THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY: REREADING THE FORMLESSNESS AND INDETERMINACY OF THE GENRE AS AN ANTI-COLONIAL STANCE OF OSCAR WILDE

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Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* presents an interesting amalgamation of elements. Wilde has clearly brought into action a high literary mode that is deliberate, ornate, has a consciously artistic language and a high sense of style.

The novel has the base elements of the classic gothic genre. Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines the tradition of gothic novel as a “story of terror and suspense usually set in a gloomy old castle or monastery” (106). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* underlines each and every feature of the traditional gothic novel. The gothic is a genre that changes over time. The traditional elements usually possess but new characters always colour the genre to bring out the spirit and flavour of the time. Kelly Hurley observes, “gothic is a cyclical genre that reemerges in times of cultural stress and order to negotiate critical issues for its readership by working through them in displaced (sometimes in supernaturalised form).”(194) He continues to say that when a nation is exposed to internal or external threats it often cannot be clearly defined, the people begin to feel uncomfortable. The gothic novel then actually helps these people in distress by giving concrete shape to their fears. Wilde’s choice of this form after it had been quite forgotten might have its roots in this cause. Wilde hence uses the genre quite justifiably to foreground the instability, fear, the chaotic world order of the colonised Ireland, just as Punter in his books writes “... the gothic emerges directly from changes in the cultural emphasis of the eighteenth century. It stood
for the contrast between the old-fashioned and the modern, the barbaric as opposed to the civilised.” (7-8)

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde has lucid base elements of the classic gothic genre. Right from the very onset the backdrop and the atmosphere puts on a very eerie, wraithlike colour. The scene describing the room where Dorian hid the painting reads, “...they walked softly, as men do instinctively at night. The lamp cast fantastic shadows on the wall and the staircase. Rising wind made some of the windows rattle.” (229) The same otherworldly eerie feeling is conveyed when Dorian attempts to visit the opium den, “a cold rain began to fall and the blurred street-lamps looked ghastly in the dripping mist. The public houses were just closing, and men and women were clustering in broken groups around their doors. From some of the bars came the sound of horrible laughter. In others, drunkards brawled and screamed.” (270) Lord Henry Wotton, a wicked malicious man who often uttered aphorisms uses his wisdom to seduce and spoil Dorian with his new Hedonism and his immoral opinions. No doubt, an impersonation and an incarnation of the devil, his handing over the evil yellow book is what brings in the final loss of Dorian’s natural innocence and makes him a murderer. The famous episode of a character selling its soul to the devil as in Goethe’s Faust has been recreated, but unlike Faust, Dorian fails to redeem himself. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, Dorian sells his soul to the devil in the very first chapter when he unconsciously says “I would give my soul for the privilege of being young for the rest of my life.” (43) He later wants to gain absolution and lead a normal life again but fails and receives the punishment.

The old school room, Dorian’s playroom and study too have been attributed with a number of uncanny details. Dorian usually used to keep himself locked for hours in that room as a kid. He reopens the room when he needs a new place to hide away the painting, to conceal the fact that he had sold away his soul. Oscar Wilde’s description of the room is quite characteristically gothic- faded tapestries, old books, medieval-like setting, windows rattling in the wind, faint smell of mildew. The main supernatural element, the aging of the picture makes the whole plot-work. The ending of the novel when Dorian dies, his dead-body lies decayed wrinkled and rotten, the portrait recovers its old stage magically. This marvellous phenomenon is plain gothic.

The motif of a doppelganger appears quite regularly in Gothicism. In The Picture of Dorian Gray this motif doesn’t appear directly in its original form but the eerie relationship that Dorian shares with the portrait certainly calls in the vision of the doppelganger effect so integral to Gothicism. Dorian’s outward appearance but Basil’s ‘fantastic’ painting keeps deteriorating according to the fall and degeneration of Dorian’s moral character.
The introduction of horror and violence in the text has been completely sudden and unexpected. When the portrait all decayed and degenerated is revealed to Basil, Dorian states he feels a sudden wave of hatred and repulsion towards the creator of the picture, “…the mad passion of a haunted animal stirred within him and he loathed the man … more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything.” (235) The subsequent item described is the brutal, heartless murder of Basil. The process of Dorian has been described with the most grotesque details. “Something began to trickle down the floor and sick, uncanny lack of feelings in Dorian while murdering the man is actually frightening and eerie.” (235) The novel has other integral characteristics of a gothic prose. Though enlightenment had already touched the society and the desire for knowledge was threatening the ideas of the Church, when The Picture of Dorian Gray was written the status of science was still in speculation. Science was still depicted as something bad and sinister. (Novels like Frankenstein, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde underlines the same facts time and again.) In The Picture of Dorian Gray, like other gothic novels the theme of an evil effect of science appears. When Dorian blackmails Alan Campbell to destroy Basil’s body by dissolving it, Campbell’s equipment is described in a diabolical way, “the servant entered carrying a large mahogany chest of chemicals, with a long coil of steel and platinum wire and two rather curiously shaped iron clamps.” (255) The sense of mystery underlines the description of the scientific procedure. The iron clamps, the heavy chest, recalls the vile machinery and torture-devices of other prose of Gothicism. Dorian Gray for Lord Henry Wotton was no more than a subject of a scientific experiment. The way Lord Henry Wotton talks about Dorian Gray gives away his evil intentions; “…and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hand and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results.” “I hope Dorian will make this girl his wife and then suddenly become fascinated by some other woman. He would be a wonderful study.” (112) Lord Henry Wotton liked to ‘vivisect’ people, all these scenes prove how Lord Henry Wotton never respected the dignity of people, but rather used them for his own interest. He is clearly the gothic villain.

The yellow book adds a very strong gothic colour to the text. Dorian Gray finds the tenth chapter totally fascinating. He himself accepts “he forgot how the time was going”. (184) The mysterious book lets ”all sins of the world pass in dumb show before him.” (183) He cannot free himself from it, or what makes it even worse is he does not even try to. Books do fascinate, but not to the extent as the yellow book. The yellow book is just a step forward in the transformation of Dorian Gray into a murderer with no remorse. Among the many reflective symbols, the most essential was Gray’s portrait, which was but a true picture of his soul. It later quite supernaturally becomes the indicator of the decay of
Dorian. It becomes the spokesperson of Dorian’s true personality by altering its appearance according to the complicated corruption and degeneration of his mind.

Dorian’s casual artistic creations quite marvelously reflected his feeling of guilt and fear after he had mindlessly murdered Basil as soon as he was alone, he lit a cigarette and began sketching upon pieces of paper drawing human faces. Suddenly he realised that every face he drew seemed to have a fantastic likeness to Basil Hallward. The novel along with its gothic features has as its main thread a series of mythical elements that are easier to look past or not to look deeper into. The greatest example would be from the book of Genesis, the allusion to the temptation and fall of man and the legend of Faust selling his soul to the devil. In the second chapter the novel strongly alludes to the temptation myth of God’s first creation in the Garden of Eden, Adam. It takes place in the metaphorical garden of Basil Hallward, when the creator of the painting (just like God), has created the masterpiece, the picture of Dorian Gray in all its perfection. He, like Adam is innocent, pure and beautiful. Lord Henry here plays the serpent, tempting him to ignore the commandments of the God quite subtly and shrewdly. Basil falls prey to the temptation and has the ‘historical’ fall. The other allusion is to the myth of Faust who sells his soul to Lucifer, the devil. Dorian here though unconsciously ends up doing the same in lust for imperishable beauty.

The Picture of Dorian Gray can also be called an incredibly interesting psychological experiment on the depths of human vanity. Oscar Wilde brilliantly studies how one defines morality and conscience and how one shapes one’s soul. The novel contains the depth and maturity of a psychological novel as well. He deftly explores how Dorian, the exquisitely beautiful is almost hypnotically deceived and in frenzy and under the ill-influence of Lord Henry Wotton makes a feverish error of choosing beauty over the purity of his soul. Gray reasserts what the scriptures insist that any pursuit for the satisfaction of the senses leads to misery. He tries to refrain from heedlessly acting on temptations but fails. Wilde explores subtly how though it is not in our nature to rebel against our senses; one must suppress them and contrive the necessity to act rationally. Dorian Gray, the protagonist of Wilde was thoroughly under the wrong impression that a man achieves the highest sense of purpose and integrity if he were to focus on pleasing his senses with no thought to suppression. He hardly realises that in doing this he awakens the evil Mr. Hyde in himself and feeds him with his vanity, materialism and callousness, the psychological turmoil has been well dealt by Wilde. He analyses how the pleasure of sadism corrupts Dorian; with every sin, every materialist coding the masterpiece of Basil turns evil, ugly and aged. The horrific terrorising transformation that Dorian could witness is shown as a metaphor mirroring the deterioration of his soul. As much as Dorian desires
pleasure, he ends up being completely blind for it. The last part of the novel brings out the turmoil in Dorian who soullessly goes on to murder Basil; from where he was, there was no looking back. He loses the body too, which had already sold out its soul, never getting a scope for redemption.

The novel doesn’t only present Gothicism and psychoanalysis but is also Wilde’s own take on philosophy of morality. Wilde gives the hypothesis how the mind and the body should be separate and crafts a clever prose to convincingly disprove his own hypothesis asserting that the mind and the body need to harmonise and stay in tune. Dorian Gray is a story of decadence. Dorian’s decadence was gradually achieved through his appreciation of immoral arts and finding artistic value in immoral affairs. Throughout Dorian’s inner struggle between good and evil, his moral degeneration starts right from the point when he starts believing in the wisdom of sin. His final step towards total decadence came when he brutally ends the life of Hallward, is reasonable to propose that all purposes of gothic elements ultimately come to serve one theme, the futility of the nature of our lives.

The strong conflict between morality and decadence is one of the important motives of the novel. The portrait of Dorian gradually brings out the tragic lives of the three main characters and ties them together. The struggle, the pain, the conflict and dilemma is quite evident throughout. The instability in the mind of the sinner, the tempest in the mind of the protagonist to reject virtue and follow a journey of decadence is but a portrayal of the unstable socio-political world order of the colonized. The novel is full of catastrophic ends, death, mental and physical degeneration, crime and punishment, which reflects the instability of Irish colonisation and the chaos not only inside the text but also in the external world. Oscar Wilde has taken a strong anti-colonial stance in the book. His anti-colonial stance is also visible not only through the theme and the gothic description but also through the formlessness and indeterminacy of the genre. One can’t be certain of the genre of the text; the text has clearly the elements of a gothic novel psychological novel, allegory and a mythological piece. It is indicative of how Irish modernism is trying not adhering to any set rules. Ambiguities are clearly being celebrated. This is a celebration against constraints of the period of colonisation, a celebration through formlessness and inclusion of various structural elements of prose within one form- a celebration of Irish modernism!
CITATIONS: -


