

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Lecture No. 56

Gothic Setting

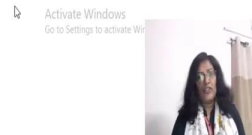
Hello and welcome to Week 11's lectures on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in today's session. I am going to talk in detail about the Gothic Setting of this novel.

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Gothic art



- "Linda Dryden argues that doubts about sanity are a traditional trope of the Gothic as "Gothic fiction is often a literature of transformations where identity is unstable and sanity a debatable state of being" (19). The reader is left doubting whether the changes to the portrait are real or a figment of Dorian's paranoid imagination until Basil Hallward confirms it in chapter thirteen. This suggestion of possible insanity adds to the uncanniness of the portrait, and explains Dorian's increasingly paranoid behaviour towards the portrait."
- (Kosten 31)



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We understand that madness, insanity, hallucination, illusion, and delusion are some of the tropes of Gothic fiction. These associated attributes imply that identity, human identity is unstable, perhaps unknowable completely. And possibly multifarious as well. Now, Dorian is the only one who follows the changes to his portrait in the novel, for a greater extent of time. Therefore, we rely on Dorian to know things about the portrait. If we doubt Dorian's sanity, then things become more complex.

Ultimately, of course, we realize that Basil Hallward, the portrait artist, the artist who do the picture of Dorian Gray, confirms the changes to the portrait. The changes according to the behaviour of Dorian Gray. Until then, there is a possibility of understanding the entire set of events as being an exhibition or an illustration of Dorian's paranoid imagination, wide fantasy. Dorian also is very anxious about the portrait and the transformation that occur on it. So, on the one hand, we have the Gothic trope of a changing portrait, a portrait that becomes increasingly ugly. On the other, we have a possibility about the insanity of Dorian Gray.

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Gothic Identity



- "Dorian's identity as a respectable London dandy is both true and untrue at the same time. The depravity visible in the portrait is a part of Dorian's identity he is desperately trying to hide from the outside world. Dorian himself claims "he was not really reckless, at any rate in his relations to society" (132), which suggests that even though he feeds his desires, he is careful about protecting his public persona of decadence and dandyism."
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Dorian has multiple identities. On the one hand, he is a fashionable London dandy. He participates in the artistic world of high class society. He appears as very handsome and sophisticated on the one hand. On the other, we know that he is indulging in a lot of his dark desires. He is selfish, he is greedy and he is manipulative. What we also understand is that he is trying to hide his identity which is about decadence and dandyism.

Dorian is anxious to protect his respectable identity with the outer world, with this high class society. So, there is a public face and a private face. And these two faces are important words when we understand, or try to understand the nature of human identity which is explored to a great extent through this narrative mode of Gothic.

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Perfection and Corruption



- “Many of the guests at his elaborate parties look up to him as the “type that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world” (133). he reader is the only one besides Dorian Gray to know anything of the corruption that grows behind the façade of perfection. If anyone were to find out the truth he would be ruined, as Dorian has ruined countless lives.”

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We saw how identities are proliferating in relation to Dorian Gray. His companions, the guests at his social gatherings, at his parties see Dorian not just as a handsome dandy, but they observe the character of the scholar, a graceful scholar, a sophisticated scholar. And at the same time to them, Dorian also possesses the manners of the citizen of the world. He seems to be cosmopolitan. He seems to be worldly, yet within the limits of acceptability and respectability.

What is significant and what is ironic is that only the reader knows the ulterior, the hidden debts of Dorian Gray, which is about corruption, decadence, indulgence, sensual pleasures. On the one hand, we have this external façade of perfection on, and underneath that, we have this world of

corruption. Now if people came to see this ulterior world, the hidden underbelly, so to speak of Dorian's world, Dorian's character, his reputation would be destroyed just as Dorian did destroy numerous lives and Sibyl Vane is a fantastic example, and so is Basil Hallward who gets murdered by Dorian.

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Gothic Uncanny



- "Over the years, Dorian grows nervous about this secret and cannot stand to leave the picture on its own for very long. The portrait becomes uncanny, and therefore a very important Gothic element in the novel, because it is, as Freud suggests in his essay on the uncanny, "in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar ... that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (13)."

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Dorian is worried greatly about the portrait, that the secret portrait which is hidden away in the attic. In fact, he becomes so anxious and nervous that he cannot bear to leave the portrait alone for a longer period. Now, this portrait is what we can term as uncanny borrowing Freud's terminology. It is uncanny because as Freud says, in itself the uncanny is not strange. The object becomes uncanny by being familiar and at the same time possessing a character of estranged from our own homely world.

Dorian's portrait is familiar to Dorian because it is his representation, it is his own face that is illustrated on the portrait. However Dorian has become estranged from that portrait because he

no longer resembles it. And the portrait no longer resembles him. In fact, the portrait becomes a version of Dorian, a version that Dorian is trying to hide from the outside world. In that regard it becomes uncanny. It is a Gothic uncanny.

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Gothic Duality



- “Dorian's identity is doubled, his private, repressed, identity, clashes with his public identity and therefore both his identities are compromised. As Dryden argues “[t]o be haunted by another ... is uncanny enough, but to be haunted by yourself strikes at the foundations of identity” (41) reflecting the Gothic nature of Wilde's novel.”

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“Dorian’s identity is doubled. His private, repressed, identity clashes with his public identity and therefore both his identities are compromised. As Dryden argues, ”to be haunted by another is uncanny enough, but to be haunted by yourself strikes at the foundations of identity”, reflecting the gothic nature of Wilde’s novel.”

There is a duality, of course, we understand that. We understand that it is uncanny to be haunted by something, by some other figure or object. Now what Dorian is being haunted is by his hidden identity, his private identity. We saw how he has several identities, at least two - the public and a private. Now, Dorian is being haunted by this private identity which is concealed in this portrait, which is becoming ghastly day by day.

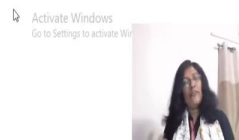
Now to be haunted is one thing, but to be haunted by one’s own self is a frightening prospect. It is something that destroys the basic structures of one’s own self. Now this kind of clash illustrates remarkably the Gothic face, the Gothic nuances of the Picture of Dorian Gray.

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Gothic Haunting



- “That Dorian is haunted by the portrait is apparent in his constant search for distractions, first by collecting things as “means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape” (142), later by using opium. In the end he intends to “kill this monstrous soul-life”(222) forgetting it is his soul he is destroying, and thus himself.”
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Now, Dorian takes measures to escape into the world of fantasy, into the world of forgetfulness, how does he do that? He tries to distract himself by garnering things, by collecting something. So we understand that this kind of distraction would make him forget but not very effectively. Now what Dorian does is use opium to make sure he will forget this portrait that seems to be haunting him. This soul-life that seems to be changing after him and that too is futile, he is not successful, objects not helping, making himself numb by using opium is again not helping and therefore what he does is, he decides to destroy it, just as he did destroy Basil Hallward.

Therefore, he takes a knife to this portrait which he thinks is something that is monstrous. A monstrous representation of his soul. In his attempt to kill the portrait, he ends up killing himself, because he does not really understand that it is his own soul that he is intent on murdering, that he is attempting to murder. So, Dorian destroys himself ultimately.

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Gothic Excess



- “Henk Pieter Berkman also shines light on what Oscar Wilde says the moral in this book is: “All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment” (11). An analysis of the Gothic elements with which Wilde has attempted to portray his suggested moral shows a different moral. As argued above, the Gothic elements work towards a moral more focused on the ability to sin in everyone, and how hiding your private corruption behind a mask of public decency will destroy you in the end.”
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There are a couple of morals there are offered here about the novel. One is an obsession, an excessive association, an excessive hankering after something has its own punishment. A rejection, a complete rejection of something also has its own consequences. So, there are two extremes, one is excess, the other is renunciation, giving up everything. So, these kinds of extreme moods of life have its complexities and are problematic.

However, there is another moral to this work by Oscar Wilde. And that is about the consequences that erupt if one tries to hide the corrupt soul behind a façade of moral purity, goodness and sophistication. The double life is what is being attacked in the picture of Dorian Gray. The hypocrisy, the Gothic duality will entail a series of highly complex and problematic consequences for the person who is attempting to manage these various identities.

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Gothic Setting



- “Wilde sets his story into Victorian London, ascribing it features of a Gothic environment. London acquires negative attributes such as “grey”, “monstrous”, “horrid”, which gives ambivalent connotations to the strong status of the capital. Dorian Gray explores the double face of the city, the West End and East End, the contradictory sites of fortune and degeneration. (p.22)”
- Iva Svobodová, 2016.
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The setting is Gothic in this novel, it is an urban setting, it is Victorian London, yet we understand that the Gothic can exploit the urban and its fabric for its own purposes. Therefore, despite this urban locale, we understand that Oscar Wilde is portraying its Gothic face in this particular novel. Look at the description that is applied by Wilde to capture this world, London is grey, London is monstrous, it is horrid. Now, these words very clearly indicate the hidden soul of London. Now London itself comes to possess multiple identities, different faces, different facades.

Now, if one compares London with the character of Dorian Gray, it becomes clear that there is a parallel between the setting and the identity of Dorian Gray. Dorian Gray is grey, there is a pun on that surname. He has shades of grey. Moral complexities can be indicated through the colour choice of grey. Dorian is also horrid, Dorian is also monstrous. His portrait is a representation of the monstrous soul-life of Dorian Gray.

Now, we come to see that these connotations problematize the urban fabric, on the one hand, there is the West End, on the other hand, there is the East End. On the one hand, we have the working classes, on the other hand, we have sophisticated urban socialites, the well-being sections of London. So, there are multiple worlds, worlds that are starkly in opposition to one another. There is fortune, on the one hand, wealth, excess. And there is deprivation on the other, a degeneration on the other.

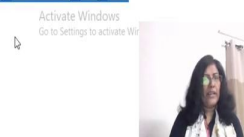
There is moral degeneration and there is physical deprivation. So, this is some of the contradictions that one finds on the urban landscape of London. And we understand that the setting is parallel to the moral complexity of people like Dorian Gray and Henry Warton, the friend and guide of Dorian.

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Gothic Setting



- “Dorian lives in a large house in the Grosvenor Square situated in the West End. Though not a Gothic castle, the large town house has Gothic components. Mainly, the true Gothic place in the house represents the former schoolroom. The first hint of its strangeness indicates its location, the top of the house. Secondly, the door is locked as if keeping its secret inside. Truly, the room served as a place where Dorian spent his lonely childhood and later as a study room. Now, nevertheless it is to serve a new purpose. It is not to hide Dorian as an innocent child anymore.” p.23.
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Now, in this section, the Gothic, the Gothic attributes of particular spaces are exhibited. Now, Dorian lives in Grosvenor Square in West End, that is not Gothic in itself, but there are special pockets in that large townhouse which has Gothic connotations and attributes because of the functions that space served in the past and in the present. Now, the schoolroom seems to possess Gothic attributes. Firstly, it is at the top of the house, far away from the rest of the domestic household.

There is a hint of marginality and a metaphoric far awayness. It is literally at the top, far moved, secondly it is kept locked up as if it is hiding a secret inside, that room was the space in which Dorian lived out his childhood, his lonely childhood. And that space later became his study. Once again implying loneliness, being removed from everybody, isolation, Gothic isolation. Now, this space again serves a new purpose, but it is not to offer refuge to an innocent mind. It has another dark purpose.

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Gothic Setting



- “Wilde seems to choose the room deliberately in order to contrast and perhaps mock the character it used to accommodate with its picture, the proof of degradation. The room has not change much over the past five years, during which it was locked yet there are marks of dilapidation: “A faded Flemish tapestry, a curtained picture, an old Italian cassone, and an almost empty bookcase - that was all that it seemed to contain, besides a chair and a table . . . the whole place was covered with dust, and that the carpet was in holes. A mouse ran scuffling behind the wainscoting. There was a damp odour of mildew.” p.23
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The whole place was covered with dust and that the carpet was in holes. A mouse ran scuffling behind the wainscoting. There was a damp odour of mildew.”

The schoolroom is chosen by Dorian Gray to house that portrait, to hide away that portrait. In fact, it is arguable that Dorian chose that particular space deliberately to contrast his earlier life with his present life. He wants to, what a critic would argue, mock the earlier innocence, the earlier loneliness of Dorian Gray. So, this present Dorian Gray is degraded, corrupt, decadent and these features of his identity seem to mock, make fun of his earlier identity of innocence and isolation, innocent isolation.

The room itself is ground down, though it has not physically changed, there are elements of degradation. It has not been maintained at all. It is unkempt, there is a layer of dust coating the objects in the room. It contains a tapestry, it is a worn fabric used for ornamental purposes, the tapestry could illustrate a scene, a picture, a curtained picture. And it has an Italian chest, cassone is a chest.

And the bookcases are empty, interestingly suggesting that the cultured mind of Dorian Gray is no longer cultured. It is empty. Further, there are holes in the carpet indicating again that there is a lack in the moral fabric of Dorian Gray. The wainscoting, that is the panelling that runs on the bottom walls of the room. Now a mouse runs behind that wainscoting. So, what all these elements indicate is that there is a hollowing out of Dorian's identity.

This for the, a damped smell of mildew again signifying that things are rotting, it has been taken over by organic nature. The schoolroom, therefore, becomes an extension of the dilapidated nature of Dorian Gray. Thanks for watching. I will continue in the next session.