

The Picture of Dorian Gray
Lecture 57
Gothic Setting (Continuation)

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Week 11: The Picture of
Dorian Gray

Lecture 11F: Gothic Setting (Continuation)



Hello and welcome to Week 11's lectures on The Picture of Dorian Gray. In today's session, I will be continuing the discussion on the Gothic setting of this novel.

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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
- Iva Svobodová, 2016.
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We stopped at this particular description in the previous lecture session. I want to revisit this particular description because it has a lot of significances in terms of how we view the setting in relation to identity. Let me read this again.

“Wilde seems to choose the room deliberately in order to contrast and perhaps mock the character it used to accommodate with this, with its picture, the proof of degradation. The room has not changed, it should be changed 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 order of mildew.”

Now, according to the critic here, this room was chosen specifically by Dorian to make a point. Now, what is that point? He wants to contrast his old personality with his present personality. Therefore, he chose to house his portrait in this old schoolroom. And this schoolroom does contain marks of dilapidation. It has signs that it is a not very well kept up. It is not a very well maintained room. It is full of dust. Actually, the description says the whole place was covered with dust. And we also have holes in the carpet. So, we understand that this room was not a place which was well dusted or well maintained.

Look at the word faded, the Flemish tapestry, the ornamental carpet like a fabric that was hung on the wall as an ornamental piece was faded. And the picture is curtained, it is not open to the view of the person in the room, it is curtained. So, and then there is this chest, the Italian chest in the room, it is old. Now, all these suggest not just dilapidation but there is a sense of secrecy.

Look at the word curtain, why is it not open to view. So, there is a combination of dilapidation and secrecy associated with the schoolroom speciality. And of course, there is a reference to mildew, a mouse running about behind the wainscoting, that is the panelling, or running across the bottom of the walls in this room. So, this schoolroom is usually associated with innocence but isolation, but now this kind of innocence has been corrupted by the behaviour of Dorian Gray.

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Gothic Setting



- “The description reminds a classic Gothic room which not being used decays. It is the room connected with Dorian’s whole life, firstly it witnessed his miserable childhood, later conceals the proof of his downfall. In any case, entering the room reminds Dorian either of past unhappiness or present degeneration. There is another Gothic space in the house. Dorian uses a secret press in a library where he keeps his disguises. When he murders Basil, he puts there Basil’s belongings as well. Gothic fictions commonly employ secret places as passages, or trapdoors, Dorian uses the press to hide his corruption.” p.23
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Now, this schoolroom is as we understand associated with his unhappy childhood. His childhood had been miserable. And later the same schoolroom is used to conceal, to hide his present corruption. The schoolroom holds the proof of Dorian’s black soul- that picture that he keeps hidden in that room is the testimony. In fact, it is a living testimony to Dorian’s corrupted soul and present hour degeneration.

In addition to the schoolroom which has Gothic resonances because of its faded ancient quality, dusty place and yet there is a living throbbing picture in that room. So, this is one classic Gothic setting. There is also another Gothic space which is in the library of Dorian Gray. It is a secret press where Dorian keeps hidden his various disguises, his costumes. And once he has murdered Basil, he also puts Basil’s belongings within that same space in the library. It is very interesting to note that Basil is the one who painted the portrait of Dorian Gray.

And Dorian Gray himself murders Basil and the remains of Basil, his clothing, his belongings are put in that press. So, the house seems to contain all the things associated with that portrait. Gothic fictions, as we understand uses a lot of specific architectural attributes such as secret passages, hidden passages that nobody knows, secret nooks, niches and trapdoors of course. And Dorian does use the hidden space in the library for his purposes, for his degenerate behaviour, for his inner corruption.

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Gothic Setting



- “Dorian Gray enjoys leaving the respectable West End in his quests of immorality which he can only find in the working class areas of the East End. There he gets forbidden pleasures while he denounces morality, going native. Still, the Victorian morality code does not allow him, a gentleman from higher society, to mingle openly with the lower society. Therefore, he can only assimilate with the working class dirty habits in disguise, and more importantly at night.” p.23
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In the previous slide, we saw how Dorian hides his disguises in the hidden space in the library. Now, we see that he has to resort to this kind of disguise because certain pleasures are forbidden for the respectable classes. Dorian Gray while he enjoys the respectable society also enjoys the pleasures of the disreputable society- the pleasures enjoyed by the working class, members of the London society.

And he cannot enjoy these forbidden pleasures in his usual guard. Therefore, he disguises himself in order to go native, in order to impersonate the appearance of a working-class figure, so that he can enjoy these forbidden pleasures. Now, the Victorian respectable world does not allow a gentleman, a sophisticated gentleman from higher classes to openly associate with the working classes.

Therefore, if Dorian has to enjoy the pleasures usually enjoyed by the working classes, then he has to go in disguise so that he can become one with these working classes, so that he can enjoy these dirty habits and these can be attained most lightly in the noise. So, you can see a secretive life for Dorian in these kinds of moments in the novel. So, Dorian has this respectable façade in the real life, he has this disrespectable identity at night. So, there are multiple identities for Dorian Gray.

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Gothic Setting



- “Wilde’s description of the desolate places of East End are intensified as the author focuses on the gloomy weather as well: A cold rain began to fall, and the blurred street-lamps looked ghastly in the dripping mist. The public-houses were just closing, and dim men and women were clustering in broken groups round their doors. From some of the bars came the sound of horrible laughter. In others, drunkards brawled and screamed. Dorian observes “the sordid shame of the great city” ,on one of his journeys to those parts.” p.23-24
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Now, we get a picture of East End and East End when it is being described is described along with a particular kind of weather that is bleak weather, rainy weather. In London becomes especially grey and ghastly during such weather. And look at the way the world is visible, it is not crystal clear because of the rain, the rain is cold. Look at the word used to describe rain, the rain is cold, it is physically cold, but also metaphorically cold because there is no warmth in these spaces literally and metaphorically. The street lamps do not give visibility and there is a blurring scene all around. And there is mist as well further obscuring visibility.

So, the weather is constraining, the weather is something which is not conducive to a very comfortable presence in these streets. And public houses, the bars, they are closing at night. And dim men, look at the work dim, men who are not very visible. And again there is a metaphoric significance as well to men who are perhaps mentally dim as well.

Women who were mentally dim as well. They were kind of huddling together in groups, in small groups. And look at the choice of the word broken, the adjective broken, used to describe these groups, they are broken groups, rezoning about them. They are broken perhaps spiritually as well and they are just huddling around their doors.

And despite this bleak atmosphere, there are sounds of laughter, but this laughter, the sounds of laughter are not pleasant to hear, which is usually the case with laughter, but now it is horrible laughter, something that is terrible. There is, there is a horror about this laughter. So, you can see that the scene is very Gothic in tone, both in terms of colour, because the rainy weather offers a particular colour to the sea, grey, dark and nothing is crystal clear.

And at the same time, there is a mental tone being offered by the kind of sounds that emerge from the street scene. In other moments of this street scene, we see drunken brawls, drunken fights and screams, so there is laughter, horrible laughter on the one side and then there are screams of pain on the other. And Dorian Gray knows that this kind of street scenes are manifestations of the shame of this great London city and he notes this during his journey into this space.

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Gothic Setting



- “The dramatic sky is depicted as well, adding to the gloomy atmosphere: The moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull. From time to time a huge misshapen cloud stretched a long arm across and hid it. The gas-lamps grew fewer, and the streets more narrow and gloomy . . . like the black web of some sprawling spider. 86 Dorian, wearing a cap to cover his face, watches the environment as he is travelling in a hansom whose “side-windows . . . were clogged with a grey-flannel mist.” It suggests his separation from the place, hiding it from his eyes.” p.24
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This is some of the fantastic descriptive passages from the novel. Look at the choice of the word yellow, and this word yellow becomes an adjective to this word skull, yellow skull. And it is bizarre to find this phrase, yellow skull being used as a descriptive term for the moon. The moon is like a skull, yellow skull, yellowy skull, something that is getting rotten, something that is without any kind of bright life.

Now, that is the kind of emotion Dorian feels when he looks at the moon as he is travelling in this cab, in this carriage, in some cab. And everything is misshapen and ghastly. Look at the word cloud, the clouds are known to change their shapes but the word misshapen immediately gives us ideas of things being aborted and distorted, so that again is an indication of the mental attitude of Dorian Gray.

He sees everything to be distorted, even a cloud. And the gas lamps throw a particular kind of light on to the scene. And even these gas lamps are fewer as he progresses down his passage through these streets. The streets are very narrow, again an indication of the kind of lives that these people led, the low classes led and gloomy as well. Lives are bleaker. Look at the analogy again.

Like a black web of some scrawling spider. Even the streets look as if it is being woven, that they are being woven as a spider would weave a black web, a dark web and there is a centre being entrapped in this speciality. Now, Dorian is hiding, he is in disguise, he is using a cap to cover his face. And when he is looking at this environment nothing is very clear, there are hazy images that he sees because of the gas lamps, because of the mist, because of these cloudy skies.

Now, even the cloud, this misshapen cloud is like an arm that, that kind of hides the moon and, and again further throwing the same into darkness. So, the great essence that one gets from this passage is that life is very bleak. The soul is bleaker, gloomier, just as the streets are, the skies are.

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Gothic Setting



- “Also the sounds of a barking dog and a screaming of a sea-gull add to the horrible scene. Dorian believes that Ugliness was the one reality. The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of distorted life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense impression than all the gracious shapes of art, the dreamy shadows of song. 88 The area truly belongs to the working class, as the den is located near docks in between two factories. The place seems not to be accessible for everyone because the chained door opens after Dorian gives “a peculiar knock.” ” p.24
- Iva Svobodová, 2016.
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outcast, were more vivid, in their intense impression than all the gracious shapes of art, the dreamy shallows of song. The area truly belongs to the working class, as the den is located near the docks in between two factories. The place seems not to be accessible for everyone because the chained door opens after Dorian gives a peculiar knock.”

We further get very very vivid images of these working-class pickets. It is a fantastic description that one finds in this novel. The sounds of animals are just a barking dog and a screaming seagull, the noise of the seagull add to the atmosphere, the bleak atmosphere, the strange atmosphere, the gothic atmosphere, the horrible atmosphere of this particular working-class area.

And Dorian generally understands that the only reality in the world is ugliness and that ugliness is beautifully described in scenes such as this. What is really concrete and tangible and real are these fights, the crude fights that he witnesses. The hateful den that he visits and the violence, the heartless violence that emerges from broken lives, the wild, the evil nature, the disgusting nature of the thief, and the outcast, the person who is in the margins of society, or outside of respectable society, these are very real to Dorian Gray.

In fact, he says these are more vivid than all the shapes of art that he sees in the galleries in the sophisticated circles. And this particular area is truly working class, the one that Dorian visits and it is a place where one finds factories, the dockyard and it is not accessible to everybody. And even Dorian has to knock in a particular way to get admitted. There is a secret code, not everybody has access to this code, to this working-class district. Now, this is a scene that is very very vivid, that one gets to see in this novel.

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Gothic Setting



- “The house epitomizes decay where terrible orgies take place. Even the person who opens the door for Dorian displays symptoms of degeneration, being “squat misshapen figure that flattened itself into the shadow. . .” where he overcomes another obstacle which separates him from the opium, “a tattered green curtain that swayed and shook in the gusty wind . . .” Again, the wind adds a dramatic element to the setting.” p.24-25
- Iva Svobodová, 2016.
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Now, the den, the house where all these indulgences take place is a representative of decay, of degeneration of the human soul. And even the person who admits Dorian into that house is like a shadow because of his consumption all these substances. Look at the choice of the words, misshapen again used here with a figure, the human being is misshapen here. Previously we saw that the cloud is misshapen, aborted, distorted.

And here it is the figure human being that is misshapen and aborted and turned into a shadow-like thing. And there are further obstacles that prevent Dorian from accessing the opium. And what is that obstacle, that is a green curtain. And once again we are reminded of curtained pictures, the curtained portrait in Dorian’s rooms, schoolroom. And the curtain itself seems to be a space, a living thing that again moves in the gusty wind.

And the wind kind of gives life to this thing. Again the atmosphere is shadowy, bleak, eerie, scary things and people are distorted and aborted. There are secrecy, secret codes, even the way

one knock is a particular kind of knock so that it becomes a password like thing for somebody to be admitted. All in all its Gothic decay that we sense all-around at moments like this in a novel.

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Gothic Setting



- “Dorian crosses a dilapidated dancing-saloon and continues to ascend a staircase to a darkened chamber. The location at the top and the darkness once more hints a forbidden place. The smell of opium meets him on the way, as he sees “the grotesque things...” The place serves Dorian at first merely to experience the working class underworld and find pleasure, later the only means to forget his sins and embrace new ones.
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So, within this opium den, before he gets to that particular place, there is a dancing-saloon and he climbs up a staircase to a dark chamber. Again, this passage is Gothic in its setting as well. There are staircases, darkened spaces and this particular dark chamber is at the top. Even in H G Wells’

The red room, the particularly horrifying room, the red room is removed from the rest of the house.

It is far away. I think one can read the red room. It is a short story by HG Wells, to understand how the Gothic works in the short story as well. It is a fantastic story, I would recommend it. Here too, the particularly dark chamber is at the top, once again far removed. And we are also

reminded of the schoolroom which is at the top far moved from the rest of the household and there is a sense of the forbidden associated with this place.

And he sees people lying about in grotesque shapes and positions. And the place, a higher place is an opportunity for Dorian Gray to enjoy the underworld of the working classes. And he does find pleasure which he uses to forget his sins and he also uses this place to experience new sensations as Lord Henry Wotton had recommended, advised him. And we understand from the novel as we read that despite his efforts to forget his sense, he is unable to do so.

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Gothic Setting



- “The setting seems to be a strong indicator of the Gothic in the novel. The abandoned room at the top of a large house which hides the changing picture resembles Gothic chambers which served as a concealment. There is another secret place in the house which hides Dorian’s disguise as well as Basil’s possessions. The author also provides a vivid depiction of one of Dorian’s journeys to the East End. Wilde portrays a gloomy night atmosphere of dark streets and shabby houses. He intensifies the scene with grim weather and disturbing sounds of a barking dog and a screaming sea-gull. Dorian likes to sink in those places of ill-repute where he can get opium and enjoy the company from the bottom of society.” p.25

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He intensifies the scene with grim weather and disturbing sounds of a barking dog and a screaming sea-gull. Dorian likes to sink in those places of ill-repute where he can get opium and enjoy the company from the bottom of society. Now, let us sum up the Gothic setting. It lies by

Oscar Wilde in this novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Now, there are a list of spaces which are illustrations of Gothic attributes.

Firstly, the schoolroom which hides the picture, the changing picture. Dorian secrets the picture in that space, in that large house. So the house is hiding that picture, that soul, the house becomes this physical body and the picture, the portrait in the schoolroom becomes the heart, the soul, the spirit hid in a way behind a curtain. Now, bizarre a secret place as we saw, it is in the library, in the press, the press that Dorian uses to hide away his disguises as well as the belongings of Basil Hallward, once he murders Basil.

So, the possessions of Basil, who is associated with the picture, as the painter of the picture is also hidden away in that house in the library. So, the schoolroom has the picture, the library has the disguises and the belongings of Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward. Now, this schoolroom is associated with childhood and it is very ironic to see that the child has grown into a monster.

And the library is associated with the intellect, with the mind and that place is also corrupted. And the library also hides off secrets, all these costumes and belongings of dead people and people with multiple identities as Dorian possess. Now, by the East End itself becomes a Gothic space. East End is full of dark streets, bleak gloomy streets, narrow passages and shabby houses, groups huddle in front of doorways and there are drunken brawls and screams, and plenty of violence being staged in those open spaces.

Now, that is also very very Gothic space. The working classes themselves become Gothic. The working-class spaces also become Gothic. Their laughter becomes horrible and terrible and Gothic. The fights are, of course, their violence is of course Gothic. We also have the sounds of animals such as dogs and a screaming seagull and these also add to the Gothic sounds. The sound scale of the *Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Now, Dorian likes to visit such spaces. Dorian is drawn to such spaces. He is drawn to the schoolroom. He deliberately chooses it to mock that space according to the critics and Dorian is perhaps enjoying corrupting that space of the library, the space of intellect by hiding away his costumes and he enjoys participating in the wildness of the East End. He is almost one with the community. He knows to get admittance into that society.

He indulges himself to the full so that he can both experience pleasures of these working classes as well as forget himself of the kind of corruption he performs during the day as well. So, the Gothic space then becomes the fantasy and escape his world for Dorian. He tries to forget his corrupted soul by drowning himself in the sights and sounds, in these clashes that the bottom of the society offers him.

But we realize when we read the novel that he can only go thus far but not completely. He is not able to forget himself, he is not able to forget his sins. He is not able to forget the corruption that he has committed. And eventually, as we know that he tries to kill the portrait, destroy the portrait in order to completely eliminate all kind of evidence of that monstrous soul life that picture is, but he fails. He fails fatally because when he murders the picture, he murders himself. Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.