

A Quasi-Aesthetic Approach to the Gothic Elements in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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The Picture of Dorian Gray was composed during the year 1890, and the same year it was given to the printing. This first version written by Wilde was not published then, because it had to be reformed and adapted in order to avoid problems with the strict social rules which were ongoing during those years. After Wilde himself had censored the novel, it was submitted to the *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*,² whose editor was also responsible for censoring the work (erasing or changing about 500 words) with the knowledge of the author. It finally appeared in June 1890. Even with the censorship the novel had already suffered, it was fiercely criticized by some of Oscar Wilde's detractors. Anyway, it became an enormous success and from then on, it has been one of the most famous (also controversial) pieces in British literature, being the subject of myriads of studies of all kinds, from Philosophy to Aesthetics and from its demonic plot to the treatment of women and sexual connotations.

The following year, 1891, the novel was published again. This second publication included several important changes: seven more chapters had been added, together with an aphoristic "Preface", in which Wilde deals with the labor of the artist. This preface had been included in response to the criticism the novel had received, for, among some other soubriquets, it had been deemed immoral. As already stated, the very first version was not published at during Wilde's lifetime. Actually, it was hidden for a long lapse of time until it was discovered, edited and published by the Virginia Commonwealth University Wilde scholar Nicholas Frankel in 2011.

Gothic elements can be traced back even before the birth of Dorian Gray, in the figure of his grandfather and his mother. In the third chapter of the 1891 version, the reader obtains, for the first time, and through a conversation between Lord Henry and his uncle, news about Dorian's family. In the course of this dialogue there are two moments to be taken into account: the first one is the description of Dorian's mother's imprisonment by her own father, Lord Kelso. "He brought his daughter back with him, I

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² The *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* was a 19th century literary publication settled in Philadelphia (US), which ran from 1868 to 1915, when it merged with *Scribner's Magazine*. Many important authors published their works in its pages, as for instance Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (*The Sign of Four*) or Rudyard Kipling (*The Light that Failed*).

was told, and she never spoke to him again. Oh, yes; it was a bad business. The girl died too, died within a year” (32). In these lines it is explained how Lord Kelso destroyed the soul of his daughter, driving to her death. To think of the poisoning she had to suffer every day during that year constitutes a first-rate gothic element.³ Two pages below, we have a description of Dorian’s mother which brings to mind the female characters in the poems of the Romantics, a good example of the New Woman, “born” within the gothic genre:

A beautiful woman risking everything for a mad passion. A few wild weeks of happiness cut short by a hideous, treacherous crime. Months of voiceless agony, and then a child born in pain. The mother snatched away by death, the boy left to solitude and the tyranny of an old loveless man (34).

This fragment can be considered as the background of the little Dorian, who will, with difficulty, get free of the influence and of the power that his grandfather –“an old loveless man”– had been holding over on him.

Everything starts with a conversation: Basil Hallward is trying to explain to Lord Henry how he felt when he first met Dorian. It was not a warm feeling, as their late relationship would suggest. It is described as if Basil had seen a phantom: “A curious instinct of terror came over me” (78).⁴ With this sentence, the reader can start to imagine what is going to happen even before the real story of Dorian Gray and his portrait begins, but that is not the only business which begins at this point: Basil Hallward is going to develop a function as a visionary and almost as a prophet.⁵

Basil is the main “prophet” in the novel, but he is not the only one; or, to be more correct, at some points of the story, some other characters take the role he had been playing as visionary.⁶ The next table shows the parts of the plot where the prophetic facet of the painter, and of the other characters, appears:⁷

Chapter	Sequence
Chapter I	The first meeting of Dorian and Basil is described.

³ This situation is reformulated, many years later, by the Spanish writer Carlos Ruiz Zafón’s in his novel *La sombra del viento*, 2001, in the character of Penélope Aldaya.

⁴ Frankel’s edition.

⁵ In this respect, see Correoso Rodenas, José Manuel. “Basil Hallward como profeta victoriano.” *Herejía y Belleza*, no. 2, 2014, pp. 221-229.

⁶ These characters are Lord Henry and Dorian, and they only act like this at very specific moments of the narration, once each one.

⁷ The reference is taken from the edition by Nicholas Frankel.

Chapter I	A conversation between Basil and Lord Henry, where the painter shows his fear of Dorian being corrupted if he meets Harry.
Chapter II	Basil realizes that the negative influence of Lord Henry has started and tries, for the first time, to take Dorian back to the “good way of life”.
Chapter III	At the end of this chapter, Harry prognosticates how the <i>affaire</i> of Dorian with Sybil is going to evolve: “...and wondered how it was all going to end” (130).
Chapter IV	Basil, after knowing of the engagement of Dorian and Sybil, suspects the tragic end of the story, with the difference that he still has a bit of hope.
Chapter X	Some years later, Dorian meets Basil by chance in the middle of the street at night. As soon as he sees the painter, he knows how the meeting is going to end. Dorian tries to avoid Basil inside his house, maybe as a last attempt to perform a good action.
Chapter XI	Basil Hallward finally confronts the portrait he painted years ago. For the last time, he makes an effort to take Dorian away from his life of sin.
Chapter XI	As typical of a prophet, Basil is assassinated by Dorian, the very man whom he had tried to save.

As a prophet, Basil blames himself for having painted the portrait when he is talking with Dorian about a hypothetical exhibition of the masterpiece and Dorian denies the painter the contemplation of his work: “Well, I am punished for that, Dorian, -or shall be some day,” (246)⁸ prognosticating his own ending.

After the murder of Basil, Dorian tries to defuse the fact by thinking that this was only one more of the myriad of crimes usually performed in London,⁹ but he also shows his horror to be discovered. Finally, he states that society is mad and he is only a product of its madness: “He sat down, and began to think. Every year –every month, almost- men were strangled in England for what he had done. There had been a madness of murder in the air. Some red star had come too close to the earth” (226).¹⁰

The plot of the novel is built in relation to some gothic elements that are used to articulate the novel and which contribute to produce, in the end, a gothic novel when considered all together. The leitmotiv underneath the story is the “sale of the soul” Dorian performs when he sees the portrait for the first time. In this moment, the painting seems to possess the model, although the latter only offers a tiny resistance before surrendering definitively: “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!” (102).¹¹ Dorian regards his picture as a son, for whom he would do everything. It seems Dorian takes the responsibility of feeding the portrait... and the only food it would take is sin and corruption.

Until the *soirée* when the portrait is finished, Dorian had not known what terror was. Now, as he faces corruption and sin, he is also able to know the sensation of horror.¹² From that evening on, Dorian will go down and down into a gothic world that, even if it had always been around him, was never perceived by his senses, due to the fact that his senses were asleep and now have been awakened by the strength of Lord Henry. Some pages ahead, during his first conversation alone with Lord Henry, Dorian

⁸ 1891 version.

⁹ It must be born in mind that Jack the Ripper had been acting only two years before the novel was first published.

¹⁰ Frankel's edition.

¹¹ Frankel's edition.

¹² Adam and Eve only knew the shame after having sinned (Gn. 2, 7). All Biblical references belong to the *New American Bible*. Catholic Book Publishing Corporation, 2011.

confesses that he had felt fear while exploring London to satisfy his curiosity: “Some of them [the lives of some Londoners] fascinated me. Others filled me with terror” (115).¹³

The description of the theatre where he saw Sybil acting embodies the gothic fashion, too: decadent buildings as symbols of a decadent society.¹⁴ The building and the characters inhabiting it produce a feeling of anguish. But the climax of this descriptive paragraph arrives with the introduction of the Jew, Sybil’s master.¹⁵ He is presented as a supernatural creature: “He was such a monster” (115).¹⁶ With this sentence Wilde recovers the entire gothic trend whose leading role had been performed by “monsters” and whose maximum example is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, even if in this case, the Jew could be seen as a corrupted example of Frankenstein’s creature.

Dorian Gray is ready to give up everything he has or everything he is. We have already seen how he gave it away (or, at least, promised that to the portrait). In “Chapter V” he gives everything to another beautiful cause: Sybil Vane “...to whom I have given everything that is good in me” (139).¹⁷ The fact that he only promises to give what is good can be understood in two ways: on the one hand that he still hopes to maintain something good inside himself and, on the other hand, that he does not really want to give everything to Sybil, because this “everything” already belongs to the portrait.¹⁸ Anyway, everything good remaining in Dorian is now Sybil’s. Related to this is the episode of Sybil’s death. It can be appreciated, within the first version of the novel, in “Chapter VI”, when Lord Henry arrives in Dorian’s house to inform him of the sad news. When Harry pronounces the sentence “...my letter –don’t be frightened– was to tell you that Sybil Vane is dead,” (156)¹⁹ it is understood that, with her death, she has taken everything good remaining in Dorian. From this scene on, the degradation of Dorian’s soul takes place. But there have been two previous moments when Dorian had the chance of becoming a demon: the first one is when he sees the portrait for the first time, and the second one is after Sybil’s horrid performance, when she and Dorian meet. Dorian literally mutters “You have killed my love” (144).²⁰ However, some pages

¹³ Frankel’s edition.

¹⁴ This can also be appreciated in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”.

¹⁵ Whose description reminds the reader of the creature appearing in Gustav Meyrink’s *Der Golem*, 1914.

¹⁶ Frankel’s edition.

¹⁷ Frankel’s edition.

¹⁸ Here, the painting can be considered as owner of its own conscience and will, the same as the ring created by J. R. R. Tolkien.

¹⁹ Frankel’s edition.

²⁰ Frankel’s edition.

Love is the last hope of men. In the Faustian myth, love [*Liebe*] is the only thing able to save doctor’s soul.

afterwards it is possible to appreciate a tiny trace of regret in Dorian's attitude, with his reflection about cruelty, his plan to go to see her in order to apologize, and to fulfill his promise of marriage. His "good side" will never be shown again.

Once Sybil has killed Dorian's love he goes back to his house. On his way home, the description offered by Wilde is that of a decadent image of the city, showing the vices of people, caricaturizing human beings, transforming details into gothic elements. During this journey, there is a feature which deserves to be taken into account. It is known that Dorian's changes do not have any effect on his external appearance, but hereby a background character is presented as if he knew something about Dorian's hideous new life: the cherries seller. "A white-smocked carter offered him some cherries. He thanked him, wondered why he refused to accept any money for them, and began to eat them listlessly" (146);²¹ the reason for this refusal could be due to some scarring branding Dorian has now and which can be recognized only by some people (as Cain after having killed Abel: "So the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one would kill him at sight").²² The mark is there to show the crime and to avoid any revenge. The sinner has to suffer and do penance.

But Sybil's death is not a gothic death only for Dorian, but also for her. Her death is not a random one. She commits suicide. It has to be remembered that the night the relationship became broken, she had been playing Juliet, and in the same way as Juliet is put into a tomb, [Sybil] dies:²³ "She had swallowed something by mistake, some dreadful thing they use at theatres" (157).²⁴ In Shakespeare's play it is shown how her family set Juliet's corpse in a crypt, an element very much liked and used by gothic authors (i.e. Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*). On the other hand, as she kills herself by her own hand, she cannot be saved. Her soul will be brought into hell, closing the romantic aura of the romance and its end. Dorian adds one more romantic detail to the whole: "Strange, that my first passionate love-letter should have been addressed to a dead girl," (239)²⁵ making use of the taste expressed by writers during the Romantic period. A reason why Sybil did what she did is given. According to Dorian "she acted badly because she had known the reality of love. When she discovered its unreality, she

²¹ Frankel's edition.

²² Gen. 4, 15.

²³ Both Juliet and Sybil are driven into tomb due to a substance they drink, being Sybil dead, unlike Shakespeare's character.

²⁴ Frankel's edition.

²⁵ 2006 edition.

died, as Juliet might have died,” (168)²⁶ showing that love, a feeling which is supposed to be good and to produce good effects and to bring happiness to people, is guilty of a murder. Wilde is presenting something evil beneath the mask of something good. The inner meaning of everything is what really makes it, not only its pretty looks.²⁷ Later on, a new similar situation is exposed: the moment when Dorian covers the portrait with a piece of cloth which is described as a luxury piece of tapestry:²⁸

His eye fell on a large purple satin coverlid heavily embroidered with gold, a splendid piece of late seventeenth-century Venetian work that his uncle had found in a convent near Bologna. Yes, that would serve to wrap the dreadful thing in. It had perhaps served often as a pall for the dead. Now it was to hide that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself, something that would breed horrors and yet would never die. What the worm of the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty, and eat away its grace. They would defile it, and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would be always alive. (177-178)²⁹

The most terrible thing ever created is going to be hidden by one of the most beautiful pieces of art able to be described. Again, the idea of the evil hidden under a patina of attractiveness appears here.

The changes produced in the portrait are, maybe, the most significant gothic element present in the novel: they show Dorian’s sins and corruption. The first change takes place after Dorian leaves Sybil, perhaps as a sign pointing to the fact that the painting already knows the actress’s fate and the role Dorian has played on it:³⁰

As he was passing through the library towards the door of his bedroom, his eye fell upon the portrait Basil Hallward had painted of him. He started back on surprise, and then went over to it and examined it. In the dim arrested light that struggled through the cream-coloured silk blinds, the face seemed to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly curious. (148)³¹

Later Dorian doubts if he has really seen what he thought he had seen:

Was it all true? Had the portrait really changed? Or had it been simply his own imagination that had made him see a look of evil where there had been a

²⁶ Frankel’s edition.

²⁷ This also happens with Dorian himself.

²⁸ Note that the painting is hidden in the study-room where Dorian used to be mistreated by his grandfather.

²⁹ Frankel’s edition.

³⁰ Placing the sinner and the sin in opposite positions.

³¹ Frankel’s edition.

look of joy? Surely a painted canvas could not alter? The thing was absurd. It would serve as a tale to tell Basil some day. It would make him smile. (153)³²

But the truth is that the painting changes and its modifications are so accurate that they are adequate to each crime Dorian commits. For instance, when he breaks up with Sybil only an evil expression appears, but when Basil is killed, a red strip, the symbol of blood, is added to the image; and when Dorian tries his first “good action” after a life of perversity (the sparing of Hetty), a new expression is added: hypocrisy. Dorian wants to convince himself and the picture (his soul) of the goodness of his act: “It was an unjust mirror, this mirror of his soul that he was looking at. Vanity? Curiosity? Hypocrisy? Had there been nothing more in his renunciation than that? There had been something else. At least he thought so. But who could tell?” (2011:250). Some chapters before, Wilde had already compared it with a mirror, “the most magical of mirrors” (165).³³

Another element taken from gothic tradition is the opposition between spaces: the terror appears when the character is alone and, especially, when he or she is in a particular place. In Dorian’s case, this place is his own house,³⁴ and it goes on and on as the action is being transferred to the room where the painting is. This use of the spaces as the element which constructs the terrific atmosphere has been used since the first gothic works, preferring dark and narrow places in order to be able to maintain the heightened tension. A good and similar example can be found in the tale of Guy de Maupassant’s “Le Horla.”³⁵ The house is the scenario where the terror is developed, and the character only feels safe outside. There is a higher fear than this one: the horror of the painting to be discovered. Dorian knows that, if the work of art is seen by anyone, his life will be ruined, and this keeps him inside the house, taking care of the portrait, which becomes both his energy and his enslaver.³⁶ The look of the picture as a judge can be related to many popular legends and fairy tales in which a supernatural being

³² Frankel’s edition.

³³ Frankel’s edition.

This comparison affords the painting a magical character and puts it in relation with some other literary works, as for example Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson”.

³⁴ “When he stepped out in the grass, he drew a deep breath. The fresh morning air seemed to drive away all his passions” (2011:151).

³⁵ First published in 1886.

³⁶ For instance, Dorian sells his house in Algeria.

appears in order to show their witnesses their own dreadful actions, with the particularity of the proximity of death.³⁷

In the novel, the whole concourse of the action changes at a specific point; this point is when Dorian receives a book as a gift from Lord Henry. This book is entitled *Le Secret de Raoul, par Catulle Sarrazin* and the description of its plot allows it to be easily associated with a prototypical gothic novel, where the main character explores all the vices which take place around the world, and across the ages. Rivers of ink have been written about this fictional book, and it will maybe never be known which one it exactly is.³⁸ Two candidates to achieve this position could be William Beckford's *Vathek* or Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus*.³⁹ Dorian is overwhelmed by the poisonous effect of this book: "For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the memory of the book" (187);⁴⁰ and, during his last conversation with Harry, the book is said to have been like a poison for the young man: "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" (299).⁴¹ The book tells the story of a dreadful life that, at the end, becomes Dorian's own.

In "Chapter IX" (XI within the 1891 version) a vast description of the objects Dorian has been collecting for years is provided. This, besides being a work of aesthetics, also offers some gothic details which contribute to building the atmosphere. For instance, the collection of Catholic embroideries and ornaments he gathered was chosen due to the meaning they had in relation to the daily sacrifice in Mass, "more awful than all the sacrifices of the antique world" (194).⁴² Dorian is not convinced of the religious principles underlying the Roman ritual, he is only interested in the notion of sacrifice (the representation of a terrible murder) performed every day at every single place in the world. It is also said that he collected some weapons and strange musical instruments, brought from the most distant areas of the world, from very different

³⁷ One of these legends could be "the shadow", very popular and well-known in places such as the south of Spain or Argentina, where it is acknowledged as "*enlutado*" [in mourning] due to the external appearance it uses to take.

³⁸ It will never probably be discovered if Wilde had in mind a particular book or if it was just a creation of his imagination for his novel.

³⁹ Rachilde (1860-1953) was the pen-name of Marguerite Vallette-Eymery, a French author who was related with the decadents' group. Her novel *Monsieur Venus* was first published in 1884 in Brussels.

⁴⁰ Frankel's edition.

⁴¹ 2006 edition.

⁴² Frankel's edition.

cultures, some of them with a dreadful past: “and flutes of human bones such as Alfonso de Ovalle heard in Chili” (196).⁴³

Dorian had not only been cursed when the painting was finished and he pronounced those already famous words of submission. London is neither blind nor deaf to his life and people start rumoring. In meetings, some gentlemen leave when he arrives. Some ladies are taken away from social life (as Lord Henry’s sister). It is also well known what the end of those close to Dorian will be. One of them is Alan Campbell (whose past is also questioned), but another example is found in Adrian Singleton (1891 version), now an opium addict with neither hope nor a future. It would be considered as normal if all those had cursed Dorian, but the hatred for him goes further: “It was said that even sinful creatures who prowl the streets at night had cursed him as he passed by, seeing in him a corruption greater than their own, and knowing but too well the horror of his real life” (203).⁴⁴

The experiment performed by Alan Campbell to destroy Basil’s corpse can be interpreted as a sample of the new sciences which were being developed at the late XIX century.⁴⁵ These evolved disciplines contributed, too, to create new gothic trends, by introducing new elements which can provoke horror. Alan’s experiment can also be seen as a homage Oscar Wilde was paying to Dr. Frankenstein. Both were doctors dealing with dead bodies: Victor Frankenstein with the purpose of creating life and Mr. Campbell in order to preserve his own (task in which he fails, as it is known) and to allow Dorian’s to continue.

The last gothic element appearing in the novel is the destruction of the portrait and the “death” of Dorian. It is with the same knife that takes Basil’s life was taken with which the painting is destroyed. Finally the actual guilt is getting its reward; finally Dorian is being a victim of the justice he had anticipated. The word “death” has been written within inverted commas because there is doubt about the end: is it the real Dorian who lies dead next to the picture with a knife in his heart? Or, is it only an image of his soul, now clean and pure again, as it can be observed on the canvas? Because, at the beginning of the first published version, Lord Henry describes Dorian as unfolded: “Before which Dorian? The one who is pouring the tea for us, or the one in the picture?”

⁴³ Frankel’s edition.

⁴⁴ Frankel’s edition.

⁴⁵ Those interested in this topic should see Gray, Frances: *York Notes Advanced. The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London: Longman, 2009.

(207).⁴⁶ The last scene in the novel shows Dorian's servants recognizing the corpse by examining the rings he is wearing, maybe a last wink to the aesthetic established by Wilde.

In conclusion, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* evolves as a first-rate gothic novel among the productions of the Victorian Age. Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry are, like Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde, Dr. Moreau or Jack "the Ripper", products of Victorian (im)morality and "its inherent dualities" (Babilas 119). Besides, *The Picture* cannot be traced only as a Gothic novel since it overspreads the boundaries of the genre including many references concerning Wilde's cultural, educational and religious background. Aestheticism and Dandyism are two terms which entangle the Gothicism along the development of *Dorian Gray's* plot, ending in a fine example of compositional harmony. Dorian Gray, character and novel, goes from showing the darkest profundities of the human soul to describing the most marvelous handicrafts ever produced, reflecting on the blank paper the unfolded soul of *fin-de-siècle* British society.

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⁴⁶ 2006 edition.

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ABSTRACT

The Picture of Dorian Gray was composed at some point between 1889 and 1890, but never published. Finally, in 1890, a censored version saw the light of day in the July issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. A year later, and after a huge scandal, Ward, Lock and Company released a new edition of the novel, enlarged in seven chapters and with the addition of a preface. However, none of these published versions were able to keep the gothic imagery of the "lost" one, only discovered in 2011.

Within his *first* novel, Oscar Wilde created one of the most outstanding examples of Victorian gothic literature, summoning elements both of Radcliffean tradition, religion, and *fin de siècle* aesthetics. The text is filled with gothic elements, picturing a fine and powerful image of both Wildean aestheticism, and nineteenth-century decadence.

The main goal of this essay is to analyze how the gothic elements have evolved within the different versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. To do that, the three existing versions of the novel will be used, making a reference to each of the sources Wilde was likely bearing in mind when composing his only full-length fiction work.

KEYWORDS

The Picture of Dorian Gray, aesthetics, Gothic, religion, *fin de siècle*.

RESUMEN

Oscar Wilde compuso *The Picture of Dorian Gray* en algún momento entre 1889 y 1890, pero esta primera versión nunca sería publicada. Finalmente, en 1890, y tras una previa censura, una nueva versión vio la luz del día en el número de julio de la revista norteamericana *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. Un año después, y tras un gran escándalo, Ward, Lock and Company lanzó una nueva edición de la novela, con siete capítulos más y un prefacio. Sin embargo, ninguna de las versiones que se publicaron a finales del siglo XIX mantiene la viveza del imaginario gótico de la versión "perdida", descubierta y publicada en 2011.

Con esta obra, Oscar Wilde consiguió crear uno de los ejemplos más sobresalientes de literatura gótica victoriana, aunando elementos de la tradición radcliffeana, la religión y la estética finisecular. El texto en su conjunto está henchido de elementos góticos, describiendo una poderosa imagen que mezcla la estética wildenana y la decadencia decimonónica.

El principal objetivo de este artículo es analizar cómo los elementos góticos han evolucionado en las diferentes versiones de *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Para ello, se utilizarán las tres versiones existentes, haciendo referencia a los recursos que Wilde debió tener en mente a la hora de componer su única obra larga de ficción.

PALABRAS CLAVE

The Picture of Dorian Gray, estética, literatura gótica, religión, *fin de siècle*.