

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

**Academic Year: 2019-2020**

**Coordinator: Mireia Aragay (G1)**

**FEMININITY AND FEMALE PRESENCE IN OSCAR  
WILDE'S *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY***

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Barcelona, 11 de juny de 2020





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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the issues of gender transgression and female presence in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The three main characters of the novel, given their aesthetic principles, celebrate beauty, especially beauty in men. The male characters show effeminacy not only because of the type of feminine beauty they acclaim and desire, but also because of their tastes and acts.

However, the importance of effeminacy in men brings about the lack of female presence in the narration. Women are silenced and eradicated from the text, as a consequence of the naturalism that decadent authors qualified women with. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to explore the novel's male characters' effeminacy, which was deemed immoral during the *fin de siècle*, and to show how their effeminacy affected the presence of women in Wilde's novel.

Key Words: Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, decadent literature, *fin de siècle*, gender, effeminacy.

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## RESUM

Aquest treball consisteix en explorar els temes de la transgressió de gènere i la presència de la dona a la novel·la d'Oscar Wilde *El Retrat de Dorian Gray*. Els tres protagonistes de la novel·la demostren feminitat; no només pel tipus de bellesa femenina que aclamen i desitgen, sinó que també pels seus gustos i accions.

Tanmateix, la importància de la feminitat en els homes provoca la manca de presència de la dona en la narració. Les dones estan silenciades i eradicades del text com a conseqüència del naturalisme amb què els autors decadentistes les qualificaven. L'objectiu d'aquest treball és, per tant, explorar la feminitat dels homes en la novel·la, que va ser condemnada d'immoral durant el *fin de siècle*, i demostrar com la seva feminitat va afectar la presència de dones en la novel·la de Wilde.

Paraules clau: Oscar Wilde, *El Retrat de Dorian Gray*, literatura decadentista, *fin de siècle*, gènere, feminitat.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important novels of the *fin de siècle* is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written by Oscar Wilde. It was first published in 1890 in *Lippincott Magazine*. The editor of the magazine deleted some parts as he feared the story indecent. In 1891 Wilde lengthened the story, which was published as a novel, but despite the fact that the author had edited some of the content for which the novel had been highly criticised and had added a Preface to explain the novel's amorality, it was still highly criticised. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is now one of the most highly acclaimed novels of the *fin de siècle* and one that strongly reflects the concerns of the period. The lack of female presence (clearer in the first edition), the intrinsic feeling of degeneration, the need of a solely male space, the aesthetic amorality and the dark London depicted in it make it a novel worth analysing as regards the shift – in terms of gender relations – of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Britain. The aim of this paper is to analyse the take on gender that the novel depicts: its decadent construction of what makes a valuable man or woman in the frame of the *fin de siècle*. The topics of effeminacy and dandyism in *Dorian Gray* have been thoroughly analysed by scholars and critics, but I found that its female presence – or lack of it – has generally been overlooked. That is why this paper will focus not only on the transgressive effeminacy and sexuality that the male characters present, but also on the construction of the few female ones so as to establish that, in fact, the lack or silencing of female characters is relevant to the decadent literary production of the *fin de siècle*. In order to justify this, I will analyse three other *fin de siècle* novels as regards gender: *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Great God Pan* and *Dracula*.

## 2. THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE* AND THE INSTABILITY OF VICTORIAN THOUGHT

*Fin de siècle* is a French term coined in the 1880s in France. It is used to refer to the last decades of a century, specially the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Characterized by metaphors of death, degeneration and decay, the 19<sup>th</sup> century *fin de siècle* in Great Britain were troubling years for the established Victorian society. Class, race and gender roles were put into doubt, and the anxiety of the end of the century also brought with itself the thought of the end of a culture that was deemed obsolete by part of their society, and the birth of a new one.

The idea of progress was central for Victorian society. *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, written by Charles Darwin and published in 1859, was a ground-breaking text that heightened humanity as an especially evolved species and allowed discourses on topics such as race and gender, centring the debate on the progress of humanity, and its being the fruit of several changes that helped its evolution into a better, greater being.<sup>1</sup> Such discourses were used to a certain extent to justify the British ‘race’ as a superior one.

Regardless of these established thoughts on progress, the structures of empire, gender, class, race and sexuality in Victorian society were brought forward and questioned at the end of the century. At an age when family was sacred and sex a taboo, brothels, sexual scandals, opium dens and prostitution were extremely popular (a surgeon specialized in female venereal diseases named William Acton estimated there was a total of 2,825 brothels and 8,600 prostitutes just within the Metropolitan Police District of London in 1857 (Flanders, 2014)). There were also anxieties around their concept of race. In 1851 there was a total of 350,000 people living in England and Wales that had been born elsewhere. (Migration Watch UK, 2014). The 1905 Aliens Act was a consequence of the great immigration from East Europe, as it tried to limit the amount of people migrating to Great Britain and Ireland, especially those of Jewish origin (Migration Watch UK, 2014). Pushed by the high rates of unemployment towards the end of the century, there rose a feeling against immigration and non-British people and thus a stress

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas of progress and rationality were brought forward by the intellectual and cultural movement of the Enlightenment, which started in the last decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Enlightenment heightened the ideas of logic, reason, intellectual freedom and human progress. One of the theorists with ideas about progress or social development is David Hume. Some of his writings focused on how innocent luxuries are needed to a certain extent so as to progress as an intellectual society.

on the differentiation of the British. They perceived themselves as a superior, better 'race', but the increase of things such as poverty and unemployment only pointed towards a degeneration of the Victorian society itself, a getting away from a pure, modern society that embraced progress. Terms such as "unemployment", "feminism" and "homosexuality" were first used in England in the 1880s, revealing how, independently from the wished society ideal, things were shifting in reality. The blame was put on some marginal figures that were thought to be able to destroy Victorian society, such as racialized groups, the decadents, and the figure of the New Woman.

Gender and sexuality were at the core of the changes in the *fin de siècle*. The emancipation of women started to resound among society in the 1880s, when the figure of the New Woman surfaced. Before this, the Odd Woman had already been established in society as a woman who did not marry, and therefore a strange one. This figure eventually presented a threat to the established patriarchal society, for she led an independent life, and had to work to earn her own living. That not only presented a threat since women had to leave the private household, but also because they would rival men for jobs. Further, they presented single life as an opportunity never deemed attractive for women before. Their need to access jobs also brought debate towards their instruction, and some started advocating for a better education and university access, for otherwise they would not be able to support themselves financially. The Odd Woman, of course, comprehended middle-class women, since upper-class women did not need to work, and working-class women saw "marriage as their one hope of release" (Showalter, 1991, p. 20), but her existence resonated among all levels of society.

Given the dual structure of Victorian thought, soon the figure of the Odd Man appeared in contrast to that of the Odd Woman. Odd Men, though, were not regarded negatively by society. A woman who did not marry was a spinster; the Odd Man, however, would be regarded as a happy bachelor, someone who chose to remain single and who led a life of "adventure and challenge" (p. 25). Unlike the Odd Woman, he did not remain celibate, and had more 'interesting' things to do other than getting married, such as travelling, making money in the colonies, or being in the military to serve the empire. Contrarily, middle and upper-class women were not allowed to do anything else

other than look pretty, and if they did so, they were seen as a threat that needed to be eliminated to ensure the survival of such patriarchal society.<sup>2</sup>

The New Woman figure became notable in the 1880s, and was clearly seen as an anarchic figure against the establishment. The New Woman was sexually independent, a figure who *chose* not to marry rather than accept single life as a lifelong burden (as often the Odd Woman was perceived as). These New Women, also referred to as feminists, fought for women's access to higher education, and showed that women could have jobs that fell outside that of the governess. The New Woman challenged the idea of women being passive consumerists and showed they could be productive, competitive humans who were able to think for themselves. The appearance of feminists was undoubtedly not to be accepted by a great part of the citizens who accused them severely. Attacks on New Women (supported by all genders) maintained that an intellectual development of the brain affected the uterus, making it sterile with time. This portrayed the New Woman as selfish, for women who did not ensure future generations of Victorian children were socially condemned. Moreover, they were associated with hysteria (Showalter, 1991, p. 40; Glover & Kaplan, 2009, p. 159), a mental condition also linked with effeminate men that tried to diminish them.

Because of the changes among the condition of woman and femininity, there was a great agitation in relation to what constituted a man. Showalter maintains that such crisis affected "the male on all levels – economic, political, social, psychological, as producer, as power, as role, as lover" (1991, p. 9). Men's general answers to what masculinity really was were divided into several opinions. Some, named male feminists, aligned with women and fought for the end of the patriarchal system of their society. However, many others reasserted the virility of men as well as the need to establish separate spatial and ideological spheres among men and women. Scientific proof was sought in order to establish "absolute mental and physical differences between men and women" (Showalter, 1991, p. 8). Given the idea that women had submissive and selfless tempers, they were relegated to taking care of the household due to their 'predisposed' nurturing condition, whereas men were deemed more competitive and active and thus inclined to have a life outside their home to work. Another way of establishing gender boundaries

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<sup>2</sup> As I have already pointed out, this included middle and upper-class women. Working-class women had to work (mainly as textile workers or as coal miners) and thus did not have or spend their time focusing on their looks. Moreover, given the physical conditions they lived with due to their jobs, they escaped the canons of beauty imposed by middle or upper-class people.

was to evilise women, and this was epitomised in the creation of the fallen woman and the *femme fatale*, allegorized in figures such as Salomé, Circe or even Eve. Women figures such as these, regarded up to the late-Victorian period as innocent victims, were depicted as wicked from the *fin de siècle* onwards. They were represented as having a castrating power over men, which was interpreted as a consequence of their selfishness and suggestive or sexually unrestrained lives. They were, at the same time, a product of “male fantasy” (Felski, 1991, p. 1104), as it was the male desire that established such a figure, and also the one that “denie[d] her identity and agency in the very process of idealizing her” (p. 1104). Besides, the fallen woman presented a threat to British society because she would not breed “a pure, strong British ‘race’” (Ledger, 1995, p. 33) due to her independence. Attacks on the New Woman reinforced her degeneration as regards her sexuality also relating her to lesbianism, which, together with male homosexuality, rose more questions on gender boundaries that blurred masculinity and femininity. The intensification and reaffirmation of manhood and virility sought to set boundaries between men and women, and to re-establish masculinity and femininity to certain and simpler labels. This separation was not only ideological, but spatial. Clubs became highly popular in cities such as Oxford or London, where bachelors and married men sought an escape from domestic lives “to fraternize with their equals on relaxed, yet defined, terms” (Boyd, 2015, p. 730) without the presence of women. It is here, though, in the space where the male homosocial desire was fulfilled, that homosexuality also blurred such gender and sexual boundaries.

Clubland fulfilled men’s desire to create an only-male space. However, they were spaces that had “a strong homoerotic subculture” (Sheehan, 2013, p. 116). As argued above, the Odd Man, also referred to as dandy or happy bachelor, was not seen as a danger for society. However, the homosexual man did become a problem because he challenged sacred ideas of family, sexuality and gender. As with New Women, homosexual people, together with effeminate men or mannish women, were deemed part of the degeneration of the *fin de siècle*, as they created anxieties in their gender and sexual labelling.

Given its non-reproductive nature, homosexuality was regarded as being capable of destroying the empire and described as a disease – it was often related to syphilis – just like the New Woman was. Because of the emergence of these marginalized groups that challenged ideas of gender and sexuality, gender roles were reinforced, and homosexual acts were condemned. The Criminal Law Amendment Act was established in 1885 and

regulated (among other things such as prostitution) “an undefined ‘gross indecency’ between men” (Gleeson, 2007, p. 337). Oscar Wilde was condemned under this law for two years of forced labour in Reading Gaol; his trial set the ground for the establishment of such acts as immoral and illegal. As Showalter argues, “in periods of cultural insecurity, when there are fears of regression and degeneration, the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender, as well as race, class, and nationality, becomes especially intense” (1991, p. 4). However, this pressure on divergence backlashed in the communities’ acknowledgement and awareness of their existence as individuals who had a place in a community where they could accept their identity. All this was thoroughly examined and described in the late-Victorian decadent art and literature, tightly linked with the shifts of the century and of its society.

### 2.1. Fin de siècle *literature*

The Victorian literary world was a reflection of its society. Books were people’s food for thought, and had to reflect the wishes and concerns of the society that wrote and read them. The *fin de siècle* anxiety was also characterized in the literary world, and realized in a change of content and form.

The triple-decker novel, also referred to as the three-decker or three-volume novel, was the common structure for an ordinary Victorian novel. It was divided into three parts, commonly associated with beginning, middle, and end, but also with the structure of the nuclear family: father, mother and child (Showalter, 1991, p. 16). The three-decker was a novel to be read in family, and thus some topics would not be associated to it, as it was expected to be “respectable and chaste” (p. 16). Some scholars emphasise that this arose critics amongst male writers, who did not agree with the structure and topics of the common Victorian novel. They thought that established Victorian writers of the three-decker such as “Thackeray and Dickens wrote at enormous length (...) their plan is to tell everything and leave nothing to be defined” (Gissing & Showalter, 1991, p. 16). However, others such as Stetz claim that it was the apparition of certain figures that put an end to the three-volume novel: “New Women and other new realists gleefully violated the laws that required fictional narratives to end with marriage or, indeed, to provide some version of closure” (2006, p. 619). These opinions point to the fact that there was a need in the late-Victorian literary world to discuss and reflect the shifts of the end of the century

related to degeneration. In order to reproduce them in their novels, authors needed to be freed from “a dictatorship of the libraries and family readership” (Showalter, 1991, p. 16) and old structures of writing. Soon, the three-decker was rejected by these authors, who were able to write different novels, distancing them from the teleological conventions of narratology.

It should not be overlooked, however, that these were mainly male writers. As argued above, middle and upper-class women started seeking for jobs other than teaching, and one of the most affordable and according jobs for them was that of the author. By being established writers they could assert their own problems into paper and have them be read by people who could identify with them in their own house. Women writers such as the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, or George Elliot became highly prolific and successful during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women were not only present in the fictional sphere of novels but also in magazines and newspapers (magazines such as *The Woman's World*, edited by Oscar Wilde between 1887 and 1889, became popular). This success arose worry and jealousy among male authors. Generally, they did not want women to be more successful, and most importantly, they did not want them to threaten their established positions as writers. Therefore, they tried to diminish women's writing. They associated books written by women to marriage, maternity and family, and thus, a lineal style of writing that they deemed obsolete. Accordingly, the refusal of the three-decker “suggested a movement away from subjects, themes, and forms associated with femininity and maternity” (p. 17) and also the creation of a literary tradition different from that already associated with women. Thus, as happened at a social level, men also tried to differentiate the boundaries between their literary production and that of women.

These writers that sought to reflect the cultural and societal decline were associated to the degeneration of the *fin de siècle*, and referred to as decadent writers. ‘Decadence’ was a “pejorative label applied by the bourgeoisie to everything that seemed unnatural, artificial, and perverse, from Art Nouveau to homosexuality, (...) associated with cultural degeneration and decay” (p. 169). These decadent writers rejected everything that was natural, given the influence of Darwin's ideas. They deemed nature a “mechanism” (p. 169), and consequently, they reflected on experiencing and feeling the moment. They would influence artistic movements such as Aestheticism, symbolism and Art Nouveau.

The decadents were part of the group that consolidated the counterpart of the New Woman and also attacked Victorian convention. But despite the fact that both groups helped in the blurring of gender and sexual norms and society put them together as part of the degeneration of the *fin de siècle*, they did not associate. While New Women longed for the emancipation of their gender, many of the decadents rejected their fight. Women were commonly associated with nature given their historically-attributed nurturing qualities. However, the decadents stood for an “aesthetic excellence and transhistorical universality” (Ardis, 1999, p. 190) and asserted that women would not be able to think of the elevated ideas of “art, artifice, sensation and imagination” (Showalter, 1991, p. 170) given their bodily qualities, thus adopting an antinaturalist standpoint (Felski, 1991, p. 1099).

Decadent literature shows, generally, a men’s world in which the male psyche is explored. By bringing on Gothic features such as terror and fantasy, decadent writers could explore the depths and boundaries of a world created for and by men, where the presence of women was eradicated or silenced. A significant characteristic of late-Victorian Gothic was that the terror was not remote or part of a dark nature, but it came from within the English society or spread through it. Novels such as *Dracula* (1897), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-1891) or *The Great God Pan* (1896) are clear examples of this. They explore and expose the fears of men, the fear of the end of *their* empire, of dying, of *femme fatale*, of corruption, of female sexuality, etc. always related to the crisis of the moment as regards empire, class, race and gender.

In these literary works it is men’s voices that narrate or focalise the stories and that impregnate them with an overt desire for male bonding. The male homosocial desire is present throughout these narratives. In *Dracula*, the Crew of Light see their search of the vampire as a divine quest. In *The Great God Pan*, men are the victims of a hideous but also highly attractive woman, and in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the doubling of a man is the main basis of the story. Showalter establishes that many of these narratives show the desire for men to reproduce themselves without the need of a woman (1991, p. 78), doing it in either an ideological way that will go down on other generations, or by splitting themselves into new beings. The Doppelgänger grew in importance in these stories, and the power of women, whose influence could castrate a man’s ideas, strength and will, had a central role in the men’s

rejection of conventions such as marriage. Thus, the male-male relationships are central to the *fin de siècle* decadent narratives in the creation of a new homosocial male space that would enable men to socialise and share their ideas alone, without the burdens of common society and women. These stories do not pretend to hide the crisis in masculinity attributed to the period, but rather present it as a way of defending their own right to consolidate a male space. Such a space creates a solace for these men who saw themselves victims of a stagnant society and tradition.

Given the male bonding of these stories, some of the relationships in *fin de siècle* literature have been interpreted as underlying homoerotic tones, but some authors did not problematize this because they aestheticized homosexual relationships. Homosexual love was for some (such as Oscar Wilde or Olive Schreiner) the epitome of love since it showed a perfect gender, one that did not need anything from the opposite gender (p. 175). The literary world they created enabled these interpretations to be made, as they relied on secrecy and mystery that could easily be traced to homoeroticism. Homosexuality was linked to effeminate men, and that brought uncertainties to the establishment of gender boundaries sought by the Victorians. Some decadents embraced a male world that entailed feminine aspects where women were rejected. This, indeed, brought more emphasis on the degeneration and decadence in their stories.

### 3. THE IDEALS OF BEAUTY AND YOUTH IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel about looks and perception. Dorian Gray, its main character, becomes as immutable as art after he begs to have his good looks forever at his own portrait. Given that his youth and beauty make him be perceived as a pure and innocent being, he sets off on a self-development journey that will end up in his degeneration as a selfish and abhorrent being. This journey is characterized by the rejection of affection, his visits to brothels and opium dens and by extreme Hedonism. It perfectly reflects the aesthetic and decadent literary production, as the space is mainly male and the characters present a desire for it to be so. The novel also shows the shifts in the perception of masculinity in the life of feminised and idolised dandies. Dorian's looks are comparable to those of women, but are described through the lens of Aestheticism and Hellenistic ideals that focus on the veneration of the male body. In order to assess to a greater extent the purpose of the novel as well as to break down its takes on beauty and gender, I will analyse the aesthetic and Hellenist influences of the novel, as they are crucial for the understanding of the novel's take on of femininity and masculinity.

#### 3.1. *Aestheticism*

In the Victorian period, an era when basic literacy was almost universal, phenomena such as mass culture, best-sellers and books serialisation surfaced. Literature was regarded as a means to educate people on morals and traditions, and so as to reinforce the ideas of the century. This is easy traceable as regards Victorian literature for children, for instance.

However, as the end of the century approached, there rose an anxiety and a more negative approach towards the fixity of Victorian customs. As argued above, artistic groups such as the decadents conformed this counter movement. The decadents were associated with the aesthetes, who belonged to what was designed the Aesthetic movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Aesthetic movement, or Aestheticism, supported that self-development of the individual was key to progress, and to do so experimentation through the senses was indispensable, even if it entailed a transgression of the codes of society. There was not anything such as moral or immoral, but things that were pleasant or not. For the aesthetes, the existence of constructs such as fixed laws and morality was an impediment to self-develop, since they encapsulated people in labelled structures and therefore impeded them in experimenting with their identity and knowledge.

Oscar Wilde was one of the followers of the Aesthetic movement. He was greatly influenced by one of its founders, Walter Pater, his teacher at Oxford University who also inspired the decadent movement. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* both in form and content endorses Aestheticism; the “Preface” itself is a defence to aesthetic principles. In the novel, Lord Henry is specially inclined to uphold self-growth and development. One of his speeches unfolds what the aesthetes sustained:

The aim of life is self-development. (...). People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. (...) The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion – these are the two things that govern us. And yet (...) I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely (...) the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal. (...) Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us.

(Wilde, 2009, p. 22)

The “maladies” of law, religion and morals, from Lord Henry’s point of view, ought to be overthrown so as to progress as an individual, but also as a society. These ideas suggest a Hedonistic lifestyle in which the fulfilment of the senses is the main objective of life.

As regards art, the Aesthetic movement is commonly linked to the decadent French movement (followed by authors such as Baudelaire), since it argued that art existed for its own sake, and that its only aim was to procure beauty. Beauty depends on each person, therefore it is relative and does not entail moral or religious values. This is an idea explored in the “Preface” of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which supports the notion that all artistic forms convey only beauty and no morality. Hence, the last line reads “All art is quite useless” (p. 4), for art’s only purpose is to be beautiful art. As Lord Henry says, “art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations” (p. 228).

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is an aesthetic work because it favours self-development, but also because it focuses on the ideas of beauty and youth, which both help in the self-development of the main character. Dorian Gray is constantly described as someone whose beauty and youth are his whole self. People describe him as having a “boyish smile” (p. 152), or being “marvellous” (p. 26), qualities which give him “infinite grace” (p. 152). Dorian is constantly reminded that beauty and youth are everything worth

having, and that they eventually fade. This anxiety over ending and time, which is intrinsic to the *fin de siècle* decadence, is what makes Dorian wish he had the unmovable attributes of the picture, of art, to never grow “old, and horrible, and dreadful” (p. 30). Moreover, there is a dual characteristic as regards the topics of beauty and youth in the novel. Being good, pure and kind is related to being young and good-looking, whereas being old is related to boredom or evil. Thus, beauty and youth are Dorian’s disguise in his journey to degeneration. Because of his good looks, people read him as someone pure, incapable of doing evil, which is what enables Dorian to exert his extreme Hedonism.

Dorian Gray’s self-development, though, is problematized by the end he meets. Despite the novel being one that belongs to the Aesthetic movement, it does present a clear moral that seems to go against the search for the self. Wilde himself said that the novel “is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment” (Wilde, 1982, p. 246), which is against the aesthetic idea of art for art’s sake, and also against the ideas expressed in the “Preface” of the novel. This presents a clear paradox in the novel, as the first half reflects a similar structure to that of the Bildungsroman, the story of someone who finds out who he really wants to be despite what society tells him to be (there are many instances in the novel where external people urge Dorian to marry, for instance). However, in the second part of the novel Dorian describes his life as a “foul parody” (Wilde, 2009, p. 166). He quotes *Paradise Lost*, which hints at the fact that he has chosen a wicked life by free choice, but a life that has destroyed him, as he tells Basil right before killing him. The evidence of his having changed is in that he sees ugliness dearer than anything else towards the end of the story, as it is “the only reality” (p. 199) for him. However, despite the fact that his reflection in the picture is hideous, it “had not yet spoiled that marvellous beauty” (p. 166) in him, drawing in the idea that beauty is still part of his physical self, creating a paradox of beauty and repulsiveness (Clausson, 2016, p. 357). Clausson sustains that “the *fin-de-siècle* theme of degeneration (...) is, quite simply, incompatible with the Paterian goal of self-development” (p. 355), as degeneration and destruction are the result of sexual and moral liberation and self-development. Clausson especially gives insight to the sexual liberation of Dorian, but I would also add that Dorian becomes aware of his potential self as a freer man as he sees himself in the painting. What he sees is someone who could act, instead of being passive, and *make* himself, a path that reminds one of the figure of the New Woman.

Art and beauty are constantly referred to in the novel, be it as regards music, clothing, decorations, etc. and are given a relevant presence in both the narration and the characters' interests. As I will explain below, his interest in decoration and in exterior looks relates the narration and the characters to femininity, as that was what women were expected to focus on. The most important forms of art described in the narration are those of painting, acting, and literature. Dorian Gray "kill[s] himself into art" (E. Cohen, 1987, p. 806) because he perceives the picture as something more than beauty. He wants his youth and beauty to be endless, to have no fault. He also sees in Sybil Vane, the woman he says he loves for a bit more than two weeks, an acting that makes Sybil be "more than an individual" (Wilde, 2009, p. 69). In fact, the notion of acting is present throughout the novel, and insists on ideas of disguise and gender performativity that will be discussed below. As regards literature, Dorian's downfall is introduced by a book, referred to as a "yellow book" (p. 134), which can be traced to J. K. Hyusman's *À Rebours*. The narration suggests that Dorian "could not free himself from the influence of this book" (p. 137), overtly presenting Dorian as taking the book as a referent for his own life. Therefore, Dorian's take on art as something that surpasses its own beauty and purposelessness is what marks his downfall and the reason for his punishment.

### *3.2 Hellenist ideals of beauty and youth*

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the Greek world is constantly mentioned. There are allusions to Greek figures such as Adonis and Narcissus (Wilde, 2009, p. 7, p. 113, p. 123), Hermes (p. 30), Paris, Adrian (p. 123), Athena, Nero, Apollo (p. 148), and Artemis (p. 219). There are also allusions to Greek art: a Tanagra figurine is mentioned (p. 82), as well as the statue of Achilles erected in 1822 in Hyde Park (p. 75), which shocked passers-by due to its nakedness.

Hellenism greatly influenced the thinkers that belonged to the Aesthetic movement. University professors at Oxford like Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds published works such as *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, or *Studies of the Greek Poets*, respectively. This influenced their students, and among them, Oscar Wilde, who wrote works as "The English Renaissance of Art" (1882), or "The Women of Homer" (1876) among others.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, beauty and youth are constantly celebrated, and their shape has a clear Hellenist undertone. As regards Hellenistic art, the naked male body was seen as a standard of beauty and perfection, and was thoroughly idolised, such a thing not being condemned by society at that time (Muriqui, 2007, p. 6). In the scene where Basil is finishing his painting this idolisation and ecstasy over the young male's body is constantly projected. The artist, Basil Hallward, paints the young and beautiful Dorian, to whom he owes the best work of his life. The painter confesses that Dorian made his art better, as he suggests to him "an entirely new manner in art" (Wilde, 2009, p. 14). At this point Dorian Gray is merely a passive sitter in a male environment who does not talk but rather complains about having to sit for Basil all day. Their relationship recalls that of a platonic one: Dorian represents the ideals of beauty and youth, and Basil evokes the artist who tries to make sense out of perfection into art. Both Hellenistic and aesthetic art focused on creating beauty out of reality, especially out of the human body, and that is why a handsome, young man such as Dorian is the perfect reference.

In Basil's confession to Dorian, he recounts that before painting the portrait, he had painted Dorian as Paris, Adonis, and Adrian (p. 123), which draws in the idea that Dorian's beauty and youth are related to the concepts of beauty and youth of Ancient Greek. At the beginning of the novel, Basil sustains that Dorian defines for him "all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek" (p. 14). Further, Dorian Gray is compared to other two Greek figures known for their perfect beauty: Adonis and Narcissus. The mention of the latter foresees Dorian's fatal ending. Dorian's path to self-development is enabled by the acknowledgement of his own beauty in the canvas, a creation of Basil's "artistic idolatry" (p. 15), which acts like the pond of water where Narcissus sees his own reflection. The painter is a teacher-like figure to Dorian who shows him his own beauty. But, if Basil Hallward enables Dorian to exert his gaze upon himself, it is Lord Henry Wotton who teaches the lad the meaning of those attributes and what he can achieve through them. The relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian is easily traceable to that of the *paidierastia* of the Greeks, a male-male bond commonly between a young pupil and an older teacher. *Paidierastia* in the Hellenistic period was common so as to teach boys how to become a man, and usually consisted on the sexual pursuit of the boys (Muriqui, 2007, p. 8). Smith refers to it as being "a form of homosociality" (2013, p. 28) which was common amongst the young men at Oxford during Wilde's time, and seen by them "at the highest level of masculine love, men who love men are procreating *ideas*" (p. 32).

This again recalls of Plato and his works' portrayal of a solely male world where Socrates and his disciples nurture ideas.

Attraction, being it sexual or not, is reflected between Dorian and Lord Henry in the novel, as can be seen by their mutual reactions in presence of the other. Dorian initially acts shy and flustered around him. He is quickly fascinated by Lord Henry's thoughts and epigraphs, which are what give him the "wonderful expression" (Wilde, 2009, p. 24) that Basil reflects on his extraordinary painting. Lord Henry insists on the fact that Dorian's beauty and youth are remarkable. He is also referred to as having "taken a fancy" (p. 21) towards the young man. Thus, Lord Henry becomes a sort of teacher for Dorian and introduces him to the values of Hedonism, beauty, youth and amorality that go hand in hand with Aestheticism, Hellenistic ideals and the *fin de siècle* degeneration. Dorian learns out of him "the wonder of youth (...) the wonder of beauty" (p. 167), and Lord Henry sees Dorian as an "interesting study" (p. 62). Lord Henry is the Gothic figure of the scientist that has turned Dorian an aesthetic work.

In a speech made by Lord Henry which I have referred to above, he insists on the need of abandoning the maladies of the past so as to return to the "Hellenic ideal" (p. 22). The Hellenic past is highly esteemed by both the characters and the narration itself. It is seen as a past where beauty meant only beauty and had no codes or morals behind it, and where male-male spaces were idolised and their sexual relationships possible. As Smith states, "the study of Greek antiquity created a connection between radical sexuality and radical aesthetics" (2013, p. 33), a world which is turned "into a utopia in which the gratification of homoerotic desire is a subcategory of the aesthetic, and is therefore inseparable from artistic and intellectual activities" (p. 33). This is why a link can be established between the aesthetic and the homoerotic male space in the narration, because they share the same space in the novel. Basil's esteem for Dorian is read as "artistic idolatry" (Wilde, 2009, p. 15) but is also referred to as "quite a romance" (p. 16), as well as Lord Henry and Dorian's exchanges can be seen as fulfilling male homosocial desire or a way to let Dorian know himself and grow.

#### 4. FEMININITY AND GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

##### 4.1. *Femininity in the narration*

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, perceiving through the senses is not only a means towards degeneration, but something that can appease the soul too. The novel's narration favours descriptions of shapes, colours, perfumes, flowers, clothes, jewels, tapestries, curtains, etc. These descriptions are present from the very beginning of the novel, as reflected in the first paragraph:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

(Wilde, 2009, p. 5)

As the novel belongs to the Aesthetic movement, this does not come as a surprise. Anything that exists in *Dorian Gray* without a clear utilitarian purpose is celebrated. That is the case of decorative elements, gardens, music, books, jewels, textile and embroidery work, perfumes, etc. These have been traditionally associated with women because they present a concern towards having a pleasant appearance. Apart from looking pretty, middle and upper-class women towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were expected to engage in activities such as “drawing, sewing, reading” (M. Cohen, 1998, p. 167) all of which were focused on the purpose of creating non-utilitarian objects as compared to men. Most importantly, such activities took place in the private sphere, which was dominated by women. Taking care of the house and its decoration was therefore also considered a womanly activity.

Mostly all the social activities of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* take place in private houses, theatres, clubs, or places related to degeneration such as brothels or opium dens. When private houses are described, there is a clear focus on their decoration, as portrayed, for instance, in the description of Lord Henry's house, with its “high panelled wainscoting of olive-stained oak, its cream-coloured frieze and ceiling of raised plaster-work and its brick-dust felt carpet strewn with silk long-fringed Persian rugs” (Wilde, 2009, p. 50). Gardens are also part of the Victorian domestic sphere, as they are the place where women

nurtured beautiful plants and flowers. It is in a garden that Lord Henry first speaks with Dorian alone, and exclaims to himself “How pleasant it was in the garden!” (p. 17) in an idyllic man-to-man scene. Going to the theatre and attending endless social gatherings were also activities related to women towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which male characters in the novel enjoy. In Chapter XVIII there is a “shooting-party” (p. 216), an activity tightly linked to manliness and virility, but Dorian does not take part in it.

The narration in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shows a tendency towards form over function. Conventional Victorian literary productions focused on function over form, since that entailed portraying a message or moral through writing. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, there is a clear emphasis on beauty, on senses and symbolism (such as that of colours or flowers) to appease the senses. Despite tendencies that are related to femininity, in the novel these activities and qualities are celebrated by men, and will also permeate their characterization.

#### 4.2. *Femininity in the characters*

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* presents a male world where the male homosocial desire and the aesthetic and Hellenistic praise of beauty can be interpreted as a disguise for homoeroticism. Moreover, the male characters show feminine qualities, thus eradicating women with their presence constructed upon a transgressive expression of masculinity. There are very few women in the narration, and the majority of them were incorporated in the chapters added in the extended 1891 edition.

##### 4.2.1 Male characters

When analysing the concepts of femininity and masculinity, one should remember that such concepts are historically framed and built into the constructed and naturalised binaries of gender. Judith Butler referred to gender as “in no way a stable identity” (Butler, 1988, p. 519), and something that rather than being, one performs “through a stylised repetition of acts” (p. 519). Thus, it is acts that constitute gender identity rather than identity constituting acts (p. 520), a statement that would dismantle the discourses on the selflessness of women and the vigour of men of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Butler maintains that the body “is a historical situation (...), and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and

*reproducing* a historical situation” (p. 521). Despite all this, there is a “tacit collective agreement” (p. 522) to encapsulate and label people in two different genders, as well as an effort to naturalise them (p. 522). Throughout history, this naturalisation has prescribed associations between gender and certain behavioural patterns. The reproduction of this mindset can only be secured through heterosexual relationships that can bear children as well as reflect the consolidated structures of two genders that complement each other (p. 524). Hence, the constructions of manliness and womanliness create expectations as regards performativity, but also as regards sexuality.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the dandy life the three main characters lead is a reflection of the social reality as concerns gender roles in the *fin de siècle*. The bachelor led a distinct life without responsibilities such as family or heavy work based on socializing – mostly with men – and characterized by waking up at noon and going to bed late, frequenting clubs, enjoying activities such as the opera, theatre, consuming art and literature, etc. Thus, they did abide to the male Victorian bourgeoisie ideas of progress and production. In fact, their passivity and consumerist attitudes could be related to femininity, as Felski sustains: “given the bourgeois encoding of production as masculine and consumption as feminine, this inclination accentuates the aesthete’s feminized status” (1991, p. 1093). The aesthete life revolved around experimenting through the senses, but nothing would be extracted out of it other than pleasure or beauty, which traces back to the aesthetic idea of art for art’s sake.

Lord Henry Wotton, Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray live the life of dandies. It is true that the only one referred to as being single is Dorian Gray; Lord Henry is married but despises his married status. He argues he does not see his wife much and even hints at their having consented adulterous relationships. There is no mention of Basil being married, and his clear desire for Dorian as well as his reflections on mystery and hidden desires lead readers to assume he is not married as he is not interested in heterosexual relationships. Dorian is of marriageable age, but is not very much inclined in maintaining female-exclusive relationships after his short affair with Sybil Vane. These three characters encapsulate what was seen as a threat to strict Victorian discourses of gender and sexuality by performing acts not associated with their gender and establishing deep relationships only with men.

Lord Henry is the character that leads a life that most resembles the dandy ideal. He is popular and frequently enjoys club life and mingles with wide ranges of people. He

upholds his Hedonistic lifestyle and condemns institutions and traditions that refrain men from exerting their freedom of action. He is also characteristic of his time as he expresses highly misogynistic remarks that embody the antinaturalist attitude towards women by *fin de siècle* men. He declares women are “vile” (Wilde, 2009, p. 80), “boring” (p. 107) and “practical” (p. 83) creatures, “the decorative sex” (p. 53) who “never appeal to one’s imagination” (p. 57). He maintains that women “love being dominated” (p. 111) and “inspire us [men] with the desire to do masterpieces, and always prevent us from carrying them out” (p. 86). He describes women as what an aristocratic man is not, by means of opposed attributes, but also in relation to their not being able to enter the sphere of art.

Basil Hallward presents a threat to the Victorian society in his sexuality. He represents homoerotic desire, but one which is referred through the language of art. In the *fin de siècle*, the language to refer to homosexual relationships had started to surface (as argued above, the word “homosexual” first appeared in the decade of the 1890s), but the criminalisation of homosexuality placed it as language that was forbidden; it was commonly referred to as “the love that dare not speak its name” (Douglas, 1892), an expression used in Oscar Wilde’s trial. Instead, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the language of art is used to refer to “the production of this reality” (E. Cohen, 1987, p. 811) that was homosexuality. As an artist, Basil is able to project his desire in the picture which “admits the visible, erotic presence of the male body” (p. 807) in a male-identified and celebrated text, a painting which shows “the secret of my [Basil’s] soul” (Wilde, 2009, p. 9). In fact, Basil’s life is constructed upon unmentioned and mysterious activities which were pleasurable for him but that cannot be revealed for they rose “many strange conjectures” (p. 6) in the past. He actually confesses that he has “grown to love secrecy” (p. 8), a secrecy that permeates his relationship with Dorian. When he describes their relationship, he recounts that due to the younger, Basil can now “recreate life in a way that was hidden from me [Basil] before” (p. 14). Despite his overt adoration, he is not able to mention what he feels for Dorian and it remains a secret that is never fully described in the book and kept under ambiguous terms such as “worship” (p. 167) and “idolatry” (p. 15). In fact, Hallward’s dialogue was changed in the expanded 1891 edition of the story, as it presented one of its immorally acclaimed traits due to its homoerotic undertones. In the 1890 Lippincott edition, Basil sustains he will not display the picture in public because he has “put into it all the extraordinary *romance* [emphasis added] of which, of course, I have never dared to speak to him” (Wilde, 2012, p. 67), whereas in

the 1891 edition this sentence is rephrased in “I have put into it some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry” (Wilde, 2009, p. 15). This change shows, if not Basil’s homoerotic desire, the meaning people extracted from his dialogue in the *fin de siècle*.

Finally, Dorian Gray presents both the desire to live an aesthetic life and to have not only an active sexual life outside marriage, but sexual relationships with men. He is presented as an effeminate man, which makes him desirable to everyone. His Hellenistic effeminate physical traits, such as his red lips and curly blond hair, make it easy to identify his beauty as womanly, and consequently, it is easy for him to cross-dress, an activity that “may be said to never have left him” (p. 145). He is also described as a passive man who “plays the piano” (p. 12) enjoys music, the arts, literature and decoration among other activities. He is, thus, a consumer rather than a producer, and positively described at the beginning of the novel as a “brainless, beautiful creature” (p. 7). He is desirable exactly because of his unspoiled brain and extraordinary beauty; just like a work of art would be desirable for Aesthetes, or the ideal woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would be described.

Despite these characters’ subversion of conventions as regards gender and heterosexual normativity, the novel does not favour women’s emancipation from such constraints. These dandies see themselves as superior to women as well as “vulgar bourgeois social norms” (Felski, 1991, p. 1096). The antinaturalist position of *fin de siècle* writers favoured the vision that women were related to stagnation and tradition. Lord Henry speaks this thought aloud several times: “Always! That is a dreadful word. (...) Women are so fond of using it. They spoil every romance by trying to make it last for ever” (Wilde, 2009, p. 28), “They [women] are limited to their century” (p. 57), “The awful memory of woman! (...) And what an utter intellectual stagnation it reveals!” (p. 109). This rejection of women entailed an emancipation from them as well as a need to find a way to reproduce themselves without their intervening. There are two ways of doing so portrayed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The first one is through educating the mind, and that is what has already been argued in the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian. The other way of reproducing themselves as men is by duplicating themselves, and that is presented through the painting. The aesthetic replication of Dorian’s image is a tool that serves a clear purpose of self-recognition and self-knowledge for Dorian, who, after having seen it finished feels “as if he had recognized himself for the first time” (p. 29). The spread of aesthetic ideas and the immutability of art will allow

them to maintain an ideal male world that aligns with the purest form of masculinity based on the rejection of the opposed Other. They see relationships between men as “more spiritual, intellectual, beautiful and pure than heterosexual love” (Showalter, 1991, p. 174), spaces where creativity and ideas are entirely male-induced and generated.

These characters undoubtedly present gender as unstable and show that people can fall out of constructed acts. They refuse, like dandies at the time, “the modern, in rejecting the middle-class ideals of reason, progress, and industrious masculinity” (Felski, 1991, p. 1098). They defamiliarise feminine traits as they adopt them, which dismantles the naturalised definitions of masculinity and femininity, as “the feminized male deconstructs conventional oppositions between the ‘modern’ bourgeois man and the ‘natural’ domestic woman; he is male, yet disassociated from masculine rationality, utility, and progress; feminine, yet profoundly unnatural” (p. 1099).

This transgression, however, is limited to high-class British men. Their privileged position in society allows them to “circulate freely within an aestheticized social space” (E. Cohen, 1987, p. 806) and create their own “subculture” (p. 806). Their self-acclaimed moral superiority is also reflected in terms of race and class: “The middle classes (...) try to pretend that they are in smart society” (Wilde, 2009, p. 161). The Jew that works at the theatre where Dorian finds Sybil Vane is described as “hideous” (p. 54), and a “monster” (p. 54). The people who are non-British are always in dark places, such as opium dens, like the Malays in Chapter XVI (p. 200). Given their privileged position, aesthetes show “disdain for the non-intellectual majority” (Felski, 1991, p. 1100). This mindset is encapsulated in Lord Henry’s proposition: “the real tragedy of the poor is that they can afford nothing but self-denial. Beautiful sins, like beautiful things, are the privilege of the rich” (Wilde, 2009, p. 85). To reaffirm their superiority, they align women and masses in opposition to their lifestyle and beliefs to regard them “as symbols of the democratizing vulgarity of modern life” (Felski, 1991, p. 1100).

Therefore, their self-supported superiority and elevated position bring about their distancing from othered groups such as women. Because of their association of corporeality and materiality with women and the masses, their subversion in acquiring feminine qualities does not entail the subversion of the binary of gender construction. These male decadent characters and authors are not really problematizing the gender structure, they are instead re-inscribing new codes, new performative acts in Butler’s terminology, into the already existing and constructed binary of gender.

#### 4.2.2 Female characters

In the male-dominated world of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* women are completely silenced. This eradication of women is even clearer in the 1890 edition of the novel. Leaving Sybil Vane aside, the women mentioned in the novel are placed in Chapters III, XV and XVII. All these chapters were added into the 1891 edition of the novel and describe scenes that do not help the plot advance or the characters evolve. One of the female characters mentioned in these chapters is a little different from the others and could be related to the New Woman figure: “the pretty Duchess of Monmouth” (Wilde, 2009, p. 207), who, together with Sybil Vane and Dorian’s mother, is described as beautiful. She is portrayed as witty, someone who believes “women rule the world” (p. 211), but despite all she remains as an unsubstantial character.

Sybil Vane remains the most important female character of the novel and plays a highly special and important role in the narrative: that of the actress. Acting is seen as desirable in the novel, as it is a form of art and a way of giving aesthetic pleasure. The stage is the space of possibility and pretence, and provides a special frame for representation and expressivity. Going back to Butler, the stage opens the possibility to unconventionality being accepted as “In the theatre, one can say ‘this is just an act,’ and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real” (1988, p. 527), whereas outside the stage “there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act” (p. 527), which is the reason why Lord Henry defends: “I don’t like scenes, except on the stage” (Wilde, 2009, p. 32).

At one point of the novel Lord Henry also sustains that “women never know when the curtain has fallen” (p. 110), but in fact it is Dorian who makes this mistake. After seeing Sybil perform for the first time, he emphasises that “She is all the great heroines of the world in one. She is more than an individual” (p. 60). Dorian is not interested in her history, but on the possibility of the multiplicity that is provided by her acting. For him, Sybil presents the possibility of women mutating, and, thus, rising above the stagnation of the corporeality they present. As E. Cohen argues, Sybil only exists onstage for Dorian, and “offstage, he imbues her with an aesthetic excess, so that her reality never pierces his fantasy” (1987, p. 809); a fantasy created under “the scrutiny of the male gaze” (Felski, 1991, p. 1102).

Sybil's performance makes her multiple. In her performances, she plays Shakespearean characters such as Juliet, Imogen, Rosalind, Desdemona and Ophelia. All these characters may be analysed in relation to the context and this male-created world. Juliet, Desdemona and Ophelia die because of love, with the difference that Juliet kills herself, whereas Desdemona and Ophelia are killed, directly or indirectly, by their beloveds. Decadent writers wrote positively of women who lived tragically, aestheticizing them.<sup>3</sup> This coincides with Lord Henry's remark as he speaks of Dorian's mother, who ran away with a poor man and died after a year of his death, leaving Dorian alone: "It posed the lad [Dorian], made him more perfect as it were" (Wilde, 2009, p. 41). The other two roles that Sybil performs are Rosalind and Imogen, who present a different quality: that of cross-dressing. In fact, Dorian highlights the third night he sees Sybil take on the role of Rosalind. He is utterly fascinated by her ability to perform different roles, to which Lord Henry asks: "When is she Sybil Vane?" (p. 60). Dorian's solid answer is: "Never" (p. 60).<sup>4</sup> Dorian is clear in his not wanting to know Sybil as a person, "it was curious my not wanting to know her, wasn't it?" (p. 59), which clarifies that he is only interested in Sybil's multiplicity as an actress. Being onstage is the only possibility for her, as a woman, to elevate herself, to be someone who she is not and express possibility and mutation in such a man-constructed world. Offstage, she is back to being identified with the historical frame of the *fin de siècle*, and back to having naturalised qualities such as domesticity and materiality attached to her. After her engagement with Dorian, Sybil's love experience permeates her acting, which worsens as she then aware of the ideal of love and cannot mimic it anymore. Love has permeated the acting frame and her expected position as a woman breaks off the spell of her acting. After Dorian breaks their

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<sup>3</sup> Baudelaire is a great example of this. He saw, for instance, prostitutes as anarchical figures; creatures much like the dandy in their walking the streets of the modern city, "whose painted faces concealed duplicity and evil" (Wilson, 1992, p. 55). Wilson insists on the fact that "Baudelaire, indeed, believed that poets resembled prostitutes" (p. 55). Baudelaire also wrote positively of women such as Eponine, a Welsh heroine who was condemned to death after saving her husband from the Romans. This allusion is placed in a poem titled "Les Petites Vieilles", dedicated to Victor Hugo. Consequently, the referenced Eponine also evokes Hugo's tragic character, who dies in order to save her beloved Marius, oblivious of her love, in *Les Misérables*. Moreover, *fin de siècle* adaptations of Shakespearean plays such as the *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet* of the Lyceum theatre highlighted the suicide of Ophelia and Juliet. Female suicide was fetishized by Victorian society: "the female corpse epitomized femininity and death, to which Victorian culture ascribed 'alterity'. Accordingly, fascinated Victorians found female corpses 'superbly enigmatic'" (Bronfen & Duncan, 2016, p. 102).

<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the impossibility of heterosexual relationships in this male-identified world is even more problematized when taking into account that men actors of Jacobean plays performed the roles of women (E. Cohen, 1987, p. 812).

engagement, Sybil kills herself by taking prussic acid, “the drug of choice for abandoned New Women” (Showalter, 1991, p. 176).

As the novel revolves around the Gothic theme of the non-disclosed, I will now address the role that acting takes as regards concealment. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator points out that the reason behind Dorian’s ruin had been his appearance: “His beauty had been to him but a *mask* [emphasis added], his youth a mockery” (Wilde, 2009, p. 235). Sybil’s death is described as having “all the terrible beauty of a *Greek tragedy* [emphasis added]” (p. 108). Later on, Lord Henry sustains that “we find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both” (p. 109). In fact, Dorian’s life is described as a “tragedy” (p. 102, p. 145, p. 187); existence is described as “dramatic” (p. 107). When Basil looks at the picture after many years, he describes it is a “parody” (p. 166) and a “satire” (p. 166), and while he is looking at it, Dorian watches him with the face of someone who is “absorbed in a play when some great artist is acting” (p. 167). Dorian states he “should like to be somebody else” (p. 159) and sometimes pretended to be so: “He had often told the girl whom he had lured to love him that he was poor” (p. 234). Further, he believes that “the presence of a third person in the room” (p. 184) gives him courage. All these passages point at the creation of artifice, an illusion which needs from an audience that expects that type of performance as it is framed under Victorian convention. In fact, insincerity is described as a positive thing “by which we can multiply our personalities” (p. 152). It is clear that the novel favours non-disclosure as regards Dorian’s self-discovering journey, but that concealment is only possible because of an audience that firstly makes it immoral to be hidden, and that secondly believes the artifice, the mask. This language is related to acting because the need of degeneration subverts the historical frame of signification of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which needs the language of performing so as to frame itself away from that space and create “a reality that is in some sense new” (Butler, 1988, p. 527).

## 5. FEMININITY AND FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN OTHER LATE VICTORIAN GOTHIC TEXTS

The instability of the *fin de siècle* had a strong influence in literature. In Gothic texts, the feeling of decrepitude, decadence and degeneration is vivid and brought closer to Victorians in works published during the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That is the case of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and so as to portray that tendency towards degenerative discourses in literature (especially regarding discourses on gender and sexuality) I will analyse three other texts published in that period that are often compared to Wilde's novel: *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Great God Pan* by Arthur Machen, and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. These works were published in 1886, 1890 and 1897 respectively, and are great examples of the uneasiness felt in relation to discourses of British gender and sexual identity in the *fin de siècle*, as they revolve around ideas of masculinity and femininity and the way to face any identity that did not align with that of the clearly heterosexual white man or woman. Additionally, these texts, unsurprisingly, praise and celebrate their male-created world. Their normative male protagonists have the urge to protect themselves from the threat of over-sexualised and unnatural gendered characters, and in doing so they will preserve their notion of a strong and pure humanity.

Be he Utterson, Villiers or Van Helsing, in these stories framed under what seems a detective story it is men who conduct the investigation. They recruit a group of other men so as to bring the world back to order. What causes chaos at first is ambiguous, a type of "irregularities" (Stevenson, 1991, p. 42), a "queer" (Machen, 2015, p. 203) or "very sad and terrible" (Stoker, 2011, p. 265) case which turns out to be a threat to the established heterosexual male modern world. These 'chosen' men are mainly bachelors. In *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Utterson, Lanyon, Bradshaw and Poole are all bachelors (two are high-class, privileged men, two are servants of Jekyll), as well as Villiers, Clarke, Raymond and Austin in *The Great God Pan* (these three are well-established men). In this novella we also find Herbert, who is married. However, his marriage is his ruin and he ends up killing himself due to his wife's influence, which gives an account of how marriage and sexual relationships with uncanny, over-sexualised women are portrayed in such a world. The other example of a married man is to be found in *Dracula*'s young and naïve Jonathan Harker. His marriage seems to be a happy one, but what drives attention is that he is never described as a strong, virile man but rather as a weak, and even

submissive one. The rest of the men in *The Crew of Light* remain unmarried, and are an interesting group formed by two non-British people (Van Helsing the patriarch and Quincey the American), a privileged man (Quincey Morris), a doctor (John Seward) and the already mentioned solicitor (Harker). Utterson and Harker's professions (related to advocacy) are taken a step further as they become the defenders of the Victorian establishment and the laws of man.<sup>5</sup>

What links these men is the desire to fight evil and protect their lives in order to perpetuate their established morals and way of living. All of them are fighting a figure that is completely radical to them in identity and intentions but who, at the same time, resembles them. Hyde is human, but gives "an impression of deformity without any namable malformation" (Stevenson, 1991, p. 10), Helen "could be called very handsome (...) and yet there is something about her face which I [Austin] didn't like" (Machen, 2015, p. 217), Dracula looks like a man, but his aquiline features, his whiteness compared to his red lips instigate "nausea" (Stoker, 2011, p. 25) in Harker. This intrinsic repulsion is almost biological, as if these men's bodies instinctively know what they are facing, something which their rationality cannot fathom yet. This draws a parallel between the Victorian's naturalisation of acts and their link with certain identities: goodness is naturalised in these British men, whereas the othered beings are unnatural and therefore prone to evilness.

The three stories present a similar structure: the first step, where the male group 'flirts' with the Other, the second, that of seeing and condemning the evil, where the men learn and are capable of confronting the damning truth of the existence of the threatening Other, and, finally, their killing it. Needless to say, the othered characters are never given the space of focalisation, whereas the 'chosen' men are given room for progression, for showing their capability to adapt to their environment and objectives, and, most importantly, for their minds to get rid of their worldly knowledge so as to broaden their mental scope into a new knowledge unintelligible for the masses (and women, who are identified with the masses). What common people would see in the three narrations is a

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, Harker is a solicitor that got such title right before leaving England: "Solicitor's clerk! Mina would not like that. Solicitor, – for just before leaving London I got word that my examination was successful; and I am now a full-blown solicitor!" (Stoker, 2011, p. 22). The Victorian job for lawyers comprehended barristers and solicitors. The main difference between them was that barristers could work at higher levels of court than solicitors. This puts Harker in a lower position as regards his job.

series of crimes; what these groups of men see is an alien threat to their existence, an “epidemic” (Machen, 2015, p. 218).

This disease threatens the British ‘race’ into extinction due to its fast expansion and willing propagators. This, of course, has a clear colonial reading, but it can also be analysed under a gender and sexual lens. Hyde, Helen and Dracula present, like Dorian, a clear subversion as regards gender and sexual norms that may bring about the end of the Victorian British ‘race’, as they attack its fertility and virility. They are all related to the old world, and are described as bestial. Hyde is described as “ape-like” (Stevenson, 1991, p. 15, p. 53, p. 54), and compared to “slime” (p. 53), as something “not only hellish but inorganic” (p. 53), which strongly reminds one of Helen’s death, when her body transforms and dissolves into “jelly” (Machen, 2015, p. 229) right before there is the seeing of a form whose symbol “may be seen in ancient sculptures” (p. 229). Dracula is, as well, very old, the first of his species, a being that crumbles into dust when it dies. This idea becomes crucial when there is an attempt to establish the threat these othered beings pose as regards gender or sexuality, as the figure of women was established as worldly and stagnate or sexually monstrous. I will analyse them separately so I can later establish parallels between them and Dorian as well as evaluate the deviance they put forward.

Hyde is the attempt to separate the evil side of man from his good side. He represents “moral weakness” (Stevenson, 2011, p. 49) and is urged on by the strong impulse “to fall” (p. 49). His evilness relies on his longing and struggling for freedom, which establishes a parallel with Dorian. In wanting to be free – free of morals, free of labels – Hyde becomes a criminal with a “lust of evil” (p. 49) that overpowers Jekyll, the morally perfect aristocrat bachelor. Hyde is portrayed as less evolved, and additionally, he is depicted as a small “thing (...) more of a dwarf” (p. 31). Doane and Hodges establish that his strangeness is related to “cultural descriptions of femininity” (Doane & Hodges, 1989, p. 60). Hyde is described as “weeping like a woman” (Stevenson, 2011, p. 32), as someone weak and hysteric whose resentment due to not being free is demonstrated “in his killing of a patriarch, the M.P. Sir Danvers Carew, and in his defacement of both Jekyll’s pious books and the portrait of his father” (Doane & Hodges, 1989, p. 69). Indeed, Hyde’s endeavours could be related to Jekyll’s past, which Jekyll remembers as a period when he “concealed [his] pleasures” (Stevenson, 1991, p. 42), a time when he had to refrain himself from aspirations that brought shame and degradation. Hyde brings back such mysteries of “disordered sensual images” (p. 44) which make Jekyll “a slave

to [his] original evil” (p. 44). Hyde’s influence, despite his queerness, dwarfishness and weakness (features naturalised in women which repulse the novel’s narrators), make Jekyll “languidly weak both in body and mind” (p. 53). This repulsion and effect on Jekyll effectively recalls a degrading sickness, which is part of the *fin de siècle* decadence, and can be extrapolated to the notion of monstrous sexuality and syphilis. Syphilis was associated with sexual perversion in the *fin de siècle*, especially in the figure of the prostitute and the homosexual. It was seen as “God’s divine judgement on male lust” (Showalter, 1991, p. 193) since its iconography was “primarily masculine” (p. 192) given men’s sexual relations with prostitutes or with other men, deemed unnatural.

The double life that Jekyll has to live is also another sign that can be related to homosexuality, as it is the only way for him to cope with his forbidden emotions. Showalter describes the story as “a study on male hysteria (...) a fable of *fin-de-siècle* homosexual panic, the discovery and resistance of the homosexual self” (p. 107). *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, being a male story about the double, is a story about male reproduction: “Unable to pair off with either a woman or another man, Jekyll divides himself, and finds his only mate in his double, Edward Hyde” (pp. 108-109). And, as I established in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the fact that Hyde occupies a more feminine position in the narration, eradicates women from the text. The only women mentioned are several maids and a girl, and none of them have a name. This establishes links with women and the masses and their lower status. Contrarily, Jekyll is able to duplicate himself, to get rid of earthly knowledge and to perceive “the trembling immateriality” (Stevenson, 1991, p. 43) of the world. The male narrators have access to Jekyll’s story and this new type of knowledge, but women and the masses do not.

In *The Great God Pan* the takes on gender and sexuality are differently portrayed but their outcome is essentially the same. Instead of a hellish twin, Helen is always described as a Gothic monster, someone who resembles Dorian in her paradoxical beautifulness and repulsiveness. She spreads an epidemic over London, but her power is left to interpretation, although it can easily be traced to promiscuity and consequently to the figure of the *femme fatale* or the fallen woman. Her free roams in the wilderness as a child entail that she was never taught by modern society how to act and also that her initial, pre-social state is a more bestial one. This is again a Victorian take on the association between women and materiality: biologically, women are earthly, wild. Helen is born out of the union of a forced woman and the god Pan, but since she is a woman she

cannot avoid the call from the wild, chaos and evil the god Pan presents. There is a gap in the narration as it jumps to when Helen is approximately nineteen, and the reader is left to assume that she has led a self-developed life which, due to her gender and upbringing, has naturally guided her to evilness. She is a take on the wild and castrating New Woman (Helen has made herself privileged in society) who, once an adult, threatens the privileged male society of modernity. Moreover, she is described as having “almost Italian appearance” (Machen, 2015, p. 195), which highlights her othered status as a non-British who does not know how to properly behave according to British woman performativity. Her subversive and condemning power is clearly related to sexuality but is never described, as Dorian’s or Hyde’s. In fact, her actions are purposely evaded, as figured several times in the text: “It’s of no use my going into details as to the life that woman led” (p. 223). Her power is unutterable by neither the male narrators nor Helen’s victims, who irrevocably end up hysteric after spending time with her and finally end up killing themselves. Amongst the victims there is Herbert, Helen’s husband, who is ruined after their wedding night. This presents the overpowering of Helen’s strong sexual power, which is firstly portrayed as desirable, to later be able to drive men so crazy they lose sense of who they are and die. Like Hyde does with Jekyll, she is able to defeat men and take their virility and strength (something Dracula’s victims also face) and steal away their identities to the point that they commit suicide. And like Hyde, Dracula, or Dorian, the only way of putting an end to the anarchical threat and epidemic she presents is death.

If Hyde is an effeminate man and Helen is a castrating woman, then Dracula is the perfect hybrid. He is both dominant and castrating, both manly and womanly. He is presented as uncannily similar to the British idea of a good man, a perfect foreigner who speaks flawless English and is educated in English literature. Knowledge is a tool that brings him closer to the Victorian ideal of a good man, together with vigour and virility, as well as his fertility, through which he can create and secure his own ‘race’. Arata argues that such qualities are absent “among the novel’s British characters, particularly the men” (1990, p. 631). Whereas all the vampires (regardless of their gender) are healthy and robust, the British characters are feeble so as to “highlight the alarming decline among the British” (p. 631). The Count’s ‘race’ is stronger and more powerful, but at the same time more bestial. The bestiality and earthly values attached to him are easy associable with women and their naturalised bodily qualities by which they were labelled. Moreover, vampires possess the bodies that enable the possibility of new generations to come, like

women's bodies. They are associated with promiscuity and a monstrous sexual power which is linked to the construction of the fear and repulsion towards female sexuality (epitomised in Dracula's acolytes or in Dracula's anarchical sexuality):

That Dracula propagates his race solely through the bodies of women suggests an affinity, or even an identity, between vampiric sexuality and female sexuality. Both are represented as primitive and voracious, and both threaten patriarchal hegemony. In the novel's (and Victorian Britain's) sexual economy, female sexuality has only one legitimate function, propagation within the bounds of marriage. Once separated from that function (...) female sexuality becomes monstrous.

(p. 632)

Such voracious sexual appetite is related to women, but Dracula's penetrating, dominating and fertile powers are masculine. His promiscuity is linked with decadence as well as syphilis and homosexuality, as seen with Hyde, Dorian and Helen and the spread of their 'malady'. Dracula makes no distinction between men or women when it comes to the propagation of his 'race', as seen when he is in Transylvania with Harker, where "Dracula's desire to fuse with a male, most explicitly evoked when Harker cuts himself shaving, subtly and dangerously suffuses this text" (Craft, 1984, p. 110). Once in Britain, Dracula will choose women in order to reproduce, which shows that "instead of being uncannily Other, the vampire is here revealed as disquietingly familiar" (Arata, 1990, p. 633) because he follows Victorian acts. However, he still shows signs of wanting to fuse his blood with that of men: "Your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them *you and others* [emphasis added] shall yet be mine – my creatures, to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed" (Stoker, 2011, p. 326). This passage portrays Dracula's masculine dominance (which he exerts on women too, as shown when he makes Mina drink from his blood) so as to ensure his life.

In Britain, it is only through the body of women that men can unite (Craft, 1984, p. 111), as happens also with the Crew of Light's fusion of blood in Lucy's body or with Quincey the son, who both symbolises the propagation of the male-desired world and the union of men: "His bundle of names links all our little band of men together" (Stoker, 2011, p. 402), as well as the restoration of order and "especially the rectification of conventional gender roles" (Craft, 1984, p. 129). Then again, the death of Dracula

symbolises the privileged men's necessary triumph over the degenerative powers of the shifting discourses on gender and sexuality of the *fin de siècle*.

There is little space left for women in these texts. As already mentioned, the nameless women in Stevenson's novella are only present in relation to the masses, as Hyde already portrays the degeneration of the shifts of gender and sexuality. His effeminacy consequently eradicates women from the story, as happens in *Dorian Gray*. The women in *The Great God Pan* are Rachel (Helen's victim when they are children), Helen and Mary. The latter is Helen's mother, a foreigner whose life is Dr Raymond's: "I rescued Mary from the gutter (...) I think her life is mine, to use as I see fit" (Machen, 2015, p. 186). She is submissive, complacent, a victim of the doctor's patronising power. Her name already hints at her offspring being unique, and also portrays her purity and selflessness, qualities that make her the perfect angel in the house under a man's patronising influence. In *Dracula*, women are treated under a similar light. Lucy is venerated by men because she is beautiful and sweet. However, as Showalter establishes, she embodies the comparison of the vampire as the New Woman's sexual daring which "represents the nymphomaniac or oversexed wife who threatened her husband's life with her insatiable erotic demands" (1991, p. 180). The only solution to her state requires a "corrective penetration" (Craft, 1984, p. 118) by the British men, especially her fiancé, so that she can go back to an "unequalled sweetness and purity" (Stoker, 2011, p. 231) in death. Mina in her slow transformation presents the New Woman related to hysteria, "the feminist intellectual whose sickness drain her family's energies" (Showalter, 1991, p. 180). Her intellectual capacity is broadened after Dracula feeds from her, that is, her "man's brain" (Stoker, 2011, p. 250) and possibility of being elevated or changing is made possible due to Dracula's influence. The Count inscribes his dominant and fearful identity in the women, who slowly lose themselves. Van Helsing even states Mina is their "teacher" (p. 376), but the men's fear is clear as regards slow-changing Mina as she presents the possibility of a monstrous sexual power as well as the capacity to domain and perpetrate knowledge, but, most importantly, the possibility of ending the conception of a British strong and dominant masculinity. Her transformation entails a reversal of gender roles (orchestrated by the already anarchical Dracula) that obviously threatens masculinity. That is why the men try to cancel, silence and remind her about her place as a woman: "you no more must question. We shall tell you all in good time. We are men, and are able to bear; but you must be our star and hope" (p. 258). Mina accepts this,

surrenders to silence, but this makes her restless: “when she is no longer taken into their confidence and included in the group, Mina becomes hysterical” (Showalter, 1991, p. 182). Moreover, her knowledge is highlighted in the text as unnatural. The utterance “Unclean! Unclean!” (Stoker, 2011, p. 316) makes reference to its being a disease.<sup>6</sup> Yu asserts that she surpasses Van Helsing’s intellectual power, “but not without the anxious warning that the ‘professional’ woman armed by modern technology is necessarily evil” (2006, p. 159). At the end of the novel, order is restored and so is her role as a Victorian woman: she is the mother of a boy, whose “sweetness and loving care” (Stoker, 2011, p. 402) will ensure the propagation of Victorian male-established gender and sexual norms.

These three novels together with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* present the anxieties as regards the shifts in the construction of gender and sexuality during the *fin de siècle*. They mainly show a male-constructed and propagated world where there is a desire for male proliferation and a will to restrict women’s sexuality and freedom of knowledge and elevation. Whereas British male elevation and shifts on gender are accepted, celebrated or at least represented as a possible outcome to be free, the same change in women is presented as a threat not only to morality, but to the Victorian personal and cultural identity. What is reflected in these works is that gender boundaries are re-inscribed in different ways (masculinity is redefined, or the role of women reaffirmed to be perfect as a pure, selfless being that serves the men’s world) so as to still propagate the same boundaries, the same construction of the separated and restricted binary of gender.

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<sup>6</sup> This quote is a reference to Leviticus 13:45: “Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’”

## 6. CONCLUSION

The present study is an attempt to analyse how the binary of gender starts to shift towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and how that was received by the also shifting literature written by men. Overall, the construction of a transgressive effeminate man who is desired because of his feminine traits problematizes the position of woman, and results in silencing or leaving her and the masses aside so as to assert privileged men as more sophisticated and knowledgeable beings.

The effeminacy or sexuality of characters such as Dorian Gray is still relevant today, and the reactions to the transgression he presents are multiple. Some of these reactions tend to make the story more traditional as regards gender and sexuality. In some movie adaptations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the need to straighten its narrative is made clear through the invention of new female interests for Dorian, such as Gladys in the 1945 adaptation directed by Albert Lewin, or Emily, Lord Henry's daughter in the 2009 movie adaptation directed by Oliver Parker. Conversely, Dorian Gray has been depicted as a woman in many adaptations or retellings of the story. In the 1983 movie adaptation directed by Tony Maylam, Dorian Gray is an actress and photographic model; in a horror novel published in 1992 Dorian is a female teenager whose reflection in a mirror turns uglier as her physical appearance becomes prettier every day. In Neil Gaiman's 1998 short story "The Wedding Present", the main character who becomes immortal and immutable is a newlywed wife. These changes are not random, as they either interpret Dorian's gender as transgressively feminine so that it creates a need to bring his gender performativity back to a naturalised female gender; or, if he is portrayed as a man, Dorian is given a passionate heterosexual romance not only with Sybil Vane, but with other female characters.

That such changes are made in such recent movie and book adaptations points at the fact that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is still relevant as regards the topics of gender and sexuality of the present day. If the novel was written today, Dorian Gray would not have, perhaps, met the end he meets in the novel, but maybe he would still need beauty as a form of privilege to be his mask, since that would have helped in the present-day society of social media, appearance and pretence. In all, Oscar Wilde's only novel provides scope to think not only of gender and sexuality in his context, but also in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and whether they have changed much since the *fin de siècle*.

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