

# Linked imagery in 'dracula' and 'the picture of dorian gray'



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Throughout the Gothic novel *Dracula*, Stoker uses symbology and imagery to reveal social anxieties and fears of the late Victorian era, for example the use of animalistic description and blood. Wilde, in his own Gothic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* uses imagery to explore the nature of man, especially in relation to sin, pleasure, and influence. These differing uses of somewhat similar devices show how sharply these two novels diverge. While Stoker focuses mainly on the social fears of the time, such as the degradation of man into beast, Wilde intensively explores the psyches of his troubled characters.

One of the dominant themes within *Dracula* is duality, a fear of the double or doppelganger. In *Dracula* there is a struggle in defining the blurred lines between man and animal, a struggle conveyed through the physical appearance of Count Dracula himself. The character's introduction is fraught with animal-like descriptions. He is described to have "moved impulsively", acting on instinct as an animal would as opposed to conforming to morals that dominated 19th century Britain. The count's hair curls in its "own profusion", he has "peculiarly sharp white teeth", and his ears are "extremely pointed", like those of a wolf. It is evident that *Dracula* is an example of the liminal: he is right on the threshold of devolution from man into beast. This hints at the Victorian fear and belief that just as man could evolve (in light of Darwin's then recently released theories) man could also devolve. Whereas Stoker employs the Gothic motif of the double to divide man and beast, Wilde uses the double to divide body and soul. The most obvious example within the novel is the portrait that Basil has painted, and what it is symbolic of. As Dorian wishes, the painting grows old and records

the ill doings of the boy, and he, in turn, receives eternal youth and beauty, thus dividing the body and soul. Dorian can then indulge in the pleasure of his sins and live out his newly found hedonistic lifestyle whilst keeping his body, consequently, the portrait alters and begins to show signs of "cruelty". This is partly to do with the Victorian ideal of keeping up appearances, that it is better to look good rather than to actually be good. It observed that despite Dorian's vile character, his immediate influence over others because of his physical beauty is still great. Perhaps Wilde's use of the double reveals the impracticality of his own homosexual lifestyle, the fact that he would need to hide his lifestyle and repress homosexual tendencies in order to keep up public appearances.

Another prominent, related theme within both novels is that of seduction. Within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, imagery of music or musical instruments is used. When Dorian meets Henry for the first time he's described to have a "low, musical voice". Sybil is also described as lulling her audience and making them as "responsive as a violin": she had "long drawn music" in her voice. Wilde frequently uses imagery of music in association with seduction, particularly in voices, as a literary allusion to Greek mythology, in particular the Sirens which feature in Homer's *Odyssey*. (Sirens were creatures which enticed sailors to their destruction with their irresistibly beautiful singing.) In the former case, Henry is able to seduce Dorian with his influence, which is the irresistible "singing" that ultimately leads to Dorian's destruction. Stoker also makes use of musical imagery, for example during Jonathan's seduction by the Count's brides. They have "such a silvery, musical laugh": an

irresistible vibrato in their voice seduces Jonathan and leads him to wait in anticipation of what's to come (again, an allusion to the Odyssey).

Wilde also offers up the symbology and imagery of flowers of many kinds, all of which carry different sentiments and illustrate different meanings. First, in the beginning of the novel, Lord Henry "plucked a pink-petalled daisy..." and "...pulling the daisy to bits", disposed of the flower. This imagery of the destruction of the flower relates to the theme of influence; specifically, it illustrates the effect of Henry's influence on the premature Dorian, represented as the daisy. The "pink" colour of the daisy perhaps makes Dorian somewhat more effeminate than the other two men, potentially adding to his natural beauty which could be likened to that of a flower. The narrative also conveys a sense of carelessness on Henry's part, unaware of the damaging effects of his influence on the young, impressionable Dorian. The flowers within the novel are used frequently in association with Sybil Vane. The "petals of her lips" are mentioned along with her description of a "pale rose". The "petals of her lips" suggest a delicacy to her character, a fragility; the description of "pale rose" appears, converting innocence, impressionability and purity. These meanings could foreshadow that Dorian will have a damaging impact on Sybil, just as Henry had a damaging impact on Dorian. The lips could also bring connotations of strong sexual desire, a love based purely on lust, and to a certain degree, Dorian's narcissistic vanity. Furthermore, the flowers in the novel carry specific symbolic meaning relevant to their positioning. In chapter seven, when Dorian has disposed of Sybil carelessly (much like the Daisy that Henry listlessly tore apart) and is walking through London, many images of flowers appear on his walk, helping

the reader interpret what Dorian's emotions are in relation to the confrontation with Sybil. " Huge carts filled with nodding lilies" rumble down the street, " lilies" being symbolic of hatred in some cases. Also, there are boys carrying crates of " striped tulips" which convey love. And finally, the boys are carrying " yellow and red roses" as well, the former carrying meaning of a broken heart and apology.

Other symbols relate to the events of Wilde and Stoker's era. During the nineteenth century, medical science was making progress, perhaps one of the most important developments during that time. The scientists invented a new science based on blood which was, according to them, connected to racial and sexual issues. For the Victorians, an exchange of blood was symbolic of an exchange of seminal fluid, making blood highly sexualized. Indeed, Stoker uses blood as imagery for sexual encounters and loss of innocence and virginity. In chapter seven, when Lucy is first bitten by the Count, Mina arrives to find that " on the band of her nightdress was a drop of blood". We know that the exchange of blood is a sexual act, and the drop of blood on the " white" nightdress is symbolic of a deflowering of the demure Lucy, a loss of her virginity. Following this, Lucy continues to fall very ill and once again blood is symbolically important, this time in the form of several transfusions. Van Helsing states that she will " die for sheer want of blood": with the connotations of blood already explained, this conveys a certain sexual appetite, which will quickly be quenched with continuous transfusions from three men. In effect, Lucy is quenching a sexual hunger by having bodily transactions of blood and thus having sexual relations with many men. This provokes the Victorian fear of female sexuality, which contradicts the

widely accepted belief that women were meant to be passive during intercourse and not enjoy sexual pleasure of any kind.

One final symbol that both Gothic novels use is that of the book in relation to the theme of forbidden knowledge. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Henry gives Dorian a mysterious “yellow book” to read, undoubtedly linked to his beliefs and ideals in line with new hedonism. The “yellow book” is self-evidently the strange and perverse French novel by Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature* (1884), a novel based around French decadence. This yellow book is the symbol of forbidden knowledge for Dorian, containing the theories of new hedonism that will ultimately lead to Dorian’s demise. Much like in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Dracula* also contains a book of forbidden knowledge. It is the journal kept by Harker (chapters 1-4). Harker gives Mina the book, since he has forgotten all that had happened to him since his brain fever, and asks her to “share [his] ignorance” and not read it but instead keep it safe. In a departure from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the discovery of the knowledge of vampires (when Mina eventually reads the diary) is very beneficial, a means of preventing a downfall. Both of these forms of forbidden knowledge are underpinned by the theories of Sigmund Freud, who argued that once you transgress and gain forbidden knowledge you can’t ever return to the state you were in before that discovery, that you simply can’t forget. This is true in both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dracula* and calls to mind the story of Genesis. After Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge, they could never return to the purely blissful and ignorant state they were in before, and so neither can the characters from *Dracula* or *Dorian Gray*.