dorian becomes representative of the duality in Victorian society. Dorian resembles doctor Jekyll whom we find in Stevenson's work, *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Like Doctor Jekyll, Dorian feels free to pursue his sensual pleasures and debauched activities, because he realizes that his physical appearance will be intact.

Therefore, Dorian feels protected. His respectable appearance, he thinks, will give him immunity from the judgmental looks of the society. He believes that he will be protected from accusations of debauchery. In this context, Dorian Gray and Doctor Jekyll are gothic doubles.

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Gothic Double



- “His ability to have the best of both worlds – the continued acceptance of his peers and the ability to fulfil his basest desires – becomes in itself an important part of his fascination with events. When attending a society gathering only hours after having committed a murder we are told Dorian ‘felt keenly the terrible pleasure of a double life’” (ch. 15).

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Dorian realizes that he can have both worlds. The world of superficial sensual pleasure and the world of darkness. He can commit a murder, and then without any kind of punishment being bestowed on him, he can go ahead and enjoy himself in a society gathering.

So, this double life is extremely pleasurable to Dorian. And the choice of words to describe his state of mind is fascinating. If we look at the phrase, the terrible pleasure, it is a pleasure but it is terrible as there is a horror to that pleasure. And Dorian enjoys both, facets of that act. He enjoys the emotion of pleasure at the same time when there is a horror to it. And this kind of phrase, terrible pleasure, can be applied to the Gothic narrative itself. Readers do feel fascinated by the Gothic narrative because they derive pleasure from something that's terrible. The duality is something which is significantly explored by Wilde in this novel. Dorian is able to enjoy his basest, his worst desires. Dorian can be as callous as he wants to but at the same time, he can get acceptance and respectability from society too.

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Gothic Crime



- “Dorian’s friend Lord Henry makes this link between the criminal and the respectable citizen clear when he observes: ‘Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. I don’t blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime is to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations’ (ch. 19). Dorian, with his visits to opium dens and his delight in high culture combines the criminal and the aesthete – the very definition of ‘decadence’ distilled into a single person and a disturbing example of the split between the wholesome public persona and the furtive private life.”
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In this set of ideas, there is a discussion between the pleasures of the criminal and the pleasures of ‘respectable citizens’. Lord Henry Wotton, the Frank philosopher and guide of Dorian tells Dorian that crime is something, which is the preserve or the domain of the lower classes. And he says that the lower strata in society cannot be blamed in the least because that

is their way of getting a taste of extraordinary sensations. Crime becomes, in a way, a domain of pleasure for the lower classes just as art is extraordinarily pleasurable to the peers, to the respectable citizens, to the upper classes. So, art is being compared to crime. And Lord Henry Wotton is being very clever when he puts both on the same level in terms of the sensations, which they offered to different sections in society.

Dorian, as we know, enjoys his time in opium dens, and he also enjoys visiting art galleries. Dorian also commits murder. So, Dorian is a personality who straddles different class positions according to Lord Henry Wotton's theory of crime and art. Greg Buzwell points out that the very idea of decadence is to be found in a distilled notion or in a single person and Dorian Gray embodies that. Dorian is decadent in several meanings of that term. He has an apparently wholesome public persona, but he also has a personal dark life. It is a secret of life that Dorian has.

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Degeneracy



- “While much of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* delights in the beautiful and the intoxicating indulgence of the senses – the novel's opening paragraph for example describes the heady pleasures to be derived from the scents of roses and lilacs – it can be argued that Wilde intended his book neither as a celebration of decadence nor as a fable about the perils of its excesses.”

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The *Picture of Dorian Gray* is a beautiful object. It is intoxicating to read this narrative. One can indulge oneself in this book and the book itself in its opening sections beautifully

captures the sensations that one can enjoy from experiencing the fragrance of roses and lilacs, objects of beauty, things of nature.

And this particular book according to Craig Buzwell was neither an illustration of the time of decadence. Wilde was not celebrating decadence and at the same time, he was not condemning the excesses of central pleasures. He was not offering extreme morality as the solution to the problems of society. So, these are the opinions of Greg Buzwell.

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Gothic Morality



- “As Wilde states in the preface to the novel ‘There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all’. In other words, any moral disgust or vicarious pleasure derived from the book reflects more upon us as readers than it does on the novel itself. The book is a tale, pure and simple. It is we, the readers, who force it to bear the weight of a moral dimension”.
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We have come across this quotation “there is no such thing, as a moral or immoral book. Books are either well or badly written.” These are very famous lines in this work. It is significant to reiterate this point because the argument of Wilde is that the book does not reflect any kind of morality, the book does not advocate any kind of vicarious pleasure. In fact, the readers derive such pressure or moral disgust, simply by their own moral compasses. The book, in fact, performs an action of being beautiful.

The morality is something that is derived through the act of the readers, so that seems to be the argument of Wilde. So, it is the readers themselves who are bearing the weight, who are

carrying this cross of this moral dimension. The readers endow a sense of morality to a particular book, which is just an object and an aesthetic object, to clarify further.

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Aestheticism and Degeneracy



- “The idea lying behind Aestheticism, the controversial theory of art that was newly fashionable at this time, was that art should be judged purely by its beauty and form rather than by any underlying moral message (‘art for art’s sake’). This is exemplified in the novel by the dandyish Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Henry advocates the hedonistic pursuit of new experiences as the prime objective in life. In his view, ‘one could never pay too high a price for any sensation’ (ch. 4). Dorian, although seduced by Wotton’s poisonous whisperings, is increasingly interested in the moral consequences of his behaviour.”
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The philosophy of aestheticism is that art should be assessed on its formal qualities. One should look at how beautiful its form, structure, and various components are, rather than by assessing its message, point, or moral. Therefore, art should be for art's sake, for beauty’s sake and not for any kind of meaning sake. In fact, the beauty is the meaning of art. So, these are some of the ideas associated with aestheticism and this was a very popular movement during the turn of the century.

Aestheticism is exemplified, embodied, and represented by Lord Henry Wotton, who's a dandy flamboyant person who believes in the pursuit of sensations. In fact, Henry believes that hedonism is the point of life. New experiences matter the most and the sensations of an experience are the most important element in one's life.

So, these are some of the things that Lord Henry Wotton believes in. Dorian, as we know, is heavily influenced by the words and behaviour of Lord Henry Wotton. In fact, he is so taken in by the poisonous whisperings of Wotton, who is somewhat like the evil angel in morality place. And Dorian, though he is taken in by the attractive pleasures shown by Henry Wotton, he increasingly becomes slightly anxious about the ramifications and result of his behaviour.

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Aestheticism and Degeneracy



- “He stands before his decaying portrait, comparing the moral degradation as depicted in oil with his unblemished innocence as reflected by the mirror. The contrast gives him a thrill of pleasure: ‘He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul’ (ch. 11). Dorian – via his wish to remain handsome, while the painting bears the weight of his corruption – muddies the boundary between art and life, aesthetics and ethics.”

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Dorian examines his portrait that is becoming increasingly corrupted. The portrait is decaying, it is looking gruesome, it has aged, it is full of the representations of degeneracy. On the other hand, his own physical appearance is completely unblemished without any kind of stain.

And that's what he gets when he looks at the mirror. In fact, this handsome appearance of Dorian seems to be a reflection of his innocence. The parent analogy is that if one is beautiful, then one is also innocent. And that is what is being subverted in an interesting way in this novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The portrait takes the moral blows of Dorian's corrupt life. When Dorian looks at all these differences between the portrait and the mirror, between his own physical appearance and the decaying portrayed, he enjoys that disjunction.

He sees two distinct personalities before him and he falls more and more in love with his own handsome appearance, and then in this regard, he is more like the figure of the narcissist that I discussed in the previous session. So, while Dorian is more and more attracted by his own physical beauty, he refuses to consider the ethics of his behaviour.

He goes on to continue degenerate acts. And in this kind of circumstances, what we have realized is that the boundary between art and life becomes problematic. There is a collapse in terms of the boundary of art and life aesthetics and ethics. The continuing aesthetics of Dorian's personality allows him to muddle up his ethics.

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Aestheticism and Degeneracy



- "The painting is made to serve a moral purpose, being transformed from an object of beauty into a vile record of guilt, something 'bestial, sodden and unclean' (chapter 10). This tainting of the picture perhaps constitutes, for the aesthete, Dorian's greatest crime – namely the destruction of a beautiful artwork."
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“The painting is made to serve a moral purpose, being transformed from an object of beauty into a vile record of guilt, something best deals sodden and unclean. This painting of the picture perhaps constitutes, for the aesthete Dorian's greatest crime, namely, the destruction of a beautiful artwork. The painting is not just an object of art but it has some moral purpose in this novel.

In fact, it stops being an object of artistic beauty and it becomes a record of sort. It becomes a symbol of guilt and it becomes something more, it becomes bestial animalistic, it becomes unclean, it is full of stains, it is full of moral corruption. And Dorian's greatest crime according to Greg Buzwell is the tainting of the work of art, he destroys aesthetics itself.

He destroys the beauty of that portrait. The portrait was once handsome and beautiful. It reflected great joy because it was very attractive to look at. And Dorian, by his behaviour, by his crimes, by his degeneracy, by his murder, turns this picture into a bestial and hateful object that invokes disgust in the person who is looking at it. Therefore, what Dorian does is destroy aestheticism. So there is a lot of Gothic ironies there. Dorian not only murders his friend Basil Howard, Dorian not only pushes Sybil Wayne into killing herself. Dorian destroys very symbolically the idea of beauty itself.

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Gothic portraits



- "Paintings often play a sinister role in [Gothic fiction](#). The first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) includes a figure stepping from a painting and into reality while *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), written by Oscar Wilde's great-uncle Charles Maturin, describes the haunting gaze of a portrait as it follows the viewer around a room. The picture hidden in Dorian's attic may be the most disturbing portrait in Wilde's book, but it is not the only canvas in the novel which provides a pointer to Dorian's behaviour."

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We have seen how paintings play a crucial role in Gothic narratives. In fact, the *Castle of Otranto*, the first Gothic novel that came out in 1764, has a figure who comes out of a painting into the real world. While Charles Maturin’s ‘*Melmoth the Wanderer*’, which was

published in 1820 has a portrait which is following the actions of the viewer in a room. So, these are fantastical concepts that we have seen in Gothic narratives.

In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian's portrait is hidden in the attic, and it is very disturbing because it changes according to the change in the soul of Dorian, and it's always for the worse. And though it records the corruption of Dorian's soul, the painting is not just the only thing which points a finger of blame at Dorian's behaviour.

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Aestheticism and Degeneracy



- At one point Dorian walks through the picture-gallery of his country home, looking at the portraits of his ancestors: 'those whose blood flowed in his veins'. The saturnine and sensuous faces stare back at him, causing Dorian to reflect whether 'some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own?' (ch. 11). This poses the question as to whether Dorian is free to determine his own actions, and is thus entirely responsible for his behaviour, or whether his actions are dictated by his genetic inheritance – an inheritance, as the faces of his ancestors indicate, 'of sin and shame'.
- Greg Buzwell, 2014. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-picture-of-dorian-gray-art-ethics-and-the-artist>

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This particular section discusses Dorian's time at a picture gallery in his country house. And Dorian looks at all the pictures hung on the walls and the pictures are the portraits of his ancestors. And Dorian realizes that he comes in that line, and the blood that flowed in his ancestors flows in his veins too.

And what Dorian feels when he looks at their faces is this. He feels that there is some strange poison running through these ancestors. And this kind of poison, the poison gene, one can

call, it seems to kind of come down to his own body, his own life. Now, such a perception on the part of Dorian makes us wonder whether Dorian had been behaving in the way that he had been because of free will or because he had been influenced by that gene of his ancestors.

Is it hereditary? Is this wise that is running in Dorian's blood a hereditary trait? Is he forced to do all these debauched activities? So, such questions inevitably arise- is he an inheritor of a problematic gene? So, these ancestors seem to be associated with sin and shame. And the same qualities are also found in Dorian Gray too.

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Gothic portraits



- “The eminent mental pathologist Henry Maudsley wrote in his book *Pathology of Mind* (1895): ‘Beneath every face are the latent faces of ancestors, beneath every character their characters’. This idea already seems present in much Gothic fiction, including Wilde’s novel. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* provides both a standard ‘Gothic’ account of Dorian’s actions – the supernatural picture and the lascivious ancestors gazing from their portraits – but also a forward-looking scientific rationale for his depraved desires, namely the importance of inheritance in determining behaviour.”
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Thank you for watching. I will continue this discussion in the next lecture.