

The Popular Gothic Novel
The Picture of Dorian Gray
Lecture No. 55
Gothic Art and Mortality

Hello and welcome to week 11 lectures on the Picture of Dorian Gray. In today's session, I will finish up the discussion on aesthetics and degeneracy that I picked up in the last lecture, and then I will move on to a discussion of Gothic Art and Morality.

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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.”
- Greg Buzwell, 2014. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-picture-of-dorian-gray-art-ethics-and-the-artist>



Now, this is the idea with which we finished in the previous lecture.

“The eminent mental pathologist Henry Maudsley wrote in his book ‘Pathology of Mind’, which came out in 1895; ‘Beneath every face are the latent faces of ancestors, we need 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.”

There are two key ideas here in this section. Henry Maudsley makes an interesting point, in his work, *The Pathology of Mind*. He says, ‘every face has the hidden faces of ancestors’. The present figure is connected to past figures. Every identity has within it the identities of the ancestors. Now, this is interesting in terms of the *Picture of Dorian Gray*.

On the one hand, we have the traditional set of Gothic tropes. We have a supernatural portrait a picture, which changes in a fantastic manner and there is a reference to the hideous ancestors, hideous in terms of the morality. Now, these are standard Gothic ideas, tropes, attributes. We are reminded of Hebrew Baskerville, we are reminded of other ancestors who pass on their hereditary vices to their ascendance in terms of a Gothic curse.

Now, in the context of Henry Maudsley, we read a scientific cause or a scientific rationale for the kind of attitudes and desires that a person in the present illustrates. Now the present figure with whom we are interested in is Dorian Gray, this textual character. And there seems to be a scientific explanation for his depraved desires, for his immoral behaviour, for his corruption.

Now there is a suggestion through that scene of the portrait gallery in this country house that Dorian could have inherited his behaviour from his ancestor, so that is a scientific way to reason out Dorian's behaviour.

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Aestheticism and Degeneracy



- "Dorian resembles his mother physically, inheriting from her 'his beauty, and his passion for the beauty of others' (ch. 11), while, as his corruption accelerates, the twisted portrait in Dorian's attic increasingly resembles his wicked grandfather. This latter idea suggests Dorian is a scientific case study, as well as a moral one."
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Dorian is interesting to note resembles his mother in terms of his extraordinary physical beauty, and his love for the beauty in others, the physical beauty in others.

However, his portrait which degenerates as domain becomes increasingly corrupt reveals a resemblance with Dorian's grandfather. His grandfather seems to have possessed some of the attributes of degeneracy and their incomes this argument that this degeneracy of the ancestors is also being passed down the male line. So, there is a combination of science and scientific rationale in addition to the Gothic landscape and the Gothic motives, and the Gothic tropes in The Picture of Dorian Gray.

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Aestheticism and Degeneracy



- "Throughout the book Lord Henry treats Dorian as a beautiful subject upon which to experiment – partly via his encouragement of Dorian to pursue a philosophy of pleasure, and partly through a call to social evolution – a wish to abandon the restraints of Victorian morality on the grounds that sin and conscience are outmoded primitive concepts to be swept aside in the pursuit of new sensations."
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Greg Buzwell here points to another social experiment of souths in terms of Lord Henry's treatment of Dorian. For Lord Henry, Dorian becomes the object of a kind of social experiment. For Lord Henry, Dorian is a beautiful subject and towards his subject, Henry points to two fascinating modes of life. One, he shows Dorian, this domain of sensual pleasure. Secondly, he encourages Dorian to be quit of the regulations, the rules of Victorian society. He encourages Dorian to break the boundaries of Victorian morality. And Lord Henry's argument is that the notion of evil, the notion of immorality, the notion of sin, the notion of conscience is something that is outdated. It is a philosophy that belongs to the past.

And therefore, as an evolving species, human species one is supposed to give up the old ways of life in order to progress to a higher level of existence. And that higher level of existence is characterized by one's desire for new feelings, new emotions, new sensations.

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Aestheticism and Degeneracy



- “Lord Henry locates progress in the overcoming of hereditary fears: ‘Courage has gone out of our race ... The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion – these are the two things that govern us’ (ch. 2). His call to youth is a call to courage. Dorian’s ultimate failure to live up to Lord Henry’s ideals is due to his inability to escape his conscience as depicted in the portrait. By attempting to destroy the painting, and thus free himself from the constant reminder of his own guilt he, ultimately, manages only to destroy himself.”
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“Lord Henry locates progress in the overcoming of hereditary fears. Courage has gone out of our race. The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion, these are the two things that govern us. His call to youth is a call to courage. Dorian’s ultimate failure to live up to Lord Henry's ideals is due to his inability to escape his conscience as depicted in the portrait. By attempting to destroy the painting and thus free himself from the constant reminder of his own guilt he, ultimately, manages only to destroy himself.”

Lord Henry points out that the only way to progress for the society is to give up its fears and anxieties. And he asserts that this society, his current society has no courage. It has become cowardly. He further points out that there are two things, which causes great fear in the minds of individuals. The first is the judgment of society, what society would think if one does such and such a thing.

Secondly, the fear of religion, the fear of God, what would be the repercussions from God if one does such and such thing. Now, what he asks Dorian to do is to be courageous. And what is the nature of this courage, and that is what we discussed in the previous slide. Courage entails being oblivious to the fears of societal rules and the rules of God, and to go ahead and plunge oneself in the life of pleasure to disregard one's conscience along the way too.

Now, this is what Lord Henry once demands of Dorian Gray, his subject. Now, Dorian does take up the advice to a great extent, but not entirely, not fully because Dorian starts to have qualms. He starts to have hands of conscience and it is his anxiety, his conscience, which somehow impels him to destroy the painting because the painting becomes the living embodiment of Dorian's corruption, stained soul, and he wants to be quit of that living mirror of his soul. So, when Dorian attempts to destroy the painting, he destroys himself.

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Gothic Setting



- "The setting of Wilde's novel is not at all historical, nor is it set in a far-away-place on the borders of civilised society. On the contrary, its setting is the vibrant social circles of high-society London. This, Dryden suggests, makes it a "modern Gothic" "focused on the urban present, refracting contemporary concerns through the lens of a literature of terror" (19). So instead of a focus on events in history that affect the present as the traditional Gothic does, Wilde's novel focusses on contemporary issues that affect contemporary lives."
- Kosten 29



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Now we have a different set of ideas offered by Kosten. Now, what this predict points out is that in this novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the setting is not historical, the setting is not set in the past, it is not set in a liminal space. It is not set in the margins of society, it's not set in a place like Gartmore. Instead, the locale is a vibrant urban space. What it shows is the high society of London, the sophisticated urban circles of London society, and therefore, such a setting makes this novel represent what we call the modern Gothic.

Now, the modern Gothic, the urban Gothic uses the urban fabric to refract, to illustrate dynamically contemporary issues, fears and concerns through the narrative of terror. As we

know Gothic can be one of horror, one of terror. So, the terror is channelled through this urban setting, through this modern setting. Now, instead of what apparently traditional Gothic does whilst novel focuses on the contemporary lives of London high society.

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Gothic Theme



- "The contemporary issues in The Picture of Dorian Gray concern art, and the morality or immorality of art, as is made clear in the preface to the novel, in which Wilde claims "[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book"(13). However, the Gothic and supernatural elements in his novel all lead to the final destruction of Dorian Gray's corrupted soul, and with it the public mask of innocence Dorian kept had worn so well. This complex duality between a public and private persona, and the eventual collision of the two, is a prevailing theme in Gothic literature."
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We understand that art is central to this novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray. Art itself becomes a very complicated Gothic trope and Wilde uses, exploits the idea of portraits to the fullest in this particular novel. And it is the portrait which eventually becomes the catalyst, the key narrative element that tips Dorian over the edge, that pushes Dorian to perform something fatal.

And thus, one comes to a collusion, one witnesses the collusion, or the collision of the public and the private persona, and eventually, things are resolved. So, art becomes a key element. This Gothic art becomes a key element, which resolves the apparent disjunction between the public and the private identity of Dorian Gray.

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Gothic Duality



- "Dorian is able to see the consequences of his life of depravity in the corruption of his beautiful portrait, which both fills him with curiosity and "monstrous and terrible delight"
- He only rarely thinks "of the ruin he had brought upon his soul" (132). Yet, when Dorian finds the portrait unchanged after doing a good deed, according to his standards, it enrages him to think his soul is far past saving as the portrait has "brought melancholy across his passions. Its mere memory had marred many moments of joy" (222)"
- (Kosten 29-30)



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It is fascinating to see that Dorian closely watches the changes in the portrait. He is aware of it, he is noticing the differences in the portrait and the corruption of this picture, of his representation offers him both, a kind of a fascination, a curiosity as well as a kind of a weird monstrous delight. He enjoys in a way the corruption of that portrait. At the same time, Dorian also interestingly experiments with that portrait.

He attempts to do a good deed, a good deed according to his standard, his capabilities and he goes back and checks the change in the portrait and there is no change. Therefore, he reads that his soul is so far gone over to the evil that he is unable to kind of bring about any kind of recovery. He sees that his soul cannot be saved and that realization makes him melancholic. Even when he is enjoying himself the full, if he thinks back to that portrait, that memory spoils his enjoyment of the various pleasures that he is indulging in.

So, one can see a very complex attitude that Dorian has towards this Gothic portrait. He is delighted by the horrors of that portrait, he is worried about the changes in the portrait as well

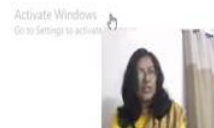
and he tries to do something in order to manage that change too. So, these are the range of emotions that one can notice in Dorian with regard to the portrait.

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Gothic art



- “Realistic art shows the corrupted soul of society, as it does with Dorian, and romanticised art shows the public mask, as does Dorian’s body. The emotions Dorian feels towards the portrait change towards the end of the novel. The “[u]gliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason” (186). Thus, by reflecting the very conflict of society Dorian Gray’s portrait becomes a metaphorical vehicle for the expression of amoral theme.”
- Kosten 30



“Realistic art shows the corrupted soul of society, as it does with Dorian, and romanticized art shows the public mask as does Dorian’s body. The emotions Dorian feels towards the portrait change towards the end of the novel. The ugliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason. Thus by reflecting the very conflict of society Dorian Gray’s portrait becomes a metaphorical vehicle for the expression of amoral theme.”

This is a fantastic set of ideas. The function of realistic art is to show the real world for what it is, society for what it is, the corrupt society for what it is and that is what we have in the portrait of Dorian. Romantic art idealizes, romantic art is akin to the public mask that Dorian puts on and romantic art is like this handsome, unstained perfect figure of Dorian. Now Dorian’s attitudes towards the portrait are interesting in this regard. Once Dorian felt hateful towards the portrait, but why did he feel hatred. He felt hatred towards it because it is getting uglier and uglier by the day.

Nevertheless, the same fact makes it dearer to Dorian, the portrait becomes important to Dorian because of its very ugliness, because of its horrible rendering of his soul. It is important because it is real. It shows things as they are and that is why Dorian feels an affinity towards that. Now, this kind of interpretation tells us the function of art for society.

Art is important because it shows the conflict, realistic art especially shows the conflicts in society. And realistic art becomes a vehicle, a medium for such ideas.

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Gothic Uncanny



- “The portrait’s ability to change with the whims of its real life antecedent is in itself supernatural, but the horror that Dorian first feels towards the change apparent in the painting after Sybil Vane’s death (still unbeknownst to Dorian) is uncanny because of the fear that “inanimate objects—a picture or a doll—come to life,” as Freud argued in his essay “The ‘Uncanny’” (13). “Surely a painted canvas could not alter?” (11)”
- Kosten 30



“The portrait’s ability to change with the whims of its real life antecedent is in itself supernatural, but the horror that Dorian first feels towards the change apparent in the painting after Sybil Vane’s death (still unbeknownst to Dorian) is uncanny because of the fear that ‘inanimate objects - a picture or a doll - come to life’, as Freud argued in his essay “The Uncanny”. Surely a painted canvas could not alter?”

There is a supernatural element in the change that one finds within that portrait of Dorian. Dorian Gray is horrified to see that change, especially in relation to his behaviour with Sybil Vane. When he goes and checks to portrait after he had behaved horribly to Sybil Vane there is an ugliness developing in that portrait. And at that point, Dorian does not know about the suicide of Sybil Vane and yet he becomes horrified by that ugly change in that portrait. And there is an uncanny aspect where inanimate objects, lifeless objects come to life.

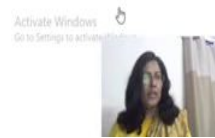
Freud discusses this in his essay, The Uncanny, and the question is how could a painted canvas change? A painted Canvas cannot possibly change and that seems to be the question that raises for almost in Dorian’s mind. So, there is an uncanny aspect, a Gothic aspect to the ships in inanimate objects such as the portrait and that ties in with the idea of the Gothic explored very powerfully in this particular novel.

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Gothic art



- "Dorian asks himself the following morning, musing whether or not he had imagined it. The doubt about what changes the portrait casts doubt on whether or not Dorian is sane, or seeing the changes as a manifestation of his own conscience. Casting it off as "merely an illusion wrought on the troubled senses" (96) gives the impression that Dorian himself does not trust his sanity after the heart-breaking scene with Sybil Vane."
- (Kosten 30-31)



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This is once again a very important point. The critic here argues very powerfully that Dorian has doubts about the reality of the change that he had witnessed in the portrait. Does the portrait really change? Or is Dorian imagining the change? If he is imagining the change, then Dorian is perhaps not sane. The changes in the portrait can be interpreted as Dorian's hallucination, which is a symbol an expression of Dorian's own guilty conscience, his breakup with Sybil Vane could have brought on this "insanity".

It was a very intense moment in Dorian's life, and that breakup could have shook him up so powerfully that he could have lost control of his senses and therefore, the entire faith of Dorian in the changes of the portrait, of his portrait could be his wild imagination brought up by his insanity. Thank you for watching, I will continue in the next session.