



JACLR

*Journal of Artistic
Creation & Literary
Research*

JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research is a bi-annual, peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access Graduate Student Journal of the Universidad Complutense Madrid that publishes interdisciplinary research on literary studies, critical theory, applied linguistics and semiotics, and educational issues. The journal also publishes original contributions in artistic creation in order to promote these works.

Volume 7 Issue 2 (December 2019) Article 4

Nour Houda Lamrabat Benkacem-Ziani

"Morality in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*"

Recommended Citation

Lamrabat Benkacem-Ziani, Nour Houda. "Morality in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 7.2.4 (2019): 42-58

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Abstract: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the only novel written by Oscar Wilde that made a strong impression as much in the Victorian times as the contemporary age. This essay aims at analysing the morality behind the story of Dorian Gray through a close philosophical approach; mainly, through Nietzsche's criticism on morality. Furthermore, the objectives of this paper are: to understand the social background in which works such as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* existed, to come to some conclusions about the intention of Wilde when he defended the purpose of aestheticism considering that many of his works dealt with morality and to reflect on the role of morality in art.

Keywords: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde, Friedrich Nietzsche, Morality, Aestheticism, Victorian Literature.

Nour Houda Lamrabat Benkacem-Ziani

Morality in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

0. Introduction

Throughout history, morality, as well as other philosophical concerns of the human world, has been an important topic to be considered when writing books. One of the reflections intended to be captured was how the ideal society should be. In the case of literature, there are many books that deal with morality in very different ways. For instance, Plato's *Republic*,

Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, etc. These books have in common with Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that they all treat the theme of morality through the development of the plot.

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891), which is the only novel written by Oscar Wilde, has been considered one of the most controversial stories of the 19th century among other works such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. As an example, Joyce Carol Oates mentions in her article about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that Gerald Weales, who wrote an introduction for this book, defined it as "terribly *fin de siècle*" (qtd. in Oates 420) and she adds that many critics as well described Wilde's work as decadent and simply aesthetic. As we will see later, there is not only one feature for the negative reaction that Oscar Wilde received after publishing his novel, but there are actually various reasons that provoked opposing opinions, mainly due to the Victorian context and the Victorians' habit of searching moral and instructive meanings of the plot.

For this reason, this may not be only seen as a literary and philosophical approach, but also as an anthropological, psychological and social one. Having taken this into account, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may be now observed in a deeper way than before and that could bring a sort of admiration for the creation of such a novel that contains large dilemmas. In fact, this essay is motivated by the interest to answer questions about human nature present in the story, for example, the influence that a person, in this case Dorian, can receive from art and how this last one could serve as a tool beyond the mere aesthetic pleasure. As Dominic Manganiello also confesses in his article, Wilde "raises a fundamental question about the aesthete's creed: how can art, which is imbued with good and evil, be both aesthetically beautiful and morally destructive?" (25).

Hence, the intention of this essay is to analyze part of the context of that time and the influences that Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche may have had that made both authors share a similar ideology that criticizes society severely through their writings. However, the analysis that will be provided does not have to be a complete answer that reveals the absolute truth, which is another debatable matter, but one possible disclosure about Oscar Wilde's novel and its meaning as fruit of a particular research in which it will be shown how the repressive society of Victorian times promoted the intellectual rebellion and, also, it will reveal the clear contradictions of the conventional values of this epoch.

As it has been mentioned before, the main objectives are the following ones: to understand the social background in which works such as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Nietzsche's *On Genealogy of Morality* were created, to analyze the morality of the novel from a philosophical perspective, mainly from Nietzsche's point of view, to come to a certain conclusion about the intention of Wilde when he defended the purpose of Aestheticism considering that many of his works dealt directly and indirectly with this branch of philosophy, morality, and, finally, to reflect on the role of morality in art taking into account the analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Having mentioned the objectives, this paper will be divided into three main sections. The first part will be dedicated to the context that will contain, on the one hand, the Victorian England and major influences of Victorian literature, and, on the other hand, morality in Victorian era and the contradictions of the Victorian values. The objective of this section is to understand the background in which Wilde wrote the story of Dorian Gray. The second section will cover the novel in question in order to develop the literary criticism and it will be divided in turn into three parts: Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the aesthetic movement, morality in this novel and the presence of morality in other Wilde's works. The last part will contain Nietzsche's philosophy on morality, the concept of *Übermensch* interpreted in Wilde's novel and, finally, the similarities found between Wilde and Nietzsche in order to conclude this analysis.

1. Methodology

Firstly, the methodology consists of the close reading of the primary sources, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1948), *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and some books written by Friedrich Nietzsche which are: *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and some sections of *The Dawn of Day* (1881) and *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). These particular works have been chosen because of their content regarding morality, art, will to power, and aestheticism. And, secondly, the focus of this research is on the secondary sources such as articles, dissertations of literary critics and other essays with philosophical questions in order to know what other critics thought about the same or similar issues and, therefore, to form a solid conclusion about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from a literary and philosophical perspective.

2. Context

2.1. Victorian England and Major Influences of Victorian Literature

During Victorian times different authors wrote about the concerns and the ironies of this period throughout the representation of characters and their written stories. Names such as Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters, Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, Mark Twain, J. Sheridan Le Fanu, Robert Browning, Henry James, Arthur Conan Doyle, Oscar Wilde, Lewis Carroll and many others formed part of the Victorian society in a very special way: through literature. And this literature served as a medium to reach unknown emotions and experiences by the readers, to express what many thought, to feel in companion, to learn about other types of lives, to feel empathy and, mainly, to understand human nature.

This period, called "Victorian Age" because of the reign of Victoria I, lasted from 1837 until 1901, her death. The Queen was considered to be an icon, a role model, the Mother of British Empire. For that reason, "Victorian" does not only derive from her name, but it also refers to the mentality of this period: moral responsibility, domestic property, the importance of marriage, religion, earnestness, honesty and, mainly, puritan moral codes. In addition, it is interesting to see what Hugh Walker (1910) mentions about it in the following lines:

We know how deep and sincere were the moral earnestness and the religious feeling of the Puritans; and we know likewise the price which was paid when the Restoration relaxed the strain. The same principle unquestionably holds in literature; and, as the artistic is the most sensitive of all types of human character, it would not be surprising to find the principle exemplified there more strikingly than anywhere else.

(2)

This excerpt is relevant in the sense that literature, or art in general, is one of the most powerful sources through which it is possible to reflect and capture the social problems and changes that occur in history. Later, he adds another element that is quite important for the explanation of how works that deal with difficult issues as Wilde's and Nietzsche's are considered masterpieces nowadays: "A time of stress and strain, far from being inimical to literature and art, is in the highest degree stimulating, provided the ferment is due to the leaven of great ideas and of ennobling conflicts. The greatest periods of the world's literature have followed upon such times" (4). As it is known, the writer and the philosopher lived during the same period of time, and, in fact, they passed away the same year, 1900. Therefore, both lived in a similar social and political background despite the different nationalities.

During this age, although there were many thinkers and intellectuals that embraced the conventional values, there were also many other writers such as Wilde that criticized the Victorian ideology and detected the injustices of that time. The unfairness was usually portrayed by the protagonists of this epoch: women, children and lower-class members. Another fact to bear in mind is that, in spite of the presence of certain values, this was a time of great transformation since the minds of the English people were changing due to the multiple alterations of the reality such as: new inventions (the railway, the telegraph, the intercontinental cable, etc.), the development of the economy, the industrialization, the new compulsory education to males, the appearance of other ideologies such as Utilitarianism, and, outstandingly, Darwinism, which was the theory that made such a big impact that people even questioned the origin of humankind and, as a consequence, the Bible was to be read as a literary book instead of a religious one, and, lastly, another big change of this time was the growth of cities and the urban life.

Regarding Victorian literature, as the printing industry was quite cheap, there was a lot of printed material such as newspapers, reviews, essays, women's magazines. In addition, as the rise of literacy increased because of the male compulsory education, the number of readers also boosted. Novels were characterized for having a didactic purpose, which really influenced the popular culture as they found many characters to be role models or, at least, reliable personas since the content was highly realistic, which was a reaction against the gothic novels. Besides, the main objective was to try to convince the reader that the fictional characters of the novels were authentic and represented real problems.

However, as it will be shown later, Oscar Wilde's intention was not to recreate Jane Austen's *Novel of Manners*, but to create literary beauty in its purest sense. That is to say that he did not want to establish fixed rules to follow in order to find happiness, but to create art as an enjoyment and as a mere act of creating art ("Art for Art's sake"). One last aspect

is that Victorian novels were serialized, so authors were sometimes influenced by the readers in light of the fact that the publication was chapter by chapter and writers knew their reactions in advance since they heard their opinions. Thereupon, as the number of people who read increased considerably, little by little, literature became part of a flourishing industry.

2.3. Morality in Victorian Era and the Contradictions of the Victorian Values

Literature was, apart from an entertainment, an informative tool that showed how contradictory society was during the Victorian era. Although this time was a period of innovation and evolution of new intellectual approaches in different fields like science, technology and philosophy, there was still a clash between traditional ideas and new ones such as Darwinism and Utilitarianism that were mentioned in the previous section. One example in which Wilde talks about this contradictory society is when, through the voice of Dorian Gray in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he claims that:

The middle classes air their moral prejudices over their gross dinner tables, and whisper about what they call the profligacies of their betters in order to try and pretend that they are in smart society, and on intimate terms with the people they slander. In this country it is enough for a man to have distinction and brains for every common tongue to wag against him. And what sort of lives do these people, who pose as being moral, lead themselves? My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite (137-138)

The fact that Dorian says to Basil Hallward that hypocrisy reigns their country is a sign that shows many contradictions and discriminations. Moreover, in "Oscar Wilde's New Hellenism: Reading *Dorian Gray* as a Hellenic *Bildungsroman*", Chew states that "it was apparent to Wilde that the Victorian definition of ethics was too narrow, dogmatic, and repressive to move society forward" (19).

According to Mc Wade (2012), this era is hard to define, mainly, "because of the sheer complexity of the social, political and cultural milieus that England commanded" (1). As expected, in the case of literature, many novels were a transgression of the Victorian mentality; they found its weakness and pointed out who the real victims of this epoch were. That is why women's life and their role in society were reflected in the novels along the representation of the conflicts that existed, some of them due to the social mobility that was growing rapidly.

What many writers wanted to do was to create social awareness and, if possible, to transmit a social message in order to educate the middle classes and to reform society. However, there was a large criticism in which, in many cases, critics and the public qualified literature as moral or immoral, as, for example, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde.

Another remarkable thing to consider about Victorian times is how literature of the *fin de siècle* "laid bare the shifts and ironies in the vouched moral constancies" (Mc Wade 1). That is to say that "the level and intensity of intellectual innovation characteristic of the late-

Victorian period, [...], was the symptom of the ultimate unravelling of the repressive Victorian social and moral superstructure" (Ibid.). In addition, what Mc Wade exposed in his work is what he called "the false binary system of moral/immoral, straight/deviant" (1), another important point for this essay since it deals with the moral content of the book.

These statements about the repressive society regarding the events that occur in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in which Dorian does not follow the moral code despite the social pressure may make us think about the psychological theory that deals with the human behavior, specifically to interrogate why sometimes people desire to do what they are told not to do.

Science would say that the latter is more likely, because people like to be in control of their own lives. The behavior is purely psychological and is known as reactance, which is a type of mechanism where our brain wants to ensure that we're free to do whatever it is that we want to do with our own lives. But that's not all; humans are also notoriously curious creatures, so when you label something as the forbidden fruit and then say someone can't have it, you ultimately make them want it even though they might not have even wanted it to begin with (Bouchard "The Science Behind Why We Do Things We're Told Not to Do")

In this article, Anthony Bouchard puts as an example, among others, the literary world. He affirms that books that had been banned in the past were more successful than others. For instance: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In psychology, this human response is known as *The Forbidden Fruit Effect*, which is defined as "a result of man's desire to learn about the unknown and the consequences of things that are supposed to be dangerous" (Dodge, "The Forbidden Fruit Effect"). This idea, unexplainable for Mark Twain, summarizes this phenomena of *The Forbidden Fruit Effect* in which he affirms that there is an unexplainable desire for the things that are forbidden.

This concept is highly linked to the attitude of the middle class in Victorian England. They were limited in many fields unlike the high-class society; however, this discriminating restriction did not stop them from desiring to behave like the high-class society. It was quite the opposite. Mc Wade says that "middle class Victorians, who, ironically, attempted to sexually and morally subdue themselves in an attempt to mimic the upper class who, while dignified, were in fact wildly decadent" (2). In addition, Ronald Pearsall (1969) (qtd. in Mc Wade) adds that, indeed, the upper class "did not give a damn about conventional morality" (XI). The fact that the high class members had more benefits is also captured in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when Dorian does not care about the murder he committed and goes to the party with other important rich figures that only have banal problems compared to the middle class society.

3. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

3.1. Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the influence of Aestheticism in Wilde

In the Preface, Wilde expressed one of the most remarkable aphorisms that characterized him: "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (3). This statement suggests that art should not be concerned about moral and that it is, indeed, the spectator or reader who carries that burden. The only function of the artist is to create art and the meaning of the creation depends on the one looking. In addition, he wrote in the end of the Preface that "all art is quite useless" (4). That is to say that art does not have a practical purpose and that, again, readers are the ones who find the usage of it. This whole idea is connected to aestheticism, which was described by Wilde in a letter sent to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle* (2 July 1890) as a "reaction against the crude primaries of a doubtless more respectable but certainly less cultivated age [...] against the crude brutality of plain realism" (qtd. in Chew 20).

Art is created to be admired and appreciated. Art is not meant to teach or instruct the reader and the artist is not someone who has the power to answer the moral question of what is right and what is wrong. Each one should be able to reflect on the matter and to answer those moral questions by themselves. As Nietzsche says in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "there is no such thing as moral phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena". (86)

After all the criticism that Wilde had to endure, he clarified in the Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that his work was just a piece of art and that "no artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" (3). Notwithstanding, Oscar Wilde added that "the artist can express everything. Thought and language are to the artist instrument of an art. Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art" (3). This can be interpreted in many ways, but, in the end, there seems to be a contradiction when taking every single word and idea into account. For instance, in these previous statements it can be thought that if an artist can express everything, including his/her own thoughts, that could also let the author/ess write about his/her moral view or ethical sympathy towards the characters of the story. This contradiction is something that makes the critic or reader think about what the real intention of Wilde was.

Mc Wade analyzed that "given Wilde's choice to set the novel in the late 19th century London, his characters inevitably reveal much about the moral and sexual standards of late-Victorian society and the construction and maintenance of that society" (30). He uses literature, in this case, to make comments on the Victorian society through his characters. After all, he did have some ethical sympathies, he could not disregard his own thoughts during the whole novel and that is why his personality seems to appear in every single character in a certain way.

While reading Wilde's remarkable aphorism about the morality of books, it is interesting to see that Nietzsche had a similar developed idea as other critics have noticed:

Hay un parecido razonable —y curioso!— entre el aforismo del prefacio a *Dorian Gray* y el siguiente precepto de Nietzsche, incluido en *Más allá del bien y del mal*: «No existen fenómenos morales, sino solo una interpretación moral de los fenómenos». La cruda abstracción del comentario de Nietzsche contrasta con el ingenio de la observación de Wilde. Una comparación de ambas revela las diferencias

estilísticas fundamentales que separan a ambos autores, pero también muestra que, en esencia, escriben sobre lo mismo y desde el mismo punto de vista. Nietzsche reclama atención; Wilde, por su parte, interpretación (Valls 210)

[There is a reasonable similarity—and a curious one!— between the aphorism of the preface of *Dorian Gray* and the following precept from Nietzsche, included in *Beyond Good and Evil*: «There is no such thing as moral phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena». The grim abstraction of Nietzsche's commentary contrasts the inventiveness of Wilde's observation. A comparison between both discloses the fundamental stylistic differences that divide both authors, but that also shows that, in essence, they write about the same and from the same perspective. Nietzsche demands attention; Wilde, from his part, interpretation.]¹ (Valls 210)

Eduardo Valls affirms that the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* assumed the possibility of transmitting moral values through a literary text (211). After all, as it was mentioned before regarding what Oscar Wilde wrote in his Preface, "the artist can express everything" (3), and, as morality undoubtedly exists, it could be developed in a literary piece of art. Hence, Wilde was not rejecting the entire possibility despite his previous statements and that may be the reason why he added the following claim in the Preface of his novel: "The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium" (3).

As Ali Hafudh says in his paper titled "Nietzsche's Philosophical Concept of Dionysus and Apollo in the Art of Oscar Wilde" (2018), Wilde, who is famous for being representative of aestheticism, "believed that art is superior to nature as well as to morality because on the one hand nature imitates art and not the opposite and on the other hand morality is limited by age and time while art transcends both, therefore morality cannot judge art" (53). Thus, it is not that he wanted to eliminate any moral connotation in his works, but what he really aimed at was to position art in a higher level than any judgmental conclusion or any limitation that morality carries out.

This reflection by Ali Hafudh Humaish can make us develop another idea linked to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and that is that Dorian Gray, who is, as a human being, a manifestation of nature, wanted to imitate art and to stop aging so he could transcend morality and live as a pure piece of art. And he even admitted the following: "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!" (27) This Faustian desire shows that he wanted to sacrifice his own soul in order to become the painting itself, so he could remain beautiful forever and live outside the negative side of Victorians' scope.

Nevertheless, Dorian is characterized in the novel by the lack of conscience and his murder of Basil marks the beginning of his end. Dorian's guilt tortures him relentlessly until he is forced to do away with the painting that he keeps locking in a room. The ending seems

¹ Author's translation.

to be a final punishment and it proves that he fails to establish and live by his own moral code.

3.2. Morality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in July of 1890 in Lippincott's magazine with censorship due to the editor's fear that the novel could be considered indecent. One year later Oscar Wilde, after revising it and having added much more content, published it again as a longer version of the novel that included the famous Preface of him in which he refuted all the critiques and accusations that he received. This novel was considered very controversial at that time because, as Amzie A. Dunekacke (2018) mentions in *Parallels of Morality: Wilde and Nietzsche's Challenge to Social Obligation*, it was characterized for being "full of messages about Wilde's own ideas about morality in relation to religion and Victorian propriety" (5).

This book covers a lot of themes that maintain a strong connection with each other: beauty and art, life and death, time, morality, ethics and decadence, fascination and admiration, and, perhaps the most decisive one, influence due to the power that it contains and that is present from the beginning of the plot, for instance, when Lord Henry talked to Dorian Gray for the first time, to practically the ending of the story. Its climax is de facto reached when Lord Henry gives *The Yellow Book* to Dorian, and from this moment the corruption of his soul will develop more quickly than ever, representing the real downfall of the character of Dorian Gray due to a book, which is a form of art.

Dorian Gray even warns Lord Henry about the dangers of this work in the novel, which is also ironical considering that a literary text is indeed a powerful source that can damage the morality of a person. This is a point that seems to contradict the arguments that Wilde used in the Preface explaining that art is far away from ethics and morality.

"Yet you poisoned me with a book once. I should not forgive that. Harry, promise me that you will never lend that book to anyone. It does harm."

"My dear boy, you are really beginning to moralize. You will soon be going about like the converted, and the revivalist, warning people against all the sins of which you have grown tired. You are much too delightful to do that. Besides, it is no use. You and I are what we are, and will be what we will be. As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all" (198)

This Yellow Book that lord Henry gave to Dorian is the representation of decadence and it is symbolized with the color yellow, the color of syphilis, which is characterized for having two elements: death and pleasure. Also, it is a representation of art and literature. Therefore, it can be claimed that not only people can have influence on other people, but also inanimate objects or language itself. However, the responsibility does not only rely on lord Henry for

influencing from the beginning Dorian Gray, but also on Dorian as a person that can also rationalize and be aware of his own actions.

The experience of life involves everything, including bad things. In addition, having the control to influence someone is a process that projects one's soul (will to power). It all starts with lord Henry achieving his goal of influencing Dorian, but that is because he is fascinated by Dorian in the first place and this fascination implies power since Harry feels subdue to the person he is fascinated by, Dorian. Lord Henry probably thinks that he is more powerful than Dorian for trying to mould Dorian in order to create his own piece of art, yet it is Dorian who ends taking control of his actions, even though he loses his humanity on the road.

Another character who feels admiration for Dorian is Basil Hallward, whose main role, according to Epifanio San Juan in *The Art of Oscar Wilde*, is to "acquire the status of spokesman of standard morality" (qtd. in Jawich 9). From the beginning, he tries to discourage lord Henry to meet the young man and even confesses something that would totally contradict what Basil says about not putting the life of the artist in his own creation:

He has a simple and a beautiful nature. [...] Don't spoil him. Don't try to influence him. Your influence would be bad. The world is wide and has many marvellous people in it. Don't take away from me the one person who gives to my art whatever charm it possesses: my life as an artist depends on him. Mind, Harry. I trust you (17)

Rihan Jawich writes about how Basil Hallward and Oscar Wilde share things such as the admiration for Dorian Gray and their roles as artists, and claims that "Wilde himself was indeed one of the men whose life was highly influenced by these artistic values" (9) and that this could be interpreted as Wilde's "self-critical attitude." (9) Therefore, as one can see, influence is not just a powerful concept that exists inside the novel, but also outside, in the real world.

Some critics such as Walter Pater condemned this novel and highlighted "the novel's appeal to immorality and the potentially detrimental effect of this on society" (Mc Wade 31). Also, many conservative journals such as *Blackwood's Magazine*, the *Edinburgh Review*, and the *The National Observer* criticized Wilde's book. For instance, according to the criticism made by the *Daily Chronicle* (qtd. in Chew) Dorian's: "unbridled indulgence in every form of secret and unspeakable vice, every resource of luxury and art," and it is added that "not a single good and holy impulse of human nature, scarcely a fine feeling or instinct that civilization, art and religion have developed throughout the ages as part of the barriers between Humanity and Animalism... is not held up to ridicule and contempt" (13).

However, more critics such as Michael Patrick Gillespie (2011) have noticed that recent authors did not agree and considered the opposite perspective, which is that the real hidden message of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is to warn the reader about the consequences of being immoral (Mc Wade 31). For instance, according to Guy Willoughby in *Art and Christhood* (1993), "Wilde's novel is a type of allegory for the potential that art can offer to humankind" (qtd. in Mc Wade 31). That is to say that through art itself the reader, spectator or viewer can achieve a better version of oneself. In the case of Wilde's novel, it is about the

character of the story instead of the reader. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the character that seems to want to achieve a better version of himself that would last the longest time possible is Dorian Gray, but as time passes, he fails to reach his objective. In fact, his obstinacy is what leads him to ruin his life. Taking this last point into account, it could be confirmed that art is not useless after all since it does not only provide delight, pleasure (the goal of Hedonism) and enjoyment, but it can also influence notably the development of the inner self, either for better or for worse.

Mc Wade brings another conclusion similar to this kind of interpretation and it is that the story "recalls Nietzsche's view of art as expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy* in its recognition of art as a force that benefits humanity" (33). This observation continues and brings back another concept that Nietzsche uses to describe this personal growth of the individual: *Übermensch*.

3.4. Presence of Morality in Oscar Wilde's Works

Oscar Wilde used to write tales for his own children. He published the first collection of fairy tales titled *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* in 1888. In this collection, Wilde intended to teach the importance of sacrifice and the moral value of it. So, at least this time, Wilde seemed to have wanted to send a moral message after all. Nevertheless, the Victorian society did not like it because his tales were too dark and sad since there were no happy endings.

Wilde wanted to create beauty in order to discover truth and show children a moral teaching, but, in the case of adults, what he wanted was to make them see the beauty that resides in dying for love or sacrificing for love. That is why the symbols that he used in his tales like the heart made of stone or the red rose are symbols for adults to interpret, not for children. For instance, in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, Oscar Wilde portrays the Victorian society as selfish people that did not care about the poverty that was around. This was a reality of these times and he represents it by the appearance of characters like the son of a tailor, the match girl, a bohemian poor writer and homeless beggars sitting in front of the house of rich people. In this tale, one of the things that contrasts with the ugliness of the town is a simple but beautiful statue. Nevertheless, this statue is the one who sacrifices himself together with a swallow and in the end the governor and the privileged classes decide to get rid of it because it stops being beautiful. This whole story is a representation of Utilitarianism: when the statue is no longer useful, it is demolished. Also, one of the teachings that this tale provides is that what matters is inner beauty.

For this reason, it is difficult to separate completely morality from Wilde's works and that is why the Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems to be more a defensive method to protect himself from the judgmental Victorian society than declaring a totally aesthetic motto. Anyway, Wilde could have also agreed with the Aesthetic idea but without embracing it in its totality. As Gentiana Bicaĵ pointed out in *Philosophy and Ideas in Oscar Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray'*:

[...] completely comprehending the philosophy of Wilde, would be hard and perhaps impossible to accomplish. Thus, apart from the perspective given by this essay, there may be various interpretations of Wilde's work, since there is not an agreement of a general truth in art, as our author himself implied: "*Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything, for in art there is no such thing as a universal truth (The Truth of Masks, 1885)*" (5)

This is part of the evidence that indicates the self-reflection of Oscar Wilde in which he also shows in his novel of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the development of his own philosophy.

4. Nietzsche's Philosophy on Morality and Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* focused on the character of Dorian Gray

Moral philosophy is defined as "the branch of philosophy that contemplates what is right and what is wrong. It explores the nature of morality and examines how people should live their lives in relation to others". This philosophical field is probably one of the most discussed ones during the history of philosophy due to its constant presence in humankind's actions. According to Leiter:

Nietzsche's moral philosophy is primarily critical in orientation: he attacks morality both for its commitment to untenable descriptive (metaphysical and empirical) claims about human agency, as well as for the deleterious impact of its distinctive norms and values on the flourishing of the highest types of human beings (Nietzsche's "higher men") (Leiter, "Nietzsche's Moral and Political Philosophy")

In his philosophy, Nietzsche analyses the etymological meaning of "good" and "bad" and, then, he continues giving his critical view about morality and developing his own theory about this issue while offering information about the evolution of concepts such as guilt, responsibility and conscience. As stated in:

Although the *Genealogy* is one of the darkest books ever written, it is also, paradoxically, a book full of hope and anticipation. Nietzsche provides us with a stunning story about man's monstrous moral past, which tells the history of the deformation of the human animal in the hands of civilization and Christian moralization; but also hints at a new kind of humanity coming into existence in the wake of the death of God and the demise of a Christian-moral culture (Ansell-Pearson 14)

On the Genealogy of Morality Nietzsche provides his perspective about the history of morality and how this affected people's lives. In addition, he criticizes Christianity because he says that the individual has to be free and religion is instead "governed by loathing and fear and

is the manifestation of humanity's cowardice" (Mc Wade 14). What he discovers when studying about the origin of the words "good" and "bad" is:

I was given a pointer in the *right* direction by the question as to what the terms for 'good', as used in different languages, mean from the etymological point of view: then I found that they all led me back to the *same conceptual transformation*, – that everywhere, 'noble', 'aristocratic' in social terms is the basic concept from which, necessarily, 'good' in the sense of 'spiritually noble', 'aristocratic', of 'spiritually high minded', 'spiritually privileged' developed: a development that always runs parallel with that other one which ultimately transfers 'common', 'plebeian', 'low' into the concept 'bad' (*On the Genealogy of Morality* 54)

Thus, as Chris Mc Wade also pointed out in his dissertation: "the argument in this case is that the formulation of morality and the assigning of value were informed by power, and the desire to sustain that power" (21). This gives the idea that society has not been restricted for the cause of goodness, but for the benefit of the powerful people. Oscar Wilde also remarked this fact in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "I should fancy that 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" (73). That is to say that "the constructs and expectations of morality are the product of humanity's drive to assert themselves in a position of dominance using language" (Mc Wade 21-22). Again, the fact that language (that same tool that literature is formed by) can influence in such a powerful form in humankind is real.

As a consequence of the etymological research of the philosopher, Nietzsche explores morality in a deeper way and reflects about it until he consolidates a theory according to it. For instance, in *The Dawn of the Day* (1881) he affirmed:

Thus, for example, the fundamental clause: morality is nothing else (and, above all, nothing more) than obedience to customs, of whatsoever nature they may be. But customs are simply the traditional way of acting and valuing. Where there is no tradition there is no morality; and the less life is governed by tradition, the narrower the circle of morality. The free man is immoral, because it is his *will* to depend upon himself and not upon tradition: in all the primitive states of humanity "evil" is equivalent to "individual," "free," "arbitrary," "unaccustomed," "unforeseen," "incalculable" (22)

In other words, he suggests that the real free man is the one who acts upon his own individuality without any limitations or social restrictions. Then, for Nietzsche, a person that follows the rules of society is no other than another member of the flock of sheep. For him that person is enslaved and, therefore, has lost his own individuality. This same idea is represented in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through lord Henry's words:

"[...] what do you mean by good, Harry?"

“To be good is to be in harmony with one’s self, [...] Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One’s own life —that is the important thing. As for the life of one’s neighbors, if one wishes to be a prig or puritan one can flaunt one’s moral views about them, but they are not one’s concern. Besides, individualism has really the higher aim. Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one’s age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality” (73)

In addition, as Mc Wade commented, Nietzsche would affirm that “with the condemnation and elimination of outward expression of these natural instincts, people began to direct these instincts inwards and thus destroy themselves” (24). Thus, the consequences are not only the loss of the differentiation between one individual and another and the incapacity to reach the best version of oneself, but the destruction of the self and the absurdity of life in the end.

That is why Nietzsche develops a perfectionist idea named *Übermensch*, mostly known in English as “overman”. This concept that is detailed in his book titled *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is according to Mc Wade “similar to the notion of the free spirit (as discussed in *Beyond Good and Evil*) in terms of the requirement of insight into and tolerance of the true nature of reality” (16). Furthermore, this new concept is for Nietzsche the solution to the slavery of humankind. For him, “the notion of rearing the Superman is only a new form of an ideal Nietzsche already had in his youth, that “THE OBJECT OF MANKIND SHOULD LIE IN ITS HIGHEST INDIVIDUALS” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 8). He describes the current man as “a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman—a rope over an abyss” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 18).

Regarding the meaning of the *Übermensch*, it can be found some truth in it taking into account that its definition is positive since it promotes the thinking that each person can develop himself/herself and become the best version of his/her own individual. However, Nietzsche also says that humans should reject values such as compassion and pity because these are characteristics of inferior human beings and they stop the growth of the individual. But, for instance, lacking compassion could take the essence of humankind away, which is humanity, and one, therefore, may conclude that no individual growth would be worthy.

This is also seen in Oscar Wilde’s novel. Dorian Gray does not care anymore about Sybil, her brother and not even about Basil. He just wants to live according to his desires all the time. That is why Dorian Gray is the character who may remind the reader as a potential of the Nietzschean will to power since he wants to experience life regardless the moral impositions of the Victorian society. However, as Mc Wade pointed out in his dissertation:

[...] although Dorian embraces life and experience on the surface, his actions simultaneously represent recoil from reality. Thus, Dorian emerges as an ambiguous and conflicted character when one considers his movement in the novel: does he move towards reality, or does he move away from it? (51)

His opium consumption during the major part of the novel makes the reader think that he was trying to avoid reality more than being part of it, “There were opiates for remorse, drugs

that could lull the moral sense to sleep. But here was a visible symbol of the degradation of sin. Here was an ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls" (88). In addition, it can be seen that he also, deeply inside, felt guilty because of his actions and that may be the reason why he wanted to avoid being conscious of the world. In fact, he wanted to repent in the beginning, before he knew that Sybil committed suicide. He said to lord Henry: "I am perfectly happy now. I know what conscience is, to begin with. It is not what you told me it was. It is the divinest thing in us. Don't sneer at it, Harry, anymore —at least not before me. I want to be good. I can't bear the idea of my soul being hideous" (89-90). However, after knowing it and after reading *The Yellow Book*, he lost every intention of changing and the painting was a reminding of his moral conscience. He even responded to Basil when he told him to pray in order to be forgiven, that "it was too late" (143).

Mc Wade noted that in this part of the story, Basil uses "Christianity in an attempt to transform the grotesque reality that he faces (Dorian as sinner) into something more palatable (Dorian as repentant). In this instance, therefore, Basil exhibits Nietzsche's criticism of religion as an organized aversion to reality" (50). In the end, regarding Nietzsche's philosophy, Dorian and Basil are just a failure to human potential.

5. Conclusion

It is interesting to see how this amoral character of Dorian Gray is not the only character with this kind of analyzed features since this type of human being is also represented in films such as Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), *Split* (2012) or other books such as *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Goethe's *Faust*. This fact shows that morality and human nature was, and still is, a preoccupation along the feeling of overreaching and will to power that one may develop. It is also remarkable that all these characters started being innocent living beings that then desired more and more about life and decided to cross the limits in order to get what they wanted. However, they all seem to have failed to reach their own superman.

On the other hand, Oscar Wilde's personality is reflected in each one of the main characters. For instance, something that may be quite impressing is that lord Henry and Wilde share similar ways of expressing themselves. Lord Henry declares in the ending of the novel: "The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all" (198). Not only the topic is the same as what Wilde pointed out in the Preface, but also the usage of language and the way of finishing the sentence, "that is all." Regarding the theme of these statements, as Joyce Carol Oates notices in her analysis, it is important to state that:

Wilde surely believes in his aesthetics and at the same time offers, by way of Dorian and his fate and Basil and his fate, a disturbingly prescient commentary on his beliefs: the artist who succumbs to the spell of beauty will be destroyed, and so savagely destroyed that nothing of him will survive (427)

This is linked to the observation that Rihan Jawich makes about the existence of the moral elements in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in which she raises the question of why Wilde wrote the Preface despite the content of the novel (5). She ends up concluding that:

The representation of Dorian's inner conflict, but also his legitimate death towards the end of the novel, might shed a light on the Victorian society's strong reluctance towards the Aesthetic Movement and decadent lifestyle Wilde stood for. Hence, it becomes evident that Wilde reflects upon his own inconsistency in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (6)

To conclude, taking into account this last critique about Wilde, I would like to add that usually society imposes how people perceive themselves, and Oscar Wilde, during the whole process of writing the novel and the Preface, seems to be using a modern way of expressing his own thoughts and emotions, which I consider it is a stream of consciousness, and that resemblance is actually another point that makes his work a masterpiece. As seen in a previous excerpt from *The Truth of Masks*, he confessed that he did not believe in the existence of a universal truth in art, and that is similar to Nietzsche's perspectivism. Wilde and Nietzsche elevated beauty and the self and, if there is something that we should learn from them, is that we can be the best version of ourselves, and a great tool to develop a certain level of knowledge to do it is art.

Works Cited

- Bouchard, Anthony. "The Science Behind Why We Do Things We're Told Not to Do | Videos." *LabRoots*, 12 Feb. 2017. Web. 21 Jun. 2019. www.labroots.com/trending/videos/10420/the-science-behind-why-we-do-things-we-re-told-not-to-do .
- Chew, H. Jeremias. *Oscar Wilde's New Hellenism: Reading Dorian Gray as a Hellenic Bildungsroman*. 2016. Nanyang Technological University. *Academia*, https://www.academia.edu/25939228/Oscar_Wilde_s_New_Hellenism_Reading_Dorian_Gray_as_a_Hellenic_Bildungsroman
- Dodge, Joanna. "The Forbidden Fruit Effect." *Exploring Your Mind, Exploring Your Mind*, 22 May. 2017. Web. 22 Jun. 2019. exploringyourmind.com/forbidden-fruit-effect/.
- Dunekacke, Amzie A. *Parallels of Morality: Wilde and Nietzsche's Challenge to Social Obligation*. 2018. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Honors Theses. *Semantic Scholar*, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/35c0/ba277b2b4c077c195e4f58ecea89ce7fb8d.pdf>
- Hafudh, Ali. *Nietzsche's Philosophical Concept of Dionysus and Apollo in the Art of Oscar Wilde*. 2018. University of Düsseldorf. *HHU Düsseldorf*, <https://docserv.uni-duesseldorf.de/servlets/DerivateServlet/Derivate49873/Dissertation%20to%20be%20publish-ed-1.pdf>
- Jawich, Rihan, *The Concept of Aestheticism in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 2015. University of Bonn. Dissertation. *Academia*, https://www.academia.edu/12932450/The_Concept_of_Aestheticism_in_Oscar_Wildes_The_Picture_of_Dorian_Gray
- Leiter, Brian. "Nietzsche's Moral and Political Philosophy." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 7 Oct. 2015. Web. 16 Jun. 2019. plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/.
- Manganiello, Dominic. "Ethics and Aesthetics in 'The Picture of Dorian Gray.'" *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1983, pp. 25–33. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25512571.
- Mc Wade, Chris. *Revaluing the Transgressive Victorian: Nietzschean Study of Power and Morality in Three Late-Victorian Texts*. 2012. University of Johannesburg. *UJContent* <https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/vital/access/services/Download/uj:7424/CONTENT1>
- "Moral Philosophy." *Ethics Unwrapped*. Web. 12 Jun. 2019. ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/moral-philosophy.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. translated by Hellen Zimmern, 1886. *Global Grey ebooks*, <https://www.globalgreyebooks.com/beyond-good-and-evil-ebook.html>
- *On the genealogy of morality*. Edited by K. Ansell-Pearson and translated by Carol Diethel.

Research Gate, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. 2012 [1887]. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297445428 Nietzsche On the genealogy of morality](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297445428_Nietzsche_On_the_genealogy_of_morality)

--- *The Dawn of the Day*, Translated by John McFarland Kennedy. 2012 [1881]. *The Project Gutenberg Ebooks*, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/39955/39955-pdf.pdf?session_id=81dc90ed5f62b19a188a2947b75b1c43b335a5e5

--- *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Thomas Common, 1909 [1883]. *Global Grey ebooks*, <https://www.globalgreybooks.com/thus-spake-zarathustra-ebook.html>

Oates, Joyce Carol. "The Picture of Dorian Gray': Wilde's Parable of the Fall." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1980, pp. 419–428. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1343135.

Valls Oyarzun, Eduardo. "Segunda parte: El malestar en la cultura victoriana. Capítulo 1, la era Nietzsche." *Dueños del tiempo y del espanto*. Escolar y mayo Editores S. L., 2017, pp. 203-221.

Walker, Hugh. "The New Age." *The Literature of the Victorian Era*, Cambridge : The University Press, 1970 [1910], pp. 2-22. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/literatureofvict00walk/page/2>

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Alma Classics, 2014 [1891]. Print.

--- *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* introduced by Markus Zusak. Puffin Classics, 2016 [1888]. Print.

Bioprofile of the authoress

Nour H. Lamrabat Benkacem-Ziani holds a degree in English Studies from the Complutense University of Madrid. Concerning her academic research, her main areas of interest are Victorian literature, Gothic literature and Shakespeare studies. As a result, she devoted her final year research project in Morality in Oscar Wilde's works, mainly in his controversial novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Contact: <nourhlam@ucm.es>