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# The Psychological Construction of Moral Disgrace in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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## Introduction

Some of the most striking characteristics of gothic literature are its mysterious atmosphere, supernatural events and overwrought emotion, as well as its exploration of darkness, evilness, temptations and psychological fears. Even though gothic fiction is widely popular nowadays for its capacity to captivate the readers, this genre can be traced back to 1764, with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto*. And it was not until the second wave of gothic literature when Oscar Wilde published *The Picture Of Dorian Gray* in 1891, during the Victorian age. That period had a critical influence over literature, and gothic features evolved to the complex themes of madness, psychological terror and horror, at the same time as being affected by Victorian ideas about death. In terms of the social atmosphere, the Victorian age was marked by its repression, obsession with appearances, sense of respectability and high morals, which were applied in religion, literature and social conduct. Due to the hypocrisy and double standards associated to this time period, it is not surprising that Wilde's novel provoked a negative reaction on society, who judged it as immoral, particularly for its homosexual theme.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde demonstrates his analytical mind and his observations of the society around him, which is represented by Dorian's duality. Because the character he created was gifted with an everlasting external beauty, people assumed him as virtuous and pure. Just as Victorian society was immersed into a strict moral code that was not necessarily based on a true sense of emphatic, humanitarian values, those who judged Dorian as righteous did not see beyond the

external representation of what they considered as moral. It is worth noting that Wilde was rejected by society, and even arrested, by a mere fraction of what Dorian did without consequences just because people evaluated his character based on his physique. Moreover, while Dorian perpetrated several wicked acts, Wilde was in prison for “indecent” in regard of his homosexuality, which is without any doubt completely natural, and would be seen as archaic for today's standards to be considered a crime. Nevertheless, Dorian is not completely free considering the figure on the portrait becomes uglier every time he displays his corrupted actions. That characteristic of the novel denotes the sense that there are in fact repercussions for doing immoral acts, which affect one's character and soul, but those can remain hidden if you externally behave according to what society expects.

Many things have been said about the supernatural feature of the portrait, for which authors have focused on how the picture has such a relevant role that it can be said it behaves as a living character (Al-Jabbari & Sadeq, 2014), and that its inexplicable nature gives the novel a sense of suspense and terror (Nounadonde, 2017). The corruption and moral notions present in the novel have also been discussed, regarding the repressed senses some characters maintain in favour of what is acceptable, as it is the case of Basil and his infatuation with Dorian, which is highlighted by Dorian's awakening of pleasures and Henry's liberalism (Clausson, 2016). As well as the moral metaphor of the picture, where it is the physical, visible representation of Dorian's corrupted soul (Yang, 2018). The psychological aspect of the novel is a paramount feature that has been studied too, when it comes to Dorian's

mental state and how his incapacity to repress his immoral impulses leads to his fatal end (Safa & Sokhanvar, 2018).

In the present dissertation I will discuss the psychological journey Dorian experienced throughout the novel which, in addition to the role played by society and the relevance of the portrait, shaped his character and actions. For that reason, the focus of this work will be Dorian's mental tribulation, how he formed an increasing immoral nature and the process involving his character development, from his first appearance as a naive, young man to his final self-destruction. In regard to other characters, the discussion will also involve the roles of Basil, Henry, Sybil Vane and his brother, and Alan Campbell, since they played an important part in Dorian's self-awareness and vicious nature. The picture itself is also a paramount element that creates the conflict by giving Dorian the possibility of maintaining his innocent aspect and beauty, and therefore it will also be mentioned throughout this analysis. Here I will refer to the portrait in terms of what it represents for his conscience, as well as the possibilities it offers him. Due to the nature of this work, I will mention the concepts of virtue, morality, sin and conscience, but will not deepen into the hypocritical nature of society beyond its role for Dorian's moral disgrace.

By moral disgrace I refer to how the actions Dorian perpetrated and his increasing callousness produced his corrupted soul, for he ends up leaving aside any conception of morality and only focuses on his self-preservation. This is a product of his psychological development, which can be appreciated as his character begins being really innocent, even naive, and certainly unaware of the darkest aspects of

society. Later on, when he acknowledges his physical appearance and the vicious pleasures presented to him by Henry, his character becomes more shallow and corrupted, to finally transform into a completely wicked version of his old self. Considering this, my thesis statement is that the social construction of appearance and reputation produces a twisted notion of right and wrong that induces Dorian's mental downfall. This is related with what have been previously said about the moral, supernatural and psychological features of the novel, but here I aim to include all those elements and link them with the social prejudices that create the perfect scenery for Dorian to keep the marks of his sins hidden.

The first element to be explored is the role of social judgement, including how Dorian is perceived by society and how he perceives himself after he discovers his physical beauty. In this chapter there will also be mentioned the roles of Basil and Henry in terms of their set of beliefs and their influence over Dorian, as well as the character of Sybil Vane, who seems to experience the first clear sign of his shallow nature and cruelty. In chapter two the discussion will be focused on the disregard of conscience Dorian experienced, which involved several glimpses of regret and self-pity, to finally accept his own callousness and corrupted nature. This is the result of a process that started with the events mentioned in chapter one, with Dorian's insensible actions towards Sybil, in a demonstration of his sinful actions that only increased over time. Finally, chapter three will deal with the path of self-destruction he took by perpetrating vicious actions, and even murdering Basil, with a complete absence of moral values or remorse. His fatal end, when he destroys himself, seems to display how his own actions constructed the inescapable final event he suffered.

## **The Role of Social Judgement**

There are many aspects in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that are directly involved in the construction of Dorian's moral disgrace, in terms of both the external role of society that form misconceptions based on people's looks and the internal awareness one develops about the distinction between right and wrong. Following this, we could say that society contributed to shape Dorian's perception of himself. In her *Handbook to Gothic Literature*, Mulvey mentions the use of parallelism as an analogy that denotes the sense of Dorian's inner separation of soul and body, "as he remains perpetually young, so his portrait ages." (252) I consider the portrait itself as not only mirroring Dorian's soul, but also reflecting the extent to which society relies on appearances to build a notion of people's lives and their inner value. In addition to this, it can be said that the importance of the portrait is not only based on the separation between his body and soul, but on the fact that through that division he was able to maintain the signs of his sins hidden, in a place where people could not perceive them. As the novel unfolds and Dorian gains experience with the dark, sinful side of life, his sense of morality fades away since there is no one to visibly acknowledge the consequences of his behavior. And the reason why no one notices his corrupted nature, at first glance, is because of the judgmental aspect of humankind that makes people focus on what is clearly visible, without searching into the real depths of one's mind and actions.

In her book *Moral Principles and Social Values*, Trusted links morality with the freedom to choose how to act based on an individual's inner thoughts and



feelings, which is tied to the moral judgements that humans make (1). She also mentions how the decision to act in a certain way after establishing a moral judgment, which may be following one's moral view or denying it, affects one's character too: "If we choose to act wrongly our characters will deteriorate. If we act rightly we shall strengthen our moral awareness." (111) Eaton also refers to morality in her *Literature and Morality*, where she identifies morality with moral judgement too, since people make judgements about other people, and everything that may be physically perceived such as art works and literature pieces, based on their own values and moral system (433). In relation to these authors' claims, people follow what they consider as right in their particular set of beliefs, and make judgements about their surroundings based on that. This is similar to the way Dorian was perceived by the rest according to their idea of how a virtuous person would look, which favoured his increasing denial of morality in regard of the shallow nature he develops, where society plays a paramount role.

Regarding the importance of society, I will be focusing on the relevance of social judgment for it forms the beginning of Dorian's concern regarding physical appearance that sets his increasing separation from his conscience and soul. At the beginning of the novel, the interactions between Henry and Basil display, in a subtle way, how society views people and judges them, which becomes clearer later on when Dorian is mentioned. For instance, when Basil tells Henry how he needs to make a public appearance to remain relevant and remind people that painters are not "savages", he says: "With an evening coat and a white tie, as you told me once, anybody, even a stock-broker, can gain a reputation for being civilized." (9) This

simple piece of speech denotes how society will perceive him based on how he looks, establishing the importance of physical appearances. Concerning this, there are two factors to take into account when talking about social judgement and the construction of Dorian's sense of morality: how Dorian is perceived and therefore treated by society, and how he starts to perceive himself based on that. The characters of Henry and Basil are quite significant to understand this, as they represent two different approaches to deal with the imposed norms and perceptions of people, as well as the conflict between hidden sins and the visible nature of one's soul, while contributing to Dorian's awakening concerning his own appearance. In his work about gothic aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Riquelme discusses how Basil and Henry represent the double nature of Dorian, which is highlighted by their contribution to the creation of the portrait. Riquelme also alludes to the similarities between Henry and the character of Victor in *Frankenstein*, by influencing Dorian to a point where he produces a sort of destructive double of himself (616). Even though I agree with the importance given to Basil and Henry in their role for the production of the portrait, as well as Henry's relevance in the development of Dorian's personality, I would argue that this overlooks how Dorian eventually forms his own posture and stops accepting everything Henry says as true, at least in part. Also, the allusion to Victor is not quite clear, for his distance from Henry is greater than their similarities, as he does not create a living being to resemble himself and is not involved in the development of the creature. The creature in *Frankenstein* formed his deviant personality by the rejection of society, because of his dreadful appearance that contrasts with his sensible soul. On the contrary, Dorian remains untouched by the prejudices of society precisely because his youthful looks

separate himself, in appearance, from the dark nature of his soul, which allowed him to commit his sins without being socially alienated.

In his work about character design in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Liebman refers to the character of Basil in opposition to Henry, as he claims that the first believes in a moral order in which God punishes evil and rewards good, as well as in a moral code in which sympathy and compassion are values that must guide humankind, which finally leads to disappointment (297). About Henry, Liebman postulates that he represents the disregard of God since his posture denotes a critique of how society uses fear as a way to impose certain norms of morality that limit the soul instead of nurturing it, which explains his continuous search for pleasure (301). I concur with this view of what these characters carry in terms of their particular set of beliefs and values, but I would like to deepen into the relevance they have regarding their role for the construction of Dorian's perception of himself.

On the one hand, the character of Henry embodies the sinful, morally callous manner of confronting one's existence. He introduced Dorian to a new form of viewing life, he gave him the first glimpses of cynicism and his apparent shallow way of confronting his surroundings. Nevertheless, Henry never really shows signs of being actively pursuing sin at such a low moral level, but transformed Dorian's perspective through his words rather than by his direct actions. In so doing, he highlights the simple nature of Dorian's character and how easy it was to influence him at that point of the novel. The virtuous nature of his character, which everyone seemed to applaud, was not really based on a true sense of moral values, but on the

lack of a deeper notion of right and wrong and the concept of pleasure. Despite his clear sympathy for Dorian, Henry seems to be aware of the shallow nature of beauty, as he says to Basil even before meeting him:

Your mysterious young friend, whose name you have never told me, but whose picture really fascinates me, never thinks. I feel quite sure of that. He is a brainless, beautiful thing, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at, and always here in summer when we want something to chill our intelligence. (7)

This demonstrates how Henry is conscious of the lack of mental depth that is inherent to their society, and he deliberately decides to pursue pleasure over virtue. This is different from Dorian's decision to fulfill his sinful wishes, for Henry does so in a demonstration of his well constructed philosophy while Dorian only shows a disregard of conscience that has no deeper foundation.

On the other hand, the character of Basil not only opens the gate of Dorian's self-awareness, presenting him the notion of the passing of time and the fragility of physical traits, but the high standards he had for Dorian ignited the latter's downfall as he maintained the false illusion of his reputation. He seems to ignore the corrupted actions committed by Dorian, never really understanding how he had evolved from the man he first met, as he bases his judgement only on how Dorian looks. Nevertheless, even before Dorian sees his nature as stained by sin, Basil demonstrates, although not directly, how society perceived him as lacking depth, as it is manifested when he is introduced to him in a social gathering:

‘Oh, she murmured, ‘Charming boy—poor dear mother and I quite inseparable—engaged to be married to the same man—I mean married on the same day—how very silly of me! Quite forget what he does— afraid he—doesn’t do anything—oh, yes, plays the piano—or

is it the violin, dear Mr. Gray?' We could neither of us help laughing, and we became friends at once.' (11)

In the previous quote Basil is recalling how he first met Dorian, and Henry mentions how the woman who introduced them is known because she always tells a lot of details about people's lives, mentioning anything worth of interest. Therefore, it is quite significant that the only thing she says about Dorian is that he plays the piano, and she even has to think for a while before mentioning it, as it was nothing else worth of attention about Dorian except that and, as it has been stated previously, his physical appearance. Despite some members of society, as Basil, are not morally blind and possess a sense of morality and principles, the notion of preconceptions based on appearances is still a feature that shapes social interactions. Although his musical talent is not as shallow as his looks, it is still only a preconceived notion of what he shows as a person, where his political, religious or moral views do not incite interest.

Later on, when these three characters meet for the first time, the importance of Dorian's physical appearance is present once again, when Henry notices his appearance:

Lord Henry looked at him. Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candor of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world. (19)

When Henry mentions his youth and links it with purity, he is assuming that because of his appearance Dorian must certainly be innocent and righteous, otherwise the hardships of life and his sins would be visible in his face. Even though Dorian is, at

this point, quite innocent, what is remarkable about this first impression is that it shows how Dorian is perceived by the rest and how people tend to make assumptions based on someone's looks without really knowing them.

And in this meeting there is also an encounter of Basil and Henry's different approach of sin and virtue, that produce a contrasting scene for Dorian, who only knew Basil in advance and had been exposed only to his view of life. Liebman alludes to this first encounter between the three of them in the following way:

At their first meeting, Dorian sees Henry and Basil as "a delightful contrast" (p. 40) and hears Henry and Sybil speaking in "different" voices (p. 70). The ensuing battle between the two antagonists, both of whom are fighting for Dorian's loyalty, is intensely personal (at least on Basil's side) but also moral and ideological. The foundation of Basil's actions is his belief in a moral order, in which men and women are punished for their evil deeds and rewarded for their good. (303)

As Liebman says, in this first meeting we can observe how Dorian is, for the first time, confronted with these two contrasting stances of life, both of them different from his previous approach that seems quite passive in comparison. It is also significant that Henry openly talks about his favour for pleasure while Basil, who is immersed in his painting, does not interfere to advocate for his own view about the sense of morality and virtue, as if sins were more visible, inviting and tempting than rightness.

After being introduced to Henry and hearing a sample of his set of beliefs, Dorian is more aware of the sense of pleasure and sins that differ from what he had heard before from Basil, but this is not what produced the greater change in how he perceived himself. He had certainly heard a lot of compliments before, but never

took them seriously, yet when he sees his portrait it was a revelation that only gained force for his recent awareness of how time inevitably perishes beauty, as Henry said. The sudden realization of his future decay came to him as the picture would reinforce a youthful image of himself that was never meant to last. The following quote represents his thoughts right after he becomes conscious about this:

The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before. Basil Hallward's compliments had seemed to him to be merely the charming exaggerations of friendship. He had listened to them, laughed at them, forgotten them. They had not influenced his nature. Then had come Lord Henry, 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 colorless, 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 mark his body. He would become ignoble, hideous, and uncouth. (27)

The impression that the picture provoked in Dorian precipitated the beginning of his concern about his appearance, which would evolve in a predominant shallow nature. This scene represents the change of how he perceived himself, marking this just acquired notion of youth and beauty. In the past, he probably worried about cultivating friendships and being in touch with his acquaintances, playing the piano in social gatherings and living day by day, without nurturing a vast amount of deep knowledge or awareness of human existence. Now, he had just realized one of the greater features people saw in him, his beauty, and started to appreciate it at the same time as knowing it would not last. Thus his overly negative reaction to the picture, who represented a image of himself that would disappear at some point:

‘How sad it is!’ murmured Dorian Gray, with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. ‘How sad it is! *I shall grow old, and horrid, and*

*dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June .... If it was only the other way! If it was I who were to be always young, and the picture that were to grow old! For this—for this—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give!*' (27-28) (my emphasis)

By expressing his desire of remaining always young and shifting the consequences of the pass of time to the portrait, he unknowingly separates himself, his physical form, from the inner realization of his soul. This is not only marked by his words, how he explicitly says he wants to look always young, but also by what it demonstrates: his new, shallow vision of himself, which puts physical appearances over everything else, just as society who measured his worth based on how he looked.

This moment presented the first glance into this new perception of himself, that continued evolving and growing. The character of Sibyl is also relevant for the construction of his moral disgrace, as she introduces one aspect of his idealistic personality that had not died yet. This is shown when he talks about her with Henry, mentioning how much he loved her:

He shook his head. 'Tonight she is Imogen,' he answered, 'and tomorrow night she will be Juliet.'

'When is she Sibyl Vane?'

'Never.'

'I congratulate you.'

'How horrid you are! She is all the great heroines of the world in one. She is more than an individual. You laugh, but I tell you she has genius. I love her, and I must make her love me.' (54)

When Henry asks Dorian "When is she Sibyl Vane?" he seems to be aware of the fact that Dorian only praises her because of her acting, as it is clear by his reply. He does not love her for her beliefs, thoughts or way of seeing life, but for the projection he makes of the roles she plays. This demonstrates the shallow nature of his true



character, who only focuses on appearances, on how it would look for him to be with a talented actress. The way he leaves her when she performs poorly proves this:

‘Yes,’ he cried, ‘you have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don’t even stir my curiosity. [...] I loved you because you were wonderful, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid. [...] You have spoiled the romance of my life. How little you can know of love, if you say it mars your art! What are you without your art? Nothing. I would have made you famous, splendid, magnificent. The world would have worshipped you, and you would have belonged to me. What are you now? A third-rate actress with a pretty face.’ (85)

In this scene he accuses her of failing him, and even says she is shallow as she “knows little about love”, but by this he only highlights his own superficiality as he only cares about her performance. Even when Dorian does not care about her beauty, he never loved her for her personal traits and personality, and only cared about what she represented for him and the world, in terms of her talent. As Dorian says, he wanted to make her famous and see people admire her knowing she was with him, which shows how little he actually loved her, as he rapidly discarded her as soon as she failed to fulfill the expectations he had about her. This exhibits his shallowness, since he kept putting all the blame in Sibyl when he was the one who changed his mind because she differed from the image he had of her, which displays the importance he gave to appearances.

This episode with Sibyl is one of the first times when it was evident that Dorian is in fact influenced by external, superficial matters, just as society judged him based on his physique. But the stance of society is even more relevant than his own shallowness at some extent, for the superficiality of people is what led them to

believe in a distorted version of reality, in a fake version of Dorian that had little to do with his inner self. This is proved later on, as Dorian kept his good name despite the rumors of his lifestyle:

The boyish beauty that had so fascinated Basil Hallward, and many others besides him, seemed never to leave him. Even those who had heard the most evil things against him (and from time to time strange rumors about his mode of life crept through London and became the chatter of the clubs) could not believe anything to his dishonor when they saw him. *He had always the look of one who had kept himself unspotted from the world.* Men who talked grossly became silent when Dorian Gray entered the room. There was something in the purity of his face that rebuked them. (123-124) (my emphasis)

Here the allusion to Dorian's beauty evidences how society relied on his physique to make assumptions about his nature, even when his actions had become so immoral that there were rumors about them. In people's minds, if someone looked so pure and innocent as Dorian, then it was impossible for them to be affected by such dark traits as sins and moral transgressions.

As I have discussed, the prevalence of physical traits over the real nature of one's character is a paramount feature of the novel that allowed Dorian to maintain his reputation almost untouched, regardless of the devious actions he perpetrated which increased through time. This settled the path for his moral disgrace as it let him remain separated from the physical consequences of his actions, giving him the freedom and lack of responsibility to behave as he pleased without being noticed for his corrupted personality.

## **The Disregard of Conscience**

In the previous chapter I focused on how society influenced Dorian's perception of himself, settling the beginning of his immoral nature; here I will discuss how his disregard of conscience started growing in favour of the separation between body and soul presented by his portrait. But this was not a clear separation, where he would simply walk away from any moral notion. On the contrary, throughout the novel there are glimpses of his discernment of right and wrong, that become more intermittent as his sinful, immoral nature increases.

The notion of conscience is fundamental to understanding the way in which Dorian starts to behave. This is different from consciousness, as consciousness merely refers to the ability to experience and react to worldly stimuli through sensorial capacities. These two concepts are discussed in Vithoukas and Muresanu's work about conscience and consciousness, where they establish the contrast between these two concepts, and expand into the moral nature of the first. They define conscience as "the inherent ability of every healthy human being to perceive what is right and what is wrong". (105) Koncavar also refers to this in her research about conscience in literature, where she defines conscience as "a character trait where one measures what he/she has done or will do based upon his/her own moral values about his/her intention and behaviours" (743). According to these authors, having a conscience implies a level of discernment of what is considered acceptable and what is illicit or dishonest, where integrity and honesty can possess a high value or, on the

contrary, be discarded for a low sense of morality that pairs with a poor conscience, just as Dorian leaves his principles behind and ends vanishing his conscience.

The episode with Sybil Vane is extremely significant, not only because this showed Dorian's primarily shallow nature, but also because after the cruel words he said to her the picture started to change, showing marks of his cruelty (81). After leaving Sybil, Dorian moved from remorse to acceptance of his own nature, in an erratic demonstration of his inner tribulation. At this point, he was still quite aware of the moral principles inherent to rightness and virtue, but his selfishness made him shift from one posture to another, when he constantly regrets his previous actions to immediately justify himself:

Cruelty! Had he been cruel? It was the girl's fault, not his. He had dreamed of her as a great artist, had given his love to her because he had thought her great. Then she had disappointed him. She had been shallow and unworthy. And, yet, a feeling of infinite regret came over him, as he thought of her lying at his feet sobbing like a little child. He remembered with what callousness he had watched her. Why had he been made like that? Why had such a soul been given to him? But he had suffered also. During the three terrible hours that the play had lasted, he had lived centuries of pain, aeon upon aeon of torture. (88)

Dorian wonders about his own cruelty, and then shifts the blame to Sybil, remembering the expectations he had about her and which she could not fulfill. Repeatedly, he experiences short moments of regret and overcomes them by blaming Sybil. When Dorian mentions his soul, he acknowledges that his nature is not righteous but tainted by his moral callousness, as he cannot truly accept his role in the outcome of his relationship with her.

Despite his previous proof of having a conscience, Dorian only started questioning his actions after seeing the consequences of this on the portrait. This, in addition to the constant change of stance he experiences, makes unclear the extent to which his conscience is really marked by moral principles or only by his fear for the changing image on the portrait. And at some point he even excuses his behavior by searching validation in Henry's view about women and relationships: "Lord Henry had told him that, and Lord Henry knew what women were. Why should he trouble about Sibyl Vane? She was nothing to him now." (89) This shows how Dorian convinced himself that he is right in discarding any empathy for Sybil, to move into a space of acceptance for his self-centred thoughts.

Nevertheless, he decides to amend his past behavior by leading a worthy life from then on. By this moment of the novel, the picture is not fully marked as a representation of Dorian's separation between body and soul, but may represent a reminder of his broken principles. This is possible because he is still divided between his conscience and selfishness, besides the impression of seeing the picture that made him realize the consequences of his actions. In his work about mind and matter in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Davis refers to the composition of the picture as an analogy of the immaterial relationship between mind and the physical world, since the painting is fluid and changes in ways that cannot be explained (548). I would like to expand on this, since I consider that the incomprehensible nature of the picture may be seen as a reflection of Dorian's erratic line of thoughts. Since his mind is fluid and unsteady, the changing picture is a perfect representation of his evolution from the clueless man who first met Basil to the devious person he becomes later on.

And that division between body and soul is what makes understandable those changing emotions; if he blames someone else for his own low values and yet keeps showing glimpses of remorse is because his true feelings towards his actions, and the lack of empathy for the consequences they have over other people, are attached to the moral expectations of what is considered as right. In that sense, the picture symbolizes what otherwise would be unclear or almost invisible for oneself; it offers the possibility to observe the dark thoughts that take place inside one's mind, without the influence of morality and principles.

Therefore, it is no surprise that after seeing the subtle yet visible marks of his words in the picture, Dorian rejected them, even attempting to compensate for what he had done to Sybil:

The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry any more,—would not, at any rate, listen to those subtle poisonous theories that in Basil Hallward's garden had first stirred within him the passion for impossible things. He would go back to Sibyl Vane, make her amends, marry her, try to love her again. Yes, it was his duty to do so. She must have suffered more than he had. (89)

Even though he seems to accept that he had misbehaved and aims to live a worthy life, he still blames someone else for his own actions. By mentioning Henry, he is denying his own will and freedom of action, not fully accepting that it was only him who demonstrated cruelty by rejecting Sybil and leaving her crying on the floor. From this, it may be said that Dorian's inability to accept responsibility is a consequence of his prevalent, yet vanishing, notion of morality in addition to his increasing disregard of conscience

When he hears from Henry that Sybil had killed herself, Dorian finally moves to a state of assuming that it was not possible for him to amend the way he had treated her. And in doing so, he realizes that, besides the expression on the portrait, little had changed in the world around him:

‘So I have murdered Sibyl Vane,’ said Dorian Gray, half to himself,—  
‘murdered her as certainly as if I had cut her little throat with a knife.  
And the roses are not less lovely for all that. The birds sing just as  
happily in my garden. And tonight I am to dine with you, and then go  
on to the Opera, and sup somewhere, I suppose, afterwards.’ (96)

At that moment he became aware of how he was not really affected by the consequences of his actions, as it is Sybil’s death. Besides the picture, nothing about his life had been altered, for he would just continue living and leaving Sybil behind as a distant memory.

After knowing this, Dorian does not feel any regret, but is only concerned for the possible repercussions of Sybil's death, calling her selfish for killing herself even though he felt remorse moments before: "And now she is dead. My God! my God! Harry, what shall I do? You don't know the danger I am in, and there is nothing to keep me straight. [...] She had no right to kill herself. It was selfish of her." (97) This time he only worries about how this would affect him, as he has come to the conclusion that there is nothing he could do to inverse the marks produced by his actions.

Sybil’s death and the realization that he cannot fix what he has done made Dorian discover the nature of the picture. His first reaction after seeing the marks on the portrait was shock, now he had assumed that there is not coming back, and that

he has to live knowing that the picture would keep changing in regard of his actions, taking the visible marks of his sins:

He felt that the time had really come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him,— life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins,—he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all. (102)

But even at this point he does not acknowledge that it was him who, although not knowing it would come true, wished for the faculty of remaining always young. Dorian says it was life who was responsible for all this, and decides to take it as a sign to fulfill his passions and desires. But he could have decided to remain righteous anyway, avoiding sin, just as characters like Basil who maintained his high principles despite being exposed to the dark aspects of society. However, his conscience was no longer present at this moment of the novel.

In her work about characters' sins and their actions in Oscar Wilde's writings, Tapper discusses how Wilde's protagonists are confronted to a turning point that makes them self-conscious of their free will and pursue action (35). Following her claim, I consider that this scene, when Dorian decides to accept the possibilities offered by the portrait, is the decisive moment for his character. The picture would allow him to live however he pleased, without being physically affected by the marks of his sins. Before this, he kept shifting from his own selfishness to feeling remorse, now he had fully embraced the possibilities of his corrupted nature.

When Basil sees Dorian he can notice, not by his looks but through his reaction to Sybil's death, how Dorian has changed. He no longer fits into the image Basil had



formed about him when they first met. Now, Dorian has just acquired this new stance towards life, but has not completely developed his desire for hiding his nature and therefore the portrait:

‘Dorian, this is horrible! Something has *changed you* completely. You look exactly the same wonderful boy who used to come down to my studio, day after day, to sit for his picture. But you were simple, natural, and affectionate then. You were the most unspoiled creature in the whole world. Now, I don’t know what has come over you. You talk as if you had no heart, no pity in you. It is all Harry’s influence. I see that’ (105) (my emphasis)

Nevertheless, just as Dorian did before, Basil attributes this change to Harry's influence, denying the possibility of Dorian being so cruel and shallow as to discard any sympathy about Sybil. And part of his surprise for Dorian's attitude is that he looks the same as before, for which Basil cannot accept this sudden change in his behaviour.

Despite his clear discernment of what is right and wrong, and his moral values, Basil is tied to prejudices just as society judges people's characters based on appearances. While he is conscious of how Dorian did not show any sadness for Sybil's death, he still maintains his high standards for him in regard of Dorian's looks:

Hallward felt strangely moved. The lad was infinitely dear to him, and his personality had been the great turning-point in his art. He could not bear the idea of reproaching him any more. After all, his indifference was probably merely a mood that would pass away. *There was so much in him that was good, so much in him that was noble.* (107) (my emphasis)

When Basil refers to Dorian's goodness and nobleness, he says that because of his appearance and not for a real knowledge of Dorian’s thoughts and character. It is significant that a great part of their interactions took place in Basil’s studio, where he

would be working in his art and not actively talking with Dorian. Therefore, the conception he had about Dorian's purity and nobleness was based primarily on how he looked and not on his personality.

Tapper also discusses that for Wilde it is the conscious decision to act or not following one's interests, without caring about the consequences it may have for others, what dictates the nature of one's soul (35). She mentions how sin is not wrong because of its religious connotation, but because it corrupts the soul (36). I agree with her view and the relevance given to the notion of soul, and consider this is related to Dorian's separation from his conscience. As the portrait contains the visible marks on his soul, the separation between his soul and body let him remain apparently untouched by the physical consequences of a life of decay. And this allowed his progressive, at first erratic, disregard of conscience, as he gets more and more willing to hide his secret nature as the novel unfolds.

When Dorian finally decides to hide the picture (113), it is because he has come to the conclusion that his only way to avoid rejection is by preventing anyone from seeing the scars on the portrait. However, by hiding the frame he not only covers his shame from others but also from himself, as it is shown later:

He had the key, and no one else could enter it. Beneath its purple pall, the face painted on the canvas could grow bestial, sodden, and unclean. What did it matter? No one could see it. *He himself would not see it.* Why should he watch the hideous corruption of his soul? He kept his youth,—that was enough. And, besides, might not his nature grow finer, after all? There was no reason that the future should be so full of shame. (118) (my emphasis)

When Dorian says he would not see the portrait either, he separates himself from the last piece of conscience he maintained. It was the image on the portrait what made him experience remorse after leaving Sybil; now, without that reminder of his sins he would walk freely, without seeing anything that made him think about the consequences of his actions, as he would never see any glimpse of corruption while looking at his reflection in the mirror.

Nevertheless, Dorian continued experiencing brief moments of reflection, when he would contemplate his actions and its consequences over his soul:

There were moments, indeed, at night, when [...] he would think of the ruin he had brought upon his soul, with a pity that was all the more poignant because it was purely selfish. *But moments such as these were rare.* [...] The more he knew, the more he desired to know. He had mad hungers that grew more ravenous as he fed them. (124)  
(my emphasis)

The difference between these moments and those he experienced after leaving Sybil is that at that time he kept moving from his selfishness to feeling remorse, over and over again. Here he would quickly discard such feelings, and experience a contemplative state which does not last long. Also, the desire of experiencing worldly satisfactions and fulfilling his decadent wishes had already grown inside him, for which there was no place for his conscience.

Actually, there is a greater change in Dorian's mentality after he left his conscience aside. He not only starts acting following his sinful impulses, but does not recognize the slightest notion of right as opposed to doing wrong. This is marked by his stance about the picture:

For weeks he would not go there, would forget the hideous painted thing, and get back his light heart, his wonderful joyousness, his

passionate pleasure in mere existence. Then, suddenly, some night he would creep out of the house, go down to dreadful places near Blue Gate Fields, and stay there, day after day, until he was driven away. On his return he would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of rebellion that is half the fascination of sin, and *smiling, with secret pleasure, at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own.* (135) (my emphasis)

He accepts his devious nature, and even enjoys seeing the consequences on the portrait, where the “pride of rebellion” symbolizes his satisfaction for hiding so efficiently what is clearly seen on the portrait. This contrasts with the way in which he reacted with fear after seeing the first, subtle change on the picture when he left Sibyl. By this moment he had completely embraced the possibilities that the picture gave him, as well as his dark nature that would only produce visible scars on the picture but not on himself.

From that point, it was not remorse what gave Dorian a feeling of uneasiness but the fear of being discovered by his corrupted interior. This made him distressed for the permanent concern of keeping the portrait hidden:

Yet he was afraid. Sometimes [...] he would suddenly leave his guests and rush back to town to see that the door had not been tampered with and that the picture was still there. What if it should be stolen? The mere thought made him cold with horror. Surely the world would know his secret then. Perhaps the world already suspected it. (135)

This shows a contrast from his previous uncaring stance, where Dorian not only accepted but enjoyed seeing the scars on the picture. It seems that his devious actions eventually became so tainted that they started to affect his mental state, while fading the tranquility that the frame gave him.

Although there is nothing in Dorian's physique that could indicate any mark of his sins, since his actions involved other people his reputation started being affected by rumors. Because of the sinful acts he perpetrated, there was a point where some people started to suspect of his dark nature, that could not be confirmed due to Dorian's apparent purity:

For, while he fascinated many, there were not a few who distrusted him. He was blackballed at a West End club of which his birth and social position fully entitled him to become a member, and on one occasion, when he was brought by a friend into the smoking-room of the Carlton, the Duke of Berwick and another gentleman got up in a marked manner and went out. (135-136)

In spite of his attempt to maintain his sinful nature hidden, some people noticed a part of what the portrait contained; not the visible marks of sin, but the knowledge that there was something evil behind his appearances. This was possible because people possess a, at times undefined, set of values that make them able to emit moral judgements. However, society is still tied to shallow notions of people, as they tend to form prejudices based on appearances

This can be perceived as Dorian maintains, after all, his image in front of most people. They refused, or simply preferred to omit any rumor about his reputation, in regard of the vision Dorian presented in society:

Of such insolences and attempted slights he, of course, took no notice, and in the opinion of most people his frank debonair manner, his charming boyish smile, and the infinite grace of that wonderful youth that seemed never to leave him, were in themselves a sufficient answer to the calumnies (for so they called them) that were circulated about him. It was remarked, however, that those who had been most intimate with him appeared, after a time, to shun him. (136)

It is truly significant that those who were at some point close to Dorian were who decided to stay away from him. And this happened while people still believed in his goodness, for they could not conceive someone who looked so pure was able of such devious acts. It seems that only those who experienced Dorian's dark nature, being associated with the rumors involving Dorian and seeing him commit corrupted acts, were as affected by this as to see what otherwise would be unnoticed. Most people, on the contrary, were blinded by their prejudices which led them to judge Dorian only based on his looks, demonstrating a twisted notion of right and wrong.

At the end, it appears that Dorian's sense of conscience evolved until fading away in favour of his acceptance of sin and pleasure. This made him discard any sense of remorse to embrace the devious nature of his soul, which involved an erratic turmoil of emotions to finally abandon his previous notion of morality. Although his actions eventually became so open that some people started to perceive his real nature, a great part of society remained oblivious to this as they only focused on Dorian's appearance to judge him. That made him able to maintain his reputation and highlighted the distorted notion society had of right and wrong, which contributed to his moral disgrace.

### **The Path of Self-Destruction**

In the previous chapters I discussed the influence of society on the construction of Dorian's self awareness and shallow nature, as well as the emotional turmoil he experienced in regard to his loss of conscience. Now I will focus on the final destruction of Dorian's moral notions and how his corrupted actions reached a point where the superficiality attributed to society could no longer endure his false sense of virtue based on his mere appearance. Even though most people were willing to judge Dorian as virtuous because of his youthful and graceful face, after rumours about his actions started spreading the acts he perpetrated got so vicious and reckless that characters such as Basil were forced to see beyond Dorian's physique to his real, dark self. Considering the role that sin played on Dorian's fatal end, I believe it is necessary to define this concept for the understanding of his character development. In his book *Sin and Evil*, Paulson mentions how sin possesses a sense of unworthiness and guilt, immersed in a religious context where it involves rewards and punishments for one's behaviour. According to Paulson, sin can be based on a theological or existential basis, since it may be produced for a feeling of self-centeredness and moral imperfection, for loving something more than God and acting contrary to the religious parameters; and for a sensation of incompleteness, feeling alone in the universe and doomed to die (9). Due to the nature of Dorian's psychological process, I will rely on these two principles of sin equally, for I consider both the theological and existential grounds of sin as relevant to understand Dorian's actions and their consequences over his mental downfall.

Once again, the character of Basil is significant when he comes to identify Dorian's approach to his hidden sins, or at least their physical marks. This can be perceived when he tries to avoid Basil when they had an encounter, after years of not seeing each other (141), and later when Basil tries to warn him about the rumors that involved him and his wicked behavior (143). From these episodes, it is clear that Dorian did not want to confront any reminder of the horrific figure in the portrait, as Basil not only gave him the picture but also maintained the high standards of his reputation. Even after he heard a variety of stories about Dorian's wrongful acts, Basil kept believing in his apparent tenderness and innocence:

‘Mind you, I don't believe these rumours at all. At least, I *can't believe them when I see you*. 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. [...] *But you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvellous untroubled youth – I can't believe anything against you.* (143) (my emphasis)

The previous quote illustrates how the importance given to someone's looks leads people to form misconceptions about Dorian. Basil is aware of how the people who were once close to Dorian saw their reputation stained and eventually started to avoid him, such as the Duke of Berwick, Lord Staveley and Sir Henry Ashton (144), but despite the connection between the rumors and Dorian's broken friendships, he keeps a distorted, yet at this point fragile, image of Dorian's purity.

Even when Basil maintains a virtuous image of Dorian until the end, it is significant how in doing so he omits the true sense of virtue, which focuses on the character. The notion of virtue has been profoundly discussed in philosophical



studies for several years, where the concept of virtue ethics is particularly appropriate to this discussion, because it is based on one's morality and character. Authors such as Sharpe, Tomlinson and Ainley have written about virtue ethics in the fields of philosophy, medicine and economics, respectively. Despite the clear differences of their corresponding fields, they all refer to virtue as the cultivation of the character, where the ethical pursuit of right over wrong flourishes human moral powers. They mention how cultivating the traits of mind and character leads to a consistent moral nature, which emphasises the virtuous and moral disposition one possesses, especially by the decision of acting with rightness in any given situation. Taking this into account, it can be said that Basil's perception of Dorian was never real, for it was not based on a deep knowledge of his character. Therefore, it is no surprise that he only starts to suspect after Dorian's immoral fame became impossible to avoid.

After warning Dorian about the rumors, Basil shows an increasing concern for the state of his soul, since he suspected deep inside that there must have been at least some truth behind people's chattering. But he continued trying to convince himself that it had to be false, using Dorian's appearance as a proof to lighten his worries. At some point, Basil even asks him to show him his soul while knowing, or believing, it was impossible, since "only God can do that" (146). And after Dorian incites him to follow him, so he could see the portrait, he stops right before confronting the wicked image, still hoping for Dorian to deny the things people said about him:

‘What I have to say is this,’ he cried. ‘You must give me some answer to these horrible charges that are made against you. If you tell me that they are absolutely untrue from beginning to end, I shall believe you. *Deny them, Dorian, deny them!* Can't you see what I am going

through? My God! don't tell me that you are bad, and corrupt, and shameful.' (147) (my emphasis)

By requesting Dorian to dismiss everything that had been said about him, Basil shows his willingness to despise all those comments in regard of the image Dorian represented for him. He wanted Dorian to reaffirm the image of virtuous and purity Basil wrongly assumed because of Dorian's physical beauty.

When Basil sees the picture upon Dorian's insistence, he finally acknowledges what Dorian has done with his life, even saying that the image on the portrait conveys more horror than what had been said about him (150). However, even after realizing Dorian's sins he tries to bring him back to the right path, by praying and repenting of his actions. Then, exclaiming that it is too late, Dorian proceeds to take a knife and stabs Basil (151-152), settling the ultimate part of his corrupted soul and completely destroying any possibility for redemption. The portrait was created based on the image Basil had of Dorian's purity and goodness. When he finally got to witness Dorian's true, dark nature, he was silenced just as the portrait was maintained hidden so no one would see the marks of Dorian's sins on the canvas.

The act he perpetrated by murdering Basil is presumably the worst sin Dorian ever committed. However, he remains calm and does not seem to feel remorse or the slightest notion of guilt. On the contrary, he immediately starts to contemplate the possible repercussions it could have for him, and comes to the conclusion he is relatively safe for there are no witnesses and no one knew Basil had met him that day. In fact, he convinces himself there are no reasons to be worried since Basil was

leaving for France and therefore people would not miss him for a while. His callousness is reinforced when he decides to act as he had just entered the house (153), so his servants would serve him as an alibi when people discover Basil is nowhere to be found. Later on, when Dorian unconsciously draws Basil's face and keeps thinking about him (156), he takes the determination to stop remembering him, showing his absolute disregard of moral values and conscience.

In his study about the enchantment of the double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Craft discusses how it is the presence of two mirrors with two opposite reflections what produces such fascination over Dorian. The portrait and its increasing ugliness, which contrasts with the permanent beauty Dorian would see in front of the mirror, induced the obsession for his appearance that finally affected his character (109). Craft also compares Dorian to Ovid's Narcissus, because the latter incarnates the relationship between visual reflection and the awakening of individual identity. Narcissus was absorbed by an image that is not himself but a seeming other, dream figure that produces a mimetic event from which he does not return to his old self if not as flower (110). In accordance with Craft's work, I overall agree with his claims about the possibilities given by the two different reflections producing the greater fascination on Dorian. Nevertheless, I cannot completely accept his comparison between Dorian and Narcissus, for he does not consider that Dorian, sooner than later, hides the picture not only from other people but from himself, since the changing image stopped producing him pleasure and started giving him a sense of fear for being discovered in his dark nature (114). Where Narcissus remains absorbed by his reflection perpetually, until he languishes to death (Ovid, lines

499-505), Dorian decides to avoid the portrait and continue his deceitful life without the reminder of his corrupted soul.

The distance Dorian takes from the picture, as opposed to Narcissus, is manifested when he tries to avoid Basil and finally murders him, because Basil represented the false illusion of his shattered reputation and, even though he is not responsible for the transmutation of the portrait, Dorian judges him as responsible of giving it to him. And the complete absence of remorse is manifested when he refers to Basil's death and shows the kind of pity (157) one may feel for an acquaintance's demise, or even a stranger, but not for a friend. When he starts feeling uneasy for the murder it is not because he regrets it, as it was the case when he first acknowledged how horribly he had treated Sybil before accepting his wrongful character, but because he is concerned about discarding the body without being suspicious. For that purpose, Dorian calls Alan Campbell since he had the scientific knowledge to deal with Basil without leaving marks. Alan did not accept immediately, so Dorian blackmailed him without any sign of guilt (163), showing once again his absolute lack of morality or conscience. After the work is finished, Dorian refers to Basil without recognizing his humanity: "As soon as Campbell had left, he went upstairs. There was a horrible smell of nitric acid in the room. But *the thing* that had been sitting at the table was gone." (166) (my emphasis) Previously, he had already addressed Basil without the warmth due to an old friend. Here, Dorian completely separates any notion of sympathy referring to him as a "thing", which illustrates the extent to which his corrupted nature had increased, absorbing the least glimpse of sensibility he could have maintained, a callousness that is reinforced later when he

destroys the last pieces of evidence by burning Basil's coat and bag (174). And since Alan shoots himself some time after the murder, Dorian allows himself to live without the fear of being discovered, at least for a period of time.

The insensible disposition Dorian developed grew when he accepted the advantages his aspect gave him. Previously, the fixation people had for Dorian's youth and beauty allowed him to maintain his reputation almost untouched, at least until his actions became so careless that some individuals could see beyond appearances. Now, his physique gained a greater benefit when he encountered Sybil's brother:

Dim and wavering as was the windblown light, yet it served to show him the hideous error, as it seemed, into which he had fallen, for the face of the man he had sought to kill had all *the bloom of boyhood, all the unstained purity of youth*. He seemed little more than a lad of twenty summers, hardly older, if older indeed at all, than his sister had been when they had parted so many years ago. It was obvious that this was not the man who had destroyed her life. (182) (my emphasis)

Sybil's brother, who had found Dorian to fulfill his desire for revenge, decided to kill him. At that moment, it was Dorian's apparent youth what stopped his actions, because he knew the man that abandoned Sybil must have been several years older. In this episode it is possible to perceive two contrasting outcomes of Dorian's eternal boyhood. First, the advantage of remaining untouched from the consequences of his actions, since people generally mistook him for a pure person incapable of committing vicious actions, although in this case it was not for a sense of virtue but for his mere young appearance. And the inescapability of the truth being revealed, as in the cases of Basil finally acknowledging his corrupted soul and his previous friends currently avoiding him, because, when he leaves, a woman who had suffered

from his actions approaches Vane to clarify it was indeed Dorian Gray the man he had let go. It is also significant that James Vane is one of the few people who was not morally blinded, and did not assume his purity based on his appearance, which may be because he does not take part of the sector of society that is known by being conditioned by assumptions and prejudices, or because he had the disposition to damage him in his rage for Sybil's death.

This encounter where he almost dies starts haunting Dorian, causing him to experience sorrow and to think about what he had done in the past. Nonetheless, this is not caused by a sense of remorse or the overlap between his shallow nature and the remains of his conscience, as discussed in chapter two, but purely because he fears to be discovered in what he has done, and he realized that there are people who may haunt him as Vane did. After this happens, Dorian thinks about Basil and seems to regret murdering him: "Oh! in what a wild hour of madness he had killed *his friend!* How ghastly the mere memory of the scene! He saw it all again. Each hideous detail came back to him with added horror." (192) (my emphasis) He had already been haunted by Basil's image before (179), but this time he clearly expresses his regret, and even refers to him as "his friend". However, this sentiment comes from his sense of self-preservation and not from real guilt, which is demonstrated by his attitude, where Dorian only refers to Basil as his friend when he fears being discovered for his actions. This denotes how Dorian had fully developed his corrupted soul by this point, which settled the path of his self-destruction. In fact, when he finds out the man who had died in a hunting accident where he was involved was James Vane,

Dorian comes to the conclusion he is safe (199), a knowledge that momentarily eases his previous concern for his safety.

In her work about duality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Milbank argues that throughout the novel the characters influence each other with their ideas, such as Lord Henry who contributed to create the first notion of sin and earthly pleasures in Dorian's mind. Milbank refers to the irony of Dorian becoming more similar to Henry as he tries to escape from the picture, and how in his rejection of duality he stabs the picture in regard of his own safety, but ends up murdering himself (31). She also mentions that Basil actually offers Dorian the opportunity to repent after seeing the painting, but he declines it and murders Basil instead, refusing to accept his guilt (32-34). I concur with what Milbank postulates concerning Basil and how his death denotes Dorian's lack of remorse and responsibility, but cannot completely agree with the relevance she attributes to Henry for the development of his corrupted soul, as I argued in chapter one. Even if Henry had an important impact over Dorian in terms of his view of life, the latter quickly started to form his own worldview and at some point became more vicious than his friend, as it is shown by the negative effects he had over people who were once close to him.

Henry's book is indeed a relevant source of inspiration for Dorian's corruption, but at the end it cannot be blamed for the self-destruction accomplished through his actions. Even Henry sees it that way, when he is confronted by Dorian about the book:

‘Yet *you poisoned me* with a book once. *I should not forgive that.* Harry, promise me that you will never lend that book to any one. It does harm.’

‘My dear boy, you are really beginning to moralize. [...] As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all.’ (208) (my emphasis)

Instead of acknowledging Henry’s influence, in this scene Dorian is passing the blame to his friend, for he neither assumes his own culpability nor recognize that it was he who decided to perpetrate the actions that formed his upcoming decay. As Henry says, external ideas have no impact over one’s actions, contrary to the conscious decision to act in a certain manner, following or denying the moral system people possess. And he also seems to blame Basil for the negative outcomes of his lifestyle: “Basil had painted the portrait that had marred his life. *He could not forgive him that. It was the portrait that had done everything.* Basil had said things to him that were unbearable, and that he had yet borne with patience.” (210) (my emphasis) Here he demonstrates again his impossibility to accept the repercussions of his acts, feeling pity for himself while being unable to take any responsibility.

Near the end of the novel, and considering his actions had reached a level of corruption that inevitably condemned his soul, Dorian contemplates his desire of living a different life. When he meets Hetty Merton and decides to stay away from her in regard of her purity (211), he has the hope that it would erase the marks on the picture. But it was too late for him, since he had already sentenced himself to destruction through the long list of sins he committed. When he realized that, the only possible course of action he could think about was to destroy the picture, as it



was the last piece of evidence that denoted his dark nature, for which he proceeded to stab the canvas with the same knife that had killed Basil (212). When Dorian refers to the portrait as “conscience” to him, he displays his desire of discarding any sort of conscience that would prevent him from living freely, without the knowledge of his wrong acts. But by destroying the picture, he destroys the veil that maintained the illusory perception that people had regarding his reputation, and the false sense of virtue that was attributed to him based on his appearance. At that moment, he reached a point where the portrait could not maintain his sins hidden, and his inner ugliness was finally visible:

When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was. (213)

The experience people had by looking at Dorian was similar to the act of looking at a picture, and seeing its steady, unchanging form, now the spell of the portrait was broken, so they could see the manifestation of Dorian’s sins on his body. At the end, his own actions, complete disregard of conscience and incapacity to acknowledge his guilt, formed the basis for his final destruction, an inescapable path whose first step began at the first pages of the novel with the awakening of his shallow nature.

## Conclusion

The psychological evolution of Dorian's character is a paramount feature of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that leads to an understanding of his moral disgrace. In order to comprehend his mental state, which experienced a variety of changes throughout the novel, it is necessary to consider society as a character itself, who has a certain position regarding Dorian's figure. According to this, people denote a marked concern over appearances, without really deeping into what is under the surface of things. That can be applied to the greater part of society, which is illustrated by how Dorian could remain almost untouched by his sins, in consideration of the picture who absorbed their scars. Although not all characters are equally shallow, as it is the case of Basil and Henry who, despite their opposite set of values, seem to be aware of the dark aspect of society, prejudices seem to be a common trait of society.. These two characters trusted in the virtuous image Dorian represented to the world, demonstrating that the importance of appearances is a feature of society that involves every member to some extent. Is in that sense that it can be said that the social construction people possessed about physical appearance and reputation produced a twisted notion of right and wrong, which induced Dorian's mental downfall.

The changes he suffered, from his first appearance to his final death, give account of the different elements that contributed to form his twisted mentality. For that reason, it is relevant to consider the role of society, Dorian's disregard of conscience and how his actions settled the path of his self-destruction. Society, being

represented by the characters Dorian interacted with, demonstrates how he is considered as virtuous based merely on his external traits. People can also be perceived as a sort of collective character who let the readers know how Dorian is viewed, as a righteous person at first, whose reputation started being stained by rumours about his increasing vicious actions. Rumours that started spreading for his callousness, since Dorian eventually left any sense of conscience he could have maintained and started committing more sins as the novel unfolded. The figure of the picture denoted his corrupted soul, a reminder of his wicked acts that ended by troubling him, in his fear of being discovered for his true nature. And Dorian's worries for being unmasked as he really was are what denote the final development of his disturbed mind. The obsession he had about hiding the picture, and later about destroying it, presents the last piece of his fatal destiny, when he ends up annihilating himself.

Overall, the arguments discussed in this dissertation present the main elements of Dorian's psychological evolution, including the aspect of society, his lack of conscience and the sinful actions that settled his destiny. Even when the picture was mentioned for its representation of his conscience and eventual fear of being discovered, its supernatural feature and sense of duality was not further analysed. Such is the case of society, since it was introduced in terms of the relevance for Dorian's reputation and self-awareness, without considering the social critique attributed to it. Due to the focus of the analysis developed and its extension, those features were overlooked in regard to the psychological influence they present, which was the focal point of the discussion. Nonetheless, both aspects of *The Picture*

*of Dorian Gray* are relevant and worthy of being studied in the future. Since Wilde's novel introduces a wide variety of themes, including social hypocrisy, madness, moral decay and the corruption of the soul, it would be impossible to carry out an analysis including all the different elements that constitute the society presented by the author. Several authors have written about the notions of duality, morality and the supernatural components in the novel. Although this research developed the mental journey Dorian experienced, its introduction to the social aspect of the novel could work as a starting point for future investigations, as I consider it relevant to also focus on the social critique presented by the possibilities the portrait offers Dorian, beyond its sense of duality or paranormal feature. At the end, it seems that Wilde's capacity of analysis and sensibility towards the social intricacies of his time are a pivotal feature of this novel, where he was able to create a complex character immersed into an environment that elevated his sense of corruption. In that scenery, it is significant to ask oneself what is more crucial for people's moral decay: one's own corruption, or the society that enables and, at some point, even praises it.

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