Elements of a Gothic novel in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Contents

1 Preface

In this essay, I am first going to give a short and straighforward definition of the Gothic novel, with a summary of it's history, it's themes and a few famous authors. My aim is to provide an overview of the Gothic motifs appearing in Oscar Wilde's *The picture of Dorian Gray* and an approach of interpretation for some of them.

2 Definition of a Gothic novel

2.1 The genre of the Gothic novel

A new genre of fictional prose was introduced in the early 18th century. It was known as "Gothic Novel" in England, as "Schauerroman" in Germany and as "Novel Noir" in France. The term "Gothic" used to refer to the German tribe of the Goths, and lateron signified "Germanic", then "medieval". It now identifies a style of architecture.

The Gothic novel, also known as "Gothic romance", was initiated by Horace Warpol's *Castle of Otranto, a Gothic Story* (1764), and spread over the 19th century.[1] Generally, haunted places such as castles, crypts, gloomy mansions and convents were a popular setting to embody the Gothic theme.[2] An other important means to establish the typical uncanny atmosphere was the use of supernatural elements.

The Gothic genre emerged directly from changes in the cultural emphasis of the eighteenth century; it stood for the contrast between the old-fashioned and the modern, the barbaric opposed to the civilized and often for the English opposed to the European or Frenchified, which suited the Victorianic idea well. Gothic was always the archaic, the pagan, which refused to yield to the establishment of a civilized and well-regulated society.[3]

The evolution of the Gothic genre came - by no means - suddenly; a famous and typical passage that shows the way poets predicted and anticipated the movement of the Gothic fiction can be found in *Night-Piece on Death* by Thomas Parnell's (1833, first published 1722):

> By the blue taper's trembling light,
> No more I waste the wakeful night,
> Intent with endless view to pore
> The schoolmen and the sages o'er:
> Their books from wisdom widely stray,

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[1] see Abrams, M. H., *A Glossary of literary terms*, 69

[2] see Drabble, Margret and Stringer, Jenny, *Concise companion to English literature*, 268

[3] see Punter, David and Byron, Glennis, *The Gothic*, 7-8

> Or point at best the longest way.
> I'll seek a readier path, and go
> Where wisdom's surely taught below. (1-7)[4]

Parnell is saying something extremely radical for the times: He is not impressed by the limits of the human species. According to his style of writing, it is required to take a quicker and more frightening way to find wisdom. As he says, one can best, or possibly even only, explore the secrets of life by meditation on it's extremest limit: death.[5]

2.2   Typical motifs and characters

The following motifs are common in the Gothic style and appear in almost every piece of literature belonging to the Gothic fiction:

- Uncanny environments such as castles, dungeons, prisons, cemeteries, ...

- The supernatural

- Monsters

- Doppelgängers

- Magic Objects

- Femme fatals

- Demons

- Walking skeletons

- The devil

- Witches and witchcraft

- Science used for a bad purpose

After all, it is quite surprising, how many of these themes appear in *The picture of Dorian Gray*, even if implicitly or indirectly.

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[4]Quotation after Punter and Byron, 11
[5]see Punter and Byron, 11

2.3 Famous works

A list of famous novels belonging to the Gothic genre, ordered chronologically. Novels marking the begin of a new period and other particularities are shortly described.

- *The Castle of Otranto* - Horace Walpole, 1764. The work inaugurating the genre

- *The Mysteries of Udolpho* - Ann Radcliffe, 1794

- *The Monk* - Matthew Gregory Lewis, 1796

- *The Italian* - Ann Radcliffe, 1797

- *The Manuscript found in Saragossa* - Jan Potocki, 1805

- *Frankenstein* - Mary Shelley, 1818

- *Northanger Abbey* - Jane Austen, 1818. This well-known novel was a parody making fun of the vast interest of society in Gothic novels. It marked the end of the genre's first phase[6]

- *Melmoth the Wanderer* - Charles Maturin, 1820

- *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* - Charles Dickens, 1870

- *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* - Robert Louis Stevenson, 1886. This novel introduced the "Gothic revival"

- *Dracula* - Bram Stoker, 1897

- *The Hound of the Baskervilles* - Arthur Conan Doyle, 1902

3 Influences on the novel

3.1 The time of writing

At the last decades of the Victorian period, when Oscar Wilde wrote *The picture of Dorian Gray*, the golden times of the Gothic Fiction had already passed. It was rather a curious revival of the Gothic, which is often referred to as the "Gothic revival", further famous pieces of literature of this era were R. L. Stephenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).[7]

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[6]see Schellinger, Paul *Encyclopedia of the novel volume 1*, 498

[7]see Drabble and Stringer, 269

3.2   Literary influences

Before writing *Dorian Gray*, Wilde had already used the well-known motifs of Gothic fiction: His short-story *The Canterville Ghost* parodied the classical ghost stories.[8]

Also, Oscar Wilde is said to have based *The picture of Dorian Gray* on Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, one of the most famous examples of Gothic novels:

> Instead of making generalizations [...] we may most usefully inquire into the relationship of Wilde's novel to it by looking closely at the Gothic noval that was most likely on his mind when he wrote *Dorian Gray*. Charles R. Maturin [...] was an ancestor of Wilde; in fact, Wilde mentions his novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* and acknowledges the family relationship with some pride - Maturin was his grand-uncle (Letters, p. 520).[9]

What Lewis Poteet writes in his article makes perfect sense. One could say, that *Melmoth the Wanderer* provides patterns for *Dorian Gray*: As an example, the protagonist if *Melmoth* is able to survive 150 years without aging. The fact that Wilde had a Gothic novel as his inspiration is also an explanation for the big amount of Gothic elements in *Dorian Gray*.

4   Elements of Gothic fiction appearing in *The picture of Dorian Gray*

4.1   The devil

Quite early, it becomes apparent that the devil is impersonated by Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Henry, a wicked, malicious man who often utters aphorisms, uses his wisdom to seduce and to spoil Dorian with his new hedonism and his immoral opinions. Lord Henry also gives Dorian the poisonous yellow book, which totally fascinates him[10] and influences him badly, he even brings him to the loss of his "natural" innocence and makes him a murderer.

A fact supporting this thesis is that Lord Henry Wottons name is an aptronym: He is often called "Harry", and "old Harry" is a synonym for the devil.

4.2   The atmosphere

The scary atmosphere, the most striking device of Gothic fiction, is created several times throughout the novel. One of these scenes is the moment Dorian shows Basil the room where he hides the painting:

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[8]Mulvey-Roberts, Marie (editor), *The handbook to Gothic literature*, 252
[9]Poteet, Lewis, in *Modern Fiction Studies 17*, 240
[10]see Wilde, Oscar *The picture of Dorian Gray*, 183

> They walked softly, as men do instinctively at night. The lamp cast fantastic shadows on the wall and staircase. A rising wind made some of the windows rattle.[11]

A second scene conveying this mood is the moment Dorian attempts to visit the opium den:

> A cold rain began to fall, and the blurred street-lamps looked ghastly in the dripping mist. The public-houses were just closing, and dim men and women were clustering in broken groups round their doors. From some of the bars came the sound of a horrible laughter. In others drunkards brawled and screamed.[12]

4.3 The bargain with the devil

The most famous occurence of a character selling it's soul to the devil can certainly be found in Goethe's *Faust*. Unlike Faust, Dorian doesn't redeem himself. The moment Dorian sells his soul unconsciensly takes place in the first chapter, when he says "I would give my soul"[13] for the priviledge of being young for the rest of his life. He wants to gain absolution and to lead a normal life again[14], but fails, and finally receives his punishment.

4.4 The secret room

Oscar Wildes seems to find some fascination in the old schoolroom mentioned in chapter X. The schoolroom used to be a study and a play-room for Dorian Gray, when he was a child, and was locked for all the time. But now, that Dorian needs a new place to hide away the painting and to conceal the fact that he sold his soul, Dorian reopens it. Oscar Wildes description features all elements we already now from Gothic novels: Old books, mice, faded tapestries, windows rattling in the wind and a smell of mildew.

The theme of locking something in also appears frequently in Gothic novels, often in connection with castles. In this instance, the room is used to lock away the painting.

4.5 The supernatural

There is no rational explanation for the fact that the picture ages and changes, while Dorian himself doesn't. It is the supernatural element, which makes the whole plot work. The most supernatural moment of the novel is the end, when Dorian dies and his dead body is old and wrinkled, and the picture recovers it's old state magically.

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[11] Wilde, 229
[12] Wilde, 270
[13] Wilde, 43
[14] see Wilde, 316

4.6 The doppelgänger-motif

The theme of the doppelgänger appears regularly in the Gothic literature, as a consequence of the scientific belief that there is a certain inner duality in every human being[15].

In *Dorian Gray*, the doppelgänger-motif doesn't appear in it's original form. But, the spell which is put on Dorian and the painting certainly reminds of the doppelgänger-motif. On one hand, there is Dorians outward appearence which doesn't change at all for eighteen years, on the other hand there is Basil's marvellous painting, which changes accordingly to Dorian Gray's character.

Presumably, Oscar Wilde uses this theme to show that behind every beautiful thing can be something evil, and that one should never trust the superficial impression of something.

4.7 The sudden break-out of violence

Horror and violence break out suddenly and completely unexpected: When Dorian shows Basil Hallward the altered painting, Dorian feels a sudden wave of hatred for Basil ("The mad passion of a hunted animal stirred within him, and he loathed the man [...] more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything."[16]). The process of Dorian stabbing the painter is discribed in detail ("Something began to trickle on the floor."[17]), and the sick and mysterious lack of feelings in Dorian while murdering the man is actually frightening.

4.8 "Bad" science

Though the enlightenment had already left it's impress on society and the desire to actually *know* was slowly getting bigger than the belief in the ideas of the Church, when *The picture of Dorian Gray* was written, science was still depicted as something bad and sinister in Gothic novels. Famous examples are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), in which a creature is being assembled from fragments, or R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).

In *The picture of Dorian Gray*, the science theme appears twice. Firstly, when Dorian blackmails Alan Campbell (a former friend if him who's a scientist) to get rid of Basil's dead body by dissolving it (chapter XIV), Campbell's equipment is discribed this way:

> [...] the servant entered, carrying a large mahogany chest of chemicals, with a long coil of steel and platinum wire and two rather curiously-shaped iron clamps.[18]

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[15]see Mulvey-Roberts, 264
[16]Wilde, 235
[17]Wilde, 235
[18]Wilde, 255

> He heard Campbell bringing in the heavy chest, and the irons, and the other things that he had required for his dreadful work.[19]

The discriptions of Campbell's chemicals and gadgets surely isn't positive at all; it even reminds of the torture devices and diabolical machines known from other Gothic novels. The science theme can also be found in the relationsship between Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray himself: Lord Henry seems to treat Dorian as the subject of an experiment. I base this thesis on following excerpts:

> [..] and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hand, and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results.[20]

> I hope that Dorian will make this girl his wife, [...] and then suddenly become fascinated by some one else. He would be a wonderful study.[21]

Lord Henry Wotton likes to "vivisect"[22] people, and doesn't respect their dignity as human beings; all these scenes prove how Lord Henry uses Dorian only for his own interests.

4.9 Magical objects and the total dedication to things

The yellow book (which is said to be *À rebours* by French novelist Joris-Karl Huysman[23]) Lord Henry sends to Dorian Gray in chapter X totally fascinates Dorian, he himself says that he "forgot how the time was going"[24]. The book lets "all sins of the world pass in dumb show before him"[25], and he cannot free himself from it, or what makes it even worse, he does not even try to[26]. Certainly, books can offer a lot of fascination, but not in the extent as the yellow book in *Dorian Gray* does. Furthermore, the yellow book is one step forward in the transformation of Dorian into a murderer with no remorse.

5 Conclusion

The picture of Dorian Gray is not a typical Gothic novel. But, as this essay tries to explain, it contains more Gothic elements than one would believe after reading it superficially. The big amount of Gothic themes is based on the influences of both literature and history at the time Wilde wrote his brilliant novel, and in my mind, it is exactly what makes the novel as brilliant as it is.

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[19]Wilde, 257
[20]Wilde, 90
[21]Wilde, 112
[22]Wilde, 26
[23]see Poteet, 239
[24]Wilde, 184
[25]Wilde, 183
[26]Wilde, 185

6 Bibliography

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7 Further reading

For further reading about the Gothic style, I especially recommend *The handbook to Gothic literature* and *The Gothic*. There is also an extremly well-known work called *The Gothic novel* by Brendan Hennessy (Harlow: Longman, 1978), which is rare and hard to get but get's quoted in nearly all essays concerning the Gothic novel.

8 Erklärung

Hiermit erkläre ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbstständig und ohne fremde Hilfe verfasst und nur die im Literaturverzeichnis aufgeführten Quellen und Hilfsmittel benützt habe.

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