

Elements of a traditional gothic novel in the picture of dorian gray



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The Picture of Dorian Gray, by Oscar Wilde, is a classic example of a traditional Gothic novel, despite the fact that it isn't scary. Gothic literature received its name because many examples of the genre were set during the late-medieval, or Gothic, period. It became popular in England, Germany, and the United States during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Buzwell). What many people don't know about Gothic novels is that they are often based off of Romanticism, a validation of strong emotion and imagination. Basically, Gothic novels combine horror and romance, and do so in a psychological way. A Gothic novel is defined as a novel that deals with frightening or supernatural objects. Through this, it becomes visible already that this story will end tragically. Gothic novels tend to take place in gloomy settings such as old buildings (particularly castles or rooms with secret passageways), dungeons, or towers that serve as a background for the mysterious circumstances (Andersson). When Dorian attempts to visit the opium den to get rid of Basil's body, we can clearly see an example of this. "A cold rain began to fall, and the blurred street-lamps looked ghastly in the dripping mist. The public-houses were just closing, and dim men and women were clustering in broken groups round their doors. From some of the bars came the sound of horrible laughter. In others, drunkards brawled and screamed." (Wilde 128) Another eerie environment from the novel is the secret room in which the yellow book is locked. The room contains old books, mice, faded tapestries, and an odd smell of mildew. Most people would not prefer to be in such a setting because it is often spooky and leads to death. Throughout the story, the most obvious example of a Gothic novel is the use of the devil as a symbol. Lord Henry represents the devil by using his wisdom and the poisonous yellow book to corrupt Dorian, who loses his innocence

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and later becomes a murderer. An interesting piece of evidence to this is that Henry is often called Harry. This appears to refer to “ Old Harry”, another name for the devil (Zakes). “ I would give my soul” in exchange for the privilege of staying youthful for the rest of his life (Wilde 19).

Unknowingly, Dorian sells his soul to the devil. He eventually realizes that he wants to be normal again, but fails, and receives his punishment: death. As an appeal to the pathos and sympathy of the reader, the female characters often face events that leave them fainting, terrified, screaming, and/or sobbing. A lonely, pensive, and oppressed heroine is often the central figure of the novel, so her sufferings are even more pronounced and the focus of attention (Junger). The women suffer all the more because they are often abandoned, left alone (either on purpose or by accident), and have no protector at times. Dorian is supposed to be Sybil’s “ Prince Charming.”

(Wilde 46) The connection shown is that Prince Charming saves his damsel in distress, a beautiful young woman who requires a hero to rescue her. Sybil believes that Dorian has rescued her from acting, which she poured her heart and soul into because that was the closest she could get to being in love. Finally, she is free and doesn’t have to act; she actually loves Dorian.

On the other hand, Dorian does not love Sybil anymore. He was infatuated with her beautiful acting and when that disappeared, so did Dorian’s love for her. In most Gothic novels, science is used for a bad purpose. One time it is seen is when Dorian blackmails Alan Campbell, a scientist, into getting rid of Basil’s dead body by dissolving it. His equipment is described as “ a large mahogany chest of chemicals.” (Wilde 120) The main way that science is used is through Lord Henry, who treats Dorian as the subject of an

experiment. “ And certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hand, and

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seemed to promise rich and fruitful results.” (Wilde 43) On top of this, Lord Henry says, “ I hope that Dorian will make this girl his wife.... and then suddenly become fascinated by someone else. He would make a wonderful study.” (Wilde 54) We are led to believe that Lord Henry is entertained by Dorian. For this reason, he has befriended him. Lastly, supernatural elements are clearly present in the novel. That would be anything of, relating to, or being above and beyond what is natural (Andersson). Often times, the events are unexplainable. In this case, it is simply impossible for a picture to change by itself, as it is for Dorian to stay youthful forever. Despite the facts, these things somehow happen anyways. Furthermore, Dorian dies and his dead body instantly becomes old, while the picture returns to its original state. All in all, a traditional Gothic novel consists of many elements. These include eerie environments, the devil, a damsel in distress, science used for a bad purpose, and the supernatural. Some people may argue that this novel does not represent a Gothic genre, but all of the important factors are easily visible in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Though this isn't a very scary story, it can definitely be classified as a traditional Gothic Horror novel.