

# The Gothic Portrayal of Morality and Evil: Split Identities in Dorian Gray and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde<sup>197</sup>

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## Abstract:

The concept of the dual nature of human beings has been highly present in literature, from the Original Sin to Doctor Faustus, always motivated by the longing for some unattained desire. The subject of Victorian ethics has been enriched by the contribution of Leslie Stephen among other writers, and the concept of evil will be analysed in this paper from the perspective of Philip Cole's theory. The following paper collects the main ideas from both areas and focuses on the parallel journeys of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). The respective journeys may appear to be quite resemblant, nevertheless, it is primarily the distinctions between them what is to be considered in the present project. The concepts to be applied to the works of Wilde and Stevenson, namely, morality and evil, will be analysed from the Victorian Gothic perspective, which portrayed darkness as a completely different idea from the traditionally assumed. Evil lurked among the most respectable members of society rather than in faraway castles; and decadence, a widespread topic during the fin de siècle, characterized the development of the characters.

**Keywords:** Evil, Morality, Gothic Fiction, Doppelgänger, Duality, Corruption

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## 1. Introduction

The Victorian era began with the reign of Queen Victoria in 1837 and lasted until her death in 1901. During said period, literature was profoundly reconstructed, with the introduction of new perspectives that completely altered the preconceived idea of fiction. It became a vehicle for social critique in areas such as class, gender roles, or industrialization; the characters gained psychological depth in their conflicts and motivations; the focus was shifted to ordinary settings which readers felt well acquainted with; and fiction evolved to portray flawed characters who challenged morality.

Victorian literature was highly influenced by its culture, in which status, appearances, and societal norms played a critical role. This was the era introduced by the Industrial Revolution, a time of economic boom, technological development and a shift to modern urban life. The system of beliefs of the era radically changed due to all these processes, plus, it was in 1859 that Charles Darwin published the revolutionary *On The Origin of Species*, which deeply conditioned the previous conception of religious faith and provided a new lens from which to observe life. People began to question what had been formerly taken for granted—topics such as morality, religion, or education were now given new consideration. The strict social protocol imposed at the time, insisted on ethical behaviour. But the question arises from whether all that was motivated by society was truthfully moral, or if it could be precisely social pressure that led some individuals into immorality. To be considered “moral,” all that is fair and responsible, pure and honourable; and for “immoral” those actions or thoughts that fall in the realm of the sinful, corrupt and shameful.

With regard to literature, the Dark Ages’ air of terror had already inspired writers of the 18th century to develop Gothic literature, which Victorians adapted to their new urban environment giving way to the so-called Victorian Gothic. As can be seen in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the view on evil and darkness is no longer a perception of something external or unknown. In this new era evil is an element deeply ingrained within human beings, rather than an independent entity. In the city of London, the setting for Dorian and Dr. Jekyll’s eventful journeys, where nobody really knows their neighbour, ethics and immorality go hand in hand, leading to one another in an ever-going struggle to take control of the human mind and soul. This paper explores human

duality, with a basis on the concept of morality and its role in shaping ethical frameworks, which is developed in the following section. Every society possesses its own distinctive values and norms, certain expectations about how the members of that society should behave, handle relations, and, in general terms, lead their social life. In the case of the Victorian period, the societal protocol was extremely relevant and there existed a rigid system of repression, which served to reinforce the social values of the time, among others decorum, hierarchy, and self-restraint, and allowed individuals to maintain their respectable status.

As a feature of the Victorian society, literary works of the time reflect these elements. In *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë she portrays a passionate love story which defies the social boundaries of class, however the ambition for status predominates and breaks the deep emotional bond. Oscar Wilde in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) transmits through the use of satire the absurdity of social codes and Victorian values, with lines like “in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.”<sup>199</sup> On the other hand, Coventry Patmore in his poem *The Angel in the House* (1854) focuses on the domestic woman, and how Victorian society expected them to be. He affirmed the ideal woman to be that with no identity, who finds her fulfilment in pleasing men, devoted and obedient.

These rules, however, were not necessarily synonymous of morality. In certain situations, society may encourage falsehood and a concealment of one’s identity, for the greater good and in order to maintain formal appearances. Morality lies in each individual, it cannot be imposed through rules or protocols since it is in the nature of one’s actions and line of thought. Leslie Stephen claimed: “I infer a man’s actions from his character and circumstances, or his character from his actions.”<sup>200</sup> This supports the idea that even a dogma as strong as the Christian was during this period, could not impose tendencies and actions on individuals whose longings and willpower lied somewhere else. The opposite to religious faith, which was assumed to be heresy and Satan’s influence did not stop people from choosing the path of evil. Moral behaviour is a personal matter; human beings are

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<sup>199</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, (Open Road Media, 2018): 45.

<sup>200</sup> Leslie Stephen, *The Science of Ethics*, (Cambridge University Press, 2011): 9-10.

driven by different desires, possess their own life expectations and are shaped by the life they have lived. In modern society there exist, moreover, plenty of challenges to morality, some of them highly praised. In certain situations, an immoral course of action may be the easiest—factors such as selfishness, instant satisfaction, or popularity may encourage individuals to gravitate towards unethical behaviours. As explained by Stephen, “[...] conduct is determined by purely mechanical conditions; so far as he is a sentient being, his feelings, and so far as he is a rational being, his reasoning powers, must be taken into account.”<sup>201</sup> Hence, one cannot be genuinely moral without willingly and consciously being so. Elements such as impulses, vices, or desires are inherently human, and it is the conviction of men, their own intuition about right and wrong, and their willingness to act on their moral side that will keep them from deviating, regardless of any laws or rules imposed.

## 2. Gothic Fiction: A Shift on the View of Evil

The Victorian Gothic constitutes a subgenre of Gothic literature that arose around the 1830s in England, and which plots were commonly set in the city of London. It differs from the original gothic in the fact that it shifts the focus from countryside life to urban life, adapting into the novels the new inventions that came with the Industrial Revolution and remarking the relevance of social class differentiation with the role of the *bourgeoisie* in opposition to the *proletariat*.

The Gothic is focused on the darkest sides of human beings. Hence, writers aimed to portray the relevance of morality through characters who, losing contact with it, started to decay. This is a fairly modern concept, closer to the human experience, since the tradition was to depict characters unflawed in every aspect, who served as an ideal representation of how the perfect man should be. Evil instincts—those not sustained by an ethical basis, which result in unnecessary harm for others or oneself—constitute, in Gothic Victorian fiction, the main threat against moral behaviour—characterised by the idea of duty, virtue, and personal conscience—.

Jarlath Killeen refers to Freud’s concept of the ‘uncanny’ to explain Victorian horror: “it is the familiar and what is known to one which becomes the unknown and the

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<sup>201</sup> Stephen, *The Science of Ethics*, 40.

mysterious.”<sup>202</sup> Tradition had long settled the idea that evil hid in gloomy dark forests and abandoned old castles, it was not to be found anywhere near the streets of London.

This shift of perspective brought horror closer to the reader’s surroundings, making it a more familiar experience. In the Victorian Gothic, the villain may be one’s neighbour or their dearest friend, no one is entirely safe from evil since it makes its way into the human soul and psyche. In ancient times, cities used to rely on walls guarding them from the enemy, now, there is no longer need for physical defences. Cruel creatures are already inside, leading what appear to be normal lives from the outside, yet keeping a sinful and corrupted soul under a set of concealing appearances.

These instincts, however, may be rooted in the individual himself, as is the case of Jekyll, or they might be introduced to them by a third entity under which influence they become evil themselves, as happens with Dorian. In his case, close friend Lord Henry Wotton paves the way to temptation and sin, by eloquently charming him into evil tendencies. As explained by Stephen, “reasoned conduct differs from merely instinctive conduct in that it implies an adaptation of means to ends, and therefore a possibility of following courses of conduct not agreeable in themselves, but promising a greater total of happiness.”<sup>203</sup> The moral codes implanted during the late Victorian period stand, therefore, against individual happiness in the case of Jekyll and Dorian’s characters, and since it is a natural instinct for human beings to pursue their own happiness, as long as morality stands in the way to achieve that goal, it will be discarded along the way.

Stevenson and Wilde portray in their novels a morality tale about the decadent consequences of surrendering to one’s vices. They both agree in the fact that human beings are as much capable of being moral as they are of being immoral, but they portray in their characters the temptation of the evil side as a much stronger force. This is a traditional Gothic element that shows the relevance of morality through characters that prescind of it but, as their stories develop, it is clear to the reader that they should have fought for the moral values they recognized to be right. The Gothic character needs to undergo a cathartic journey in which they lose sense of their moral side in order for them to rather atone in life,

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<sup>202</sup> Jarlath Killeen, *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature, 1825-1914*, (University of Wales Press, 2009): 130.

<sup>203</sup> Stephen, *The Science of Ethics*, 46.

as is the case of Scrooge in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), or, as for Dorian and Jekyll, to die for their sins. This places the focus of 'evil' on the main characters rather than on their enemies, as is characteristic of Victorian literature. The new idea that evil could even be the most familiar of individuals led to the conclusion that, although one can be evil, one can also have a good side; the human mind has the capability to be more than one thing at the same time, therefore it is split between two opposites.

### 3. The Split of the Self

#### 3.1. The Figure of the Doppelgänger

This concept of a divided identity is common ground to both Wilde and Stevenson's novels: "both Dorian Gray's portrait and Mr. Hyde are grotesque manifestations of secret opposite identities,"<sup>204</sup> while their owners, respectively Dorian and Dr. Jekyll, maintain their original appearances and even more so, their respectability, when facing society.

The concept of the *doppelgänger* was firstly introduced by Johann Paul Friedrich Richter —also known as Jean Paul—in 1796, and it has been a recurrent resource in literature ever since. They are, in essence, an evil twin that only resembles the main character in their physical appearance. Dimitri Vardoulakis asserts, "doppelgänger characters tend to be associated with evil and the demonic; thus one can infer that the Doppelgänger presents a notion of the subject/subjectivity that is defective, disjunct, split, threatening, spectral."<sup>205</sup> In the instance of Dorian and Dr. Jekyll, they are not similar to their counterpart characters in looks, which differ from the concept of doppelgänger. The similarity, however, lies in the presence of a double identity that represents evil and cruelty. In Freud's perception, narcissism is essential for the doppelgänger as "narcissism is what facilitates the movement from infantile or primitive wish to repression and fear—from the canny to the uncanny."<sup>206</sup> This can be perceived in Dorian's innocent wish to remain the boy in the portrait, and the dark consequences it entails.

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<sup>204</sup> David E. Robinson, "The Gothic Genre, Classical Allusion and Other Influences in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," *Literator* 42, no 1 (2021): 3.

<sup>205</sup> Dimitris Vardoulakis, "The Return of Negation: The Doppelgänger in Freud's 'The Uncanny,'" *SubStance* 35, no. 2 (2006): 100.

<sup>206</sup> Vardoulakis, "The Return of Negation," 108.

In the case of Dorian Gray, the division of his identity is shown by the appearance of his portrait; however, his painted image only reflects the darkness of his soul, since it does not have the ability to express itself. The young and beautiful appearance that he preserves is nothing but a remnant of what he once was. A vessel that remains unaltered by the passage of time, which is not in harmony with the development of Dorian's character. There is no double personality, for the side that shows the signals of a life lived in sin, does not possess a life whatsoever; it merely remarks the beauty he used to possess, and that he lost by dwelling on his hedonistic tendencies. The youthful looks in the picture show, not a different identity, but a different version of Dorian he could have been, had he chosen a different path. The division here is based on the fact that human beings have the ability to choose good or evil, even if they are predisposed to one side. Dorian was naturally a good person, yet his choices were what led him astray, for "Dorian is of both light and dark worlds; he is the living embodiment and symbol of the dualism of the light and shadow elements of existence."<sup>207</sup>

In Stevenson's work, Jekyll and Hyde's division is centred on the psychological area: the physical differentiation between them is a requirement to pass unrecognised, but the fact that they actually constitute two different individuals is due to Jekyll's hypocrisy of not wanting to be responsible for Hyde's evil and for Jekyll's respectability, for they threaten each other. As Jekyll reflects in his diary "it was on the moral side, and in my own person, that I learned to recognise the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both."<sup>208</sup>

Although there are human feelings in Jekyll which on the contrary are not present in Hyde, it could be assumed that Jekyll is essentially capable of committing every crime Hyde does, since what represses him is not his own morals or principles, but what society will think of him. Hyde, at the same time, shows certain behaviours that would not be proper of a madman, but rather of a civilised man. The fact that they share features such as

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<sup>207</sup> Robinson, "The Gothic Genre", 3.

<sup>208</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Penguin Classics, 2023): 56.

handwriting sign that the essence of Jekyll's identity cannot be suppressed or divided, for their nature is that of one single being.

A key idea that opposes both Dorian and Jekyll's desires lies in the fact that they both desire what for the other is but a consequence of their process. Jekyll does not aim to look like Hyde does; he aims for his actions to go unpunished and his riddance of social obligations, so the physique simply works as a means to grant him the possibility to do so while remaining unnoticed. In the case of Dorian's, his appearance is not something secondary but the initial fuel to the whole division of the self that works as the main concept of the novel. What Dorian and Jekyll expect from society are opposing behaviours: Dorian searches for popularity and approval, while Jekyll longs to be set apart from social life and all the pretence that it entails. The versions of themselves that fit into society's norms are, therefore, opposing: Dorian's depraved self is admired and encouraged, while Hyde's is hated and feared. This is due to the fact that one of them is concealing his true face, that which reflects his soul, while the other's evilness shows itself—Jekyll is loved in spite of sharing Hyde's instincts—. As long as looks do not accompany what the mind possesses, people will trust (and hope) that they can believe in what they see.

### 3.2. The Hedonist versus the Scientist

Wilde's reference to Narcissus is crucial to understand Dorian's obsession with his own beauty. Lord Henry Wotton describes Dorian at the start as a Narcissus,<sup>209</sup> and Dorian, at the same time describes his lover Sibyl Vane as a white narcissus.<sup>210</sup> She is not, however, absorbed by her own image—she would represent Narcissus lover, Echo—but by Dorian's, and it is their obsession for his beauty that eventually kills both of them. Wilde's portrayal of dandyism is set, primarily, on the character of Lord Henry, and on Dorian by influence. These characters personalise the values of the Aesthetes, who place the relevance of beauty over that of intellect. For although Basil Hallward is a painter who maintains the Aesthetic tradition alive,<sup>211</sup> he does not share the idea that beauty should be so highly praised: "For Wilde, the new dandy is a refined, elegant Aesthete, who contemplates beauty whilst

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<sup>209</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Modern Library, 2004): 3.

<sup>210</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 86.

<sup>211</sup> Olga Vainshtein, "Oscar Wilde," in *Fashioning the Dandy: Style and Manners* (Anthem Press, 2023): 153.



perfecting his own lifestyle: in this, Wilde saw the manifesto of creative hedonism. [For Baudelaire] the dandy was far closer to the artist [...] for Wilde, the contemplative, reflective critic is closer to the truth than the artist himself.”<sup>212</sup> Therefore, in these terms, Lord Henry and Dorian represent the ideal of a hedonist dandy, who can appreciate art and beauty from the perspective of an observer.

His responsibility is not to create art but to enjoy it. In the same manner, he perceives his duty to be dwelling on the many pleasures of life, which he can afford, according to Lord Henry because “beautiful sins, like beautiful things, are the privilege of the rich.”<sup>213</sup> In spite of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* being an Aesthetic novel with a hedonist hero, it is not portrayed as an idealised life to pursue. The hedonistic tendencies are shown as a warning that, when aesthetics are adopted as the main guiding principle in life, separated from intellect and morals, they lose meaning and result in the decadence and corruption of the beauty they worship. On the other hand, there is the case of Jekyll, in whose story there is no trace of hedonism. It is, precisely, his transformation that provides him with the opposite image of that of a beautiful or appealing one. However, the goal for him is that it serves his purpose as a concealer of his identity, as it eventually does.

Jekyll’s motive is the eagerness of a scientist to investigate and develop an experiment that could constitute a milestone in his career. For Jekyll, his desire to get rid of his ties to society is greater than the potential consequences he may suffer under Hyde’s identity, including the loss of his own person. Without his scientific knowledge, he would not have been able to develop the transformation into Hyde. Hence the contradiction that it takes a respectable and acclaimed doctor—a profession associated with care and a predisposition for honourable deeds—to create a heartless monster. Being Hyde a scientific experiment, it makes Jekyll conscious and observant of the consequences of his progress; he is never oblivious to his losing control over Hyde. On the contrary, Jekyll always shows a deep consciousness of the processes that take place within himself. Thus, even though he struggled to keep both identities divided, he knew from the start what he was facing: “I

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<sup>212</sup> Vainshtein, *Fashioning the Dandy*, 153.

<sup>213</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 88.

hesitated long before I put this theory to the test of practice. I knew well that I risked death,"<sup>214</sup> yet he willingly assumed this for the sake of discovering how far he could reach.

Without Hyde, Jekyll would not have been able to discover the core of his identity, for although he realised the evil instincts that hid within his soul, he would have never taken action on them from the perspective of Jekyll. From his perspective, therefore, it was preferable to die pursuing the division of his dual nature, than to remain one and keep his other side concealed forever. The fact that he chose to give life to Mr. Hyde is a sign that cruelty was a remarkably influential side of his nature, he was not, as Dorian, oblivious of his actions.

### 3.3. Cruel Instincts versus Naivety

In his work *The Myth of Evil* (2006), Phillip Cole explores the concept as divided into 'pure evil' and 'impure evil'. The first one can be understood as reserved for the supernatural elements, for it constitutes evil for the sole sake of evil. On the other hand, human beings are, as he suggests, capable of an impure sort of evil, that which is motivated by human longings such as fame, wealth or power.<sup>215</sup> Dr. Jekyll's evil behaviours do not provide him with any of these benefits except for his own satisfaction and fulfilment, but these desires are essentially to do wrong with no consequence whatsoever. This hence locates his actions closer to Cole's conception of 'pure evil', since they are not motivated by a logical human longing.

Mr. Utterson, on meeting Hyde, thought "O my poor old Harry Jekyll, if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is on that of your new friend,"<sup>216</sup> and according to Cole, the idea of pure evil revolves around the key figure of Satan.<sup>217</sup> At the time, as previously mentioned, morality was closely related to religious faith, hence evil and unethical behaviours were associated to its counterpart: heresy, temptation, and the devil. The unspeakable nature of Hyde's appearance and the character's inability to describe him

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<sup>214</sup> Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 57.

<sup>215</sup> Phillip Cole, *The Myth of Evil: Demonizing the Enemy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006): 3.

<sup>216</sup> Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 16.

<sup>217</sup> Cole, *The Myth of Evil*, 4.

support the idea that, even though Hyde's essence is not a supernatural one, he does not constitute something which human beings are able to recognise.

As ventured by Mr. Utterson, it is perhaps "the mere radiance of a foul soul that thus transpires through, and transfigures, its clay continent."<sup>218</sup> However, this statement implies that there would be a certain substance—namely, the soul—which does not fall into the realm of science, but is present nevertheless. This would constitute the closest element to the supernatural to be found in this novel, and it is not even made explicit: it is hence its inexplicability which makes it otherworldly and therefore unknown to the human eye. Again relevant to mention Sigmund Freud and his essay of 1919 'Das Unheimliche'—'The uncanny'—in which he develops the idea of the familiar becoming strange, as happens with Dr. Jekyll, friendly neighbour to everyone until he creates Mr. Hyde, who sows terror among what used to be his dearest friends.

The easiness and naturality with which Jekyll carries Hyde at the beginning, before the former takes over both of them, proves that he is comfortable under the skin of Hyde and he has enough self-confidence to bring Dr. Jekyll into the picture, rather than avoid any relation with his alter-ego. Hyde's actions come naturally to the doctor, for they are his truest instincts. In *Dorian Gray*, the root of evil does not stand by itself, it grows from an ache to live intensely, be popular among society's most respectable members and dwell in life's earthly pleasures. These are all comprehensive desires, yet, under the wrong influence (as is the case with Dorian and Lord Henry) and taken to the extreme, they lead to a corruption of the soul and the lines that limit one's morals, start to blur until there are no lines whatsoever. This does not mean that Dorian becomes evil, but that evil becomes a means for him to fulfil his goals, therefore his sins fall into Cole's 'impure evil', for they are motivated by human ambitions that people can easily relate to, to one extent or another.

The fact that his actions are not motivated by evil itself does not mean that he is not deliberately embracing that way of life as his own. Although at the beginning he was only a naïve and malleable young boy, he does not remain so forever. The case with him is that, by the time he gains awareness about his behaviours and tendencies, these are too deeply ingrained in his personality and at a certain point, he willingly makes the decision to remain

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<sup>218</sup> Stevenson, 16.

in that path of life. However, it is not in his nature and he needs to separate himself from his sins, for which he relies on opium-dens, “where one could buy oblivion, dens of horror where the memory of old sins could be destroyed by the madness of sins that were new.”<sup>219</sup>

In this sense, the embodiment of sin is given in different ways from one character to another: on the one hand there is the persona of Hyde, which acts with premeditation on evil instincts that have been present within himself all his life. On the other hand, Dorian constitutes a representation of the weakness of the human mind and body, the lengths to which an individual may go only by letting himself get over-influenced by temptation and vices that were introduced into his knowledge by someone else or even society. Dorian, under Sibyl Vane’s guidance could have been able to find the good in him that he denigrated, as he even claimed that her trust made him faithful, her belief made him good, and when he was with her he regretted all that Lord Henry had taught him.<sup>220</sup> Dorian, however, is shown to be unable to make decisions by himself, whether he chooses to be good or not, it is under someone else’s influence, even though he does recognise what is morally acceptable from what is not. One of the very few situations in which he acted on his own terms, was the moment he traded his soul for the portrait’s image, and even then, he invoked this unknowingly.

#### 4. The Faustian Bargain and the Overreacher

This section follows the influence of two specific archetypes: the Faustian Bargain and the Overreacher. Firstly, the Faustian Bargain would be addressed. This concept has its root in Christopher Marlowe’s play *Doctor Faustus* written in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and first performed around 1594. The doctor makes a pact with the devil Mephistopheles in order to gain unimaginable wisdom and magical powers, in exchange for his soul. The idea of giving in to temptation and paying with one’s own life has been a resource in literary works for further back as the Original Sin goes, being present even in Greek mythology. The same concept was then explored by Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667), where he portrays the first act of disobedience and The Fall of Man. Even in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1954) the

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<sup>219</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 209.

<sup>220</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 87.

One Ring works as an embodiment of corruption and temptation to power, and reveals the moral integrity of its bearers in the way they respond to its influence. The case of Sméagol is the closest reference to the processes of Dorian and Dr. Jekyll. He commits murder in order to possess the Ring and is rewarded with an unnaturally long life. He deals with the split of his identity between the Hobbit he used to be—Sméagol—and the persona developed under the influence of the Ring—Gollum—. In the same way that all other mentioned characters succumbed to the object of their desires and died for them, he gave his soul to the Ring and with its destruction came his downfall.

This concept is essential in understanding Dorian's intertwinement with his portrait. In Marlowe's play, Faust considers that "the medical writings of Galen are worthless if one cannot raise the dead or grant the gift of eternal life,"<sup>221</sup> which claim comes close to the mentality of Dorian and Jekyll. Lord Henry educates Dorian into believing that intellect will not contribute to his beauty and, therefore, there is nothing in it for him. Jekyll, at the same time, uses his medical knowledge to alter his being, so this ambitious project becomes his reason for living. Jekyll's bargain is not as officially stated as Dorian's, who, in spite of not signing a physical contract like Faust, expresses his trade to Basil and Lord Henry: "If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!"<sup>222</sup> In the case of Jekyll, his own experiment is a pact with the evil side in him to set him free. He assumes the fact that his sins will lead to his decay in exchange for being able to live in Hyde's skin for a while.

Although there is no physical hell in the novels of Stevenson and Wilde, in Marlowe's play, as Kaličanin explains, "Mephistopheles denies the existence of any local Hell, and defines it instead as a state of mind."<sup>223</sup> This applies to Dorian and Jekyll, who both create their own personal Hell: one that grows from their ambitions and vices. But this Hell is not somewhere they end up in, it is ingrained in their mind and their being, unknown and unreachable to anyone but them. This concept of the Faustian Bargain also carries the

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<sup>221</sup> Milena Kaličanin, "Dr. Faustus," in *The Faustian Motif in the Tragedies by Christopher Marlowe* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 20.

<sup>222</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 29.

<sup>223</sup> Kaličanin, *The Faustian Motif*, 25.

implication of impossibility for the atonement of one's sins. Both Dorian and Jekyll, just like Faust, navigate through the scarce moments where they are overcome by the shame and remorse that their actions produce upon their moral side. This guilt, however, is not as strong a force as the desires that push them to corruption, so they find themselves unable to regret their ill-doings.

The concept of the 'overreacher' is explained in depth by Harry Levin's *The Overreacher: A Study of Christopher Marlowe* (1952). Here, he claims that the overreacher hero leads the fate of his life until his own ambition plays against himself, and his tragedy constitutes "rather an assertion of man's will than an acceptance of God's."<sup>224</sup> The Myth of Icarus,<sup>225</sup> from Greek mythology, is one of the early references there are about the figure of an overreacher. As the myth narrates, Icarus had to flee from Crete with his father Daedalus, who built a pair of wings for each of them. As they flew, Daedalus warned his son not to fly too high, for the sun's heat would melt his waxen wings and he would fall to his death. Icarus, however, blinded and mesmerised by his desire to ascend as much as he could, flew too close to the sun and died.

In this resource, one can recognise a hero tempted by an ambitious desire, a voice of conscience, and a lethal consequence for ignoring the message of that voice. This idea can be easily transferred to the novels of reference within this project: Dorian longs to preserve his youthful beauty; he ignores his friend Basil Hallward's warnings and advice, and dies for his own choices. The same is the case with Jekyll, whose desire is to split his identity. In this case, it is his friend Mr. Utterson who pushes him towards morality, even the essence of Jekyll in himself warns him against damnation. But his choices, once again, lead him into a doomed death.

The key idea is the fact that those characters considered themselves to be special, to be superior to the rest of their fellow human beings, and in thinking that, they ignored warnings that they believed would not apply to them, for they constituted an exception. The previously introduced 'Faustian bargain' implies the figure of an overreacher, portrayed by Faust in Marlowe, who aims to achieve a life that surpasses the limits of human ability. He

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<sup>224</sup> Harry Levin, *The Overreacher: A Study of Christopher Marlowe* (Harvard University Press, 1952), 24.

<sup>225</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book 8: 183-259.

aims to acquire knowledge and powers that do not belong in the human mind. As is the case of Jekyll, who attempts to go against nature to separate one being into two, or Dorian who tries to alter the effects of the passage of time assuming it to be something that he could avoid. These are all goals that go out of human control, yet these characters, aiming to fight the natural order of the world, think they possess knowledge enough or power enough to find a manner in order to see their desires fulfilled.

The “hubris,” from ancient Greek ὑβρις, etymologically excessive pride or defiance of the gods leading to nemesis, is a personality trait that makes reference to a dangerous level of overconfidence and arrogance. In the Greek tradition, these characters thought themselves to be closer to the deities than to their fellow human beings, and the consequence was usually a punishment from the gods. In adaptation to the modern perspective, the concept of a punishment from the gods has been replaced by the concept of ‘karma’, or simply by the fact that actions lead to consequences.

In essence, this is not but the consequence of a narcissistic personality and extremely nurtured egos that make the characters believe they are above the natural laws, or any entity such as a god or the devil. However, in the fact that all of these characters die for their sins and delusions of grandeur, it can be understood that they were, in fact, not the almighty beings they thought themselves to be. It was in their playing to be a God-like figure that they succumbed to the most humanly possible perdition: death.

The Gothic novel, as it dwells on the darkest side of human beings, does not commonly incline towards the atonement of its heroes since it does not portray an image of true repentance in them. The characters of Wilde and Stevenson do not regret their evil doings, rather the fact that these could not be maintained in time and did not have the outcome they had foreseen.

The reader is kept, throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in a constant state of expectation, waiting for the heroes to amend their vile tendencies and atone for their life in sin. This moment, however, never comes, for the periods of regret and shame are so scarce and fleeting that they never become actions. The fact that these characters are finally doomed to decay and a tragic death does not depend on external factors, or comes sentenced by fate. The individuals they were at the beginning

of the novels were not yet doomed, they gradually sentenced themselves through their own actions and choices, until the consequences became inevitable.

It is during the *fin de siècle* that the popularisation of the concept of decadence spread among authors, and it provided a renewed tendency for the downfall of their heroes, which had been formerly present in numerous literary works from the Bible, to Shakespeare. The topic was adapted to different traditions and time periods, but the essence of the concept remains unaltered. Slight considerations of repentance are portrayed in Stevenson and Wilde's heroes as something distant and weak, practically non-existent. It constitutes no threat whatsoever for the centrifugal force of a sinful life, and hence this absence leaves no adversary for evil in the struggle to conquer the characters' minds, hearts and souls. At this point, once the evil side has taken control, all sense of will-power is lost and the characters drift towards the fatal outcome of the life they built.

Although both of them succumb to their vices and their dark side, in a sense, it can be perceived in Jekyll a last remnant of humanity, which he struggles to preserve, for his moral side is as dearest to him as his evil one. In the case of Dorian, the only purity and benevolence left in him is in the physical appearance that sources from the portrait, for in his personality there is, by the end, no trace of a moral side or even a conscience.

## 5. Conclusion

The eternal division of human nature into good and evil is something inherent and inexorable, that was firstly introduced into literature during the Victorian Era. Originally in literature, the hero was consistently guided by moral integrity—representing an ideal of behavioural perfection hardly achievable for everyday men and women. It was during this period of literary development that it became characteristic to create individuals as human as possible, which implied flawed in many ways: easily impressed, naïve, driven by desires and impulses, and who lose sight of their moral compass along the way. Many factors, as much external as internal, may provoke the course of a life to gravitate either way. The analysis of characters such as Dr. Jekyll or Dorian show that knowledge and conscious recognition of what is ethical and what is not does not constitute reason enough to act morally if one's desires lie on the other side. Moreover, society does not necessarily



constitute an ethical party. In the case of Dr. Jekyll it is his social surroundings that keep him from sin. However, for Dorian, it is the vices and desires that come with a snobbish social environment that lead him to degradation. In this distinction it is perceived that evil can be inherent in an individual or introduced to them through influence if one is naïve enough.

Wilde and Stevenson complement each other in demonstrating that there is not only one pathway to a sinful life. The journeys of Dorian and Jekyll develop in completely opposing contexts, their longings and desires are different, their transformations happen through different means—magic and science—, and even their approaches to life are that of a doctor and a dandy, with nothing in common with each other except for their need to satisfy certain desires that fall in the realm of the immoral. It can be perceived through this comparison, that the characters do not become their evil counterparts only by determination of their circumstances and environment. The path to decadence and sin is not fixed to certain recognisable behaviours but it is a cumulus of choices, some innocent and some wicked, that leads human beings to the final outcome of their lives.

All of these factors shape characters that follow previous archetypes, with recognisable processes of transformation and action that resemble those of Faust and Icarus, which eventually lead to foreseen downfalls. The difference that quite describes their pure natures and tendencies, could be reduced to their final courses of action once they are fully conscious of the situations they are facing: when the time comes that they are left to one final determination. In the case of Dr. Jekyll, he assumes the dooming consequences of his own deeds with repentance that he could not control his own experiment, yet not for his vile actions. Dorian, instead of killing the monster, attempts to destroy proof that he is one in a final act of vanity. The identities may be split, since in both cases there are two different entities, but this does not entail that the individual becomes two different beings, they remain one, hence they die as one.

The idea that both good and evil reside in them does not mean they are two different people at once, it is proof they are humans. As such, they are inherently both, and are capable of choosing the side they want to empower. The fact that makes them most inhuman is achieving that division, not their desire to do so, for it is a human's feature to avoid assuming the sins and wrongs of oneself. It is, therefore, necessary that they perish—

and that they do so by their own hands—, for this closes the cycle of the downfall, characteristic of Victorian literature. The souls of Dorian and Dr. Jekyll never really had a chance for atonement, for they never desired one. Had they desperately searched for redemption, they would have reached it. However, once evil imposes itself over morality, it corrupts its way until there is nothing left of the personality that used to be there.

Taken together, this paper conveys deep analysis of human tendencies, providing a study on horror fiction not based on fantastic elements—yet including them. The focus is placed on common flaws and behaviours that lead to that known feeling of uneasiness characteristic of Gothic works and which is very much present in today's cinema and literature. As history evolves, so do societies and their cultures, yet, the topics dealt with in this paper have been a resource since ancient times, and most interestingly, still are nowadays. Wilde and Stevenson portray in their novels extremely flawed characters, which serve as raw examples of the impact choices have on human lives. They were not the first ones to do so and certainly not the last ones, however, their contribution has adapted an old topic to modern literature. Both of their works, as much *Dorian* as *Dr. Jekyll*, as complete as they are on their own, gain a deeper sense in their comparison, as this paper has shown.

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### Notes on contributor

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