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## **The Cost of Vanity: Exploring the Faustian Pact and Moral Consequences in *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

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### **Abstract:**

This research paper delves into Oscar Wilde's 1890 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, using the Faustian bargain archetype as a lens. The Faustian bargain, a literary trope derived from the legend of Faust, a scholar who sells his soul to the devil for knowledge and power, is a powerful and engaging tool for critiquing societal issues. Wilde's narrative, with its powerful and captivating exploration of the Faustian trope, transcends the traditional Faustian narrative to critique the problems of the fin de siècle, such as hedonism and narcissism. The paper also examines Dorian's portrait and Wilde's commentary on the delicate relationship between art and morality. It explores how Wilde presents a cautionary tale and a stark warning against the consequences of prioritising external appearances. The downfall of Dorian is a reminder of the certainty of punishment, reflecting the readers as both a critique of the Victorian era and a timeless moral story, urging the audience to be mindful of their choices and to examine societal values critically.

**Keywords:** Faustian bargain, Dorian Gray, portrait, vanity, eternal youth.

## Literature Review

Significant research has been done on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* since its controversial publishing in 1890, providing different angles on aestheticism, decadence, and hedonism. This literature review synthesises three. The literature review focuses on three significant vital aspects: the use of the Faustian pact as a literary device, the critique of aestheticism, and the novel's profound commentary on Victorian morality. Walter Pater's aesthetic philosophy profoundly influenced Wilde's understanding of aestheticism. Pater highlights the transient power of art, but Wilde complicates Pater's view by adding darker consequences. Gagnier (2016) argues that Wilde incorporates Pater's philosophy of art into the novel but, at the same time, also presents a critique of its moral ambiguity. Wilde's use of Pater's philosophy in the story can be seen in how he portrays Dorian's obsession with beauty and youth and the destructive consequences of his aesthetic pursuits.

In his biography of "Oscar Wilde" (1987), Ellman presents the significant historical background for a better understanding of the novel's deal with the idea of vanity and morality. He highlights that the story comes from Wilde's complex relationship with private desire and public image, arguing that Dorian's affliction towards vanity is an outcome of Victorian anxiety about image and reality. Gagnier (2016) further studied the biographical aspect, which combines Wilde's experiences concerning aesthetic philosophy with the novel's relationship with beauty as an element of salvation and damnation.

Wilde's bold departure from the conventional Faustian narrative, incorporating contemporary issues like excess value to beauty, hedonism, aestheticism, and decadence, is a significant aspect of the literature review. Joseph Bristow, in "*The Picture of Dorian Gray: Wilde, Faustus, and the Devil*", argues that Wilde adapts the Faustian myth to critique a society that elevates beauty and youth above moral integrity. Unlike Goethe's *Faust*, whose pact is made with the

devil, Dorian's bargain is a wish made without religious or moral grounding, symbolising a deal with his narcissism and vanity. This departure from the traditional Faustian narrative is significant as it allows Wilde to critique the societal values of his time, inviting the audience to examine these values critically.

Nassar describes the portrait as a "moral barometer" for him, a symbol of his inner moral decay. The portrait, a key element in the novel, is a powerful visual metaphor for Dorian's inner decay. Dorian's bargain becomes what Dellamore (1998) calls "the moral compromise required by Victorian social performance".

The Aesthetic Movement is an essential background for the novel, as Wilde's focus on art in the novel appeals to the movement's cry of "art for art's sake". In Wilde's *Aestheticism and Moral Decay*, Riede argues that the portrait is a metaphor for the dangers of an existence solely for beauty. The Aesthetic movement, a significant cultural and historical context, focused on beauty and external appearance, ignoring the consequences of an artificial existence. Dowling's "Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle" (1986) presents the idea of the aesthetic fall from grace in the narrative of *Dorian Gray* and argues that Wilde's bargain projects the backdrop of the anxieties associated with aestheticism.

In her essay "Aestheticism and the Faustian Bargain in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Matus argues that Dorian's bargain with the portrait could be read as a metaphor for the Faustian bargain between the aesthetic movement and art. Miller's (1982) "Wilde's Gothic: The Visual Arts in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," argues that Wilde creates a "reverse Faust" where damnation occurs through art and aesthetics instead of diabolical intervention.

In "Come See About Me: Enchantment of the Double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" (2005), Craft argues that Wilde incorporates innovation in the Faustian bargain narrative by inculcating

aesthetic and moral concerns with aestheticism and describes the portrait as "a visible conscience".

The novel could also be read from a profoundly psychological perspective. In "The Aesthetics of Evil", Berman coins the phrase "an unconscious Faustian pact" and describes Dorian's bargain as not being with external forces but with his desires and principles. Ross, in "Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Dorian Gray", examines Dorian's character through Freudian psychoanalysis and argues that Dorian's obsession with the idea of eternal youth might be a projection of his repressed narcissism and a substantial denial of mortality. Carroll's "Reading Human Nature" argues that Dorian's narcissism and psychological dissonance critique the aesthetic ideal, highlighting that pursuing youth and beauty leads to moral degeneration.

### **The nature of the bargain**

The nature of the Faustian bargain in the novel differs from the traditional bargains, as Dorian's pact comes from passionate wish-making in front of his picture. Wilde attempts to incorporate and subvert the conventional Faustian bargain trope in his novel. He uses the Faustian narrative like Goethe and Christopher Marlowe, but simultaneously adds a unique bargain type to the plot by inculcating elements of art and aesthetics. While the other Faustian narratives present a serious deal with the devil, Dorian's offer in the novel is instead a deliberate attempt at wish-making. The book also differs from the traditional Faustian narratives as it immediately starts the pact's effect by projecting Dorian's corruption into the picture. Meanwhile, conventional Faustian stories project the implication of the deal at the end of the narrative.

The novel's central supernatural element is Dorian's bargain for eternal youth and beauty. Wilde incorporates the conventional Faustian trope, making Dorian's deal with the devil unique. Unlike Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Goethe's *Faust*, Dorian does not offer his soul to the

devil; instead, his deal of eternal youth arises from wish-making, influenced by Basil's artistic passion and Lord Henry's hedonistic approach towards life.

The unique approach towards the Faustian pact presents the novelist's concern with the nineteenth-century, materialist and secular society. Dorian's bargain projects the superficiality of nineteenth-century society that prioritised outward appearances over reality. While Faustus's bargain in *Doctor Faustus* centred around knowledge and experience, Dorian's bargain revolves around the ideas of beauty, vanity and youth, highlighting the aesthetic movement's approach towards beauty as the supreme virtue of human existence. This transition in the Faustian bargain projects how Wilde used the concepts of youth and vanity to critique his society.

### **Lord Henry as Mephistopheles**

It is crucial to note the absence of a literal devil figure to highlight that evil lies within us, especially when vanity and youth are prioritised over morality. Lord Henry Wotton could be seen as a representative of Mephistopheles as he is an inspirational figure for Dorian's deal with the devil. Lord Henry's hedonistic approach towards life could be highlighted in his line, "The only way to get rid of temptations is to yield to them." Lord Henry establishes a hedonistic temptation for Dorian, encouraging him to make a deal with the devil. Wilde does not involve an actual devil figure in the bargain, projecting that the real evil lies within human nature, especially concerning narcissism and vanity. Lord Henry's hedonistic approach ignites the spark of Dorian's hidden vanity. Wilde highlights that vanity, when lit up, becomes self-perpetuating, forcing one to go beyond his limits to secure eternal youth and beauty.

### **The portrait as a mirror of morality**

The idea of the portrait is significant throughout the novel, as it records Dorian's growing immorality. Initially, Dorian's innocence and beauty are presented as an empty canvas upon

which society's obsession with vanity could be painted. The portrait is a supernatural element in the novel and serves various purposes throughout the book. It is a mirror showcasing Dorian's true self and recording every evil he commits, leaving marks on it. At the same time, Dorian's physical beauty remains unharmed. The division between the public and private selves represents the Victorian anxiousness associated with moral degeneration and physical appearance.

The picture transitions from an object of beauty to an object of disgust and records Dorian's moral decay with increasing terror and disgust. "The thing was still loathsome—more loathsome, if possible, than before—and the scarlet dew that spotted the hand seemed brighter and more like blood newly spilt." This description highlights the growing distinction between Dorian's immoral soul and his beautiful physical exterior.

The picture functions as both an enabler and a discourager for Dorian as it becomes an externalised conscience that bears the load of Dorian's immorality, which he so evidently neglects throughout the novel. This externalisation enables him to pursue pleasure without giving a thought about the consequences, leading him on a path of complete degeneration. The portrait also projects the relationship between art and life. It is a gothic double of Dorian that embodies Dorian's repressed guilt and shame. The picture's transition from a thing of beauty to an object of disgust also highlights the transition of aestheticism that turned out to be toxic.

### **The psychology of eternal youth**

Dorian's psychological deterioration could be seen as a parallel to the portrait's physical decay. His initial narcissistic view regarding his image develops into a pathological shift between the private and the public. The picture represents a reality that Dorian so evidently cannot face. The distinction between the private inner decay and the well-maintained private appearances comes at the cost of a psychological decline. Dorian's eternal youth could be considered

psychological imprisonment, as he does not age but grows morally corrupt. His eternal youth restricts his individual and moral growth. His perpetual youth becomes a status that prevents genuine maturation or moral development.

### **Social critique of Victorian society**

Wilde critiques the Victorian era's obsession with superficiality and outward appearances through the bargain and Dorian's downfall. The society that Dorian inhabits becomes an enabler for Dorian's moral degradation. Dorian's bargain symbolises upper-class Victorian shallowness, which normalises moral degradation, and the influence of the same could be noted in Dorian's character. The whispers and rumours that follow Dorian but never lead to his expulsion from society represent a broader critique of Victorian hollowness. Wilde presents a sharp critique of the hollowness of Victorian society that puts outward appearances over moral integrity. While Dorian becomes a representative of beauty and youth, his inner soul becomes increasingly deceased.

Wilde also highlights class dynamics, wherein Dorian's youth and beauty are treated as a social currency, enabling him to transcend moral judgements and walk freely through society. This highlights Victorian society's obsession with outward appearances, creating a social atmosphere wherein moral character was secondary to beauty and vanity. With Dorian's pact and eventual death, Wilde offers a sharp critique of Victorian society that enables moral transgressions by creating an atmosphere that normalises vanity and superficiality. It is significant to note that Dorian can walk freely through society after committing heinous sins, a stark social commentary.

### **The role of art and the artist**

Through this novel, Wilde questions the role of art and the artist's responsibility. The artist, Basil Hallward, makes the reader wonder about his commitment to art and societal role. Basil's

death at the hands of Dorian is highly symbolic and presents the dangerous side of art and the outcome of not having a divide between art and life. Basil's art blurred the line between art and life, which enabled Dorian's moral decay and could be read as a critique of the Aesthetic Movement that sought to connect art and life.

### **The price of the bargain**

At the novel's end, Dorian tries to destroy the portrait but dies, highlighting how it becomes impossible to ignore moral consequences. Later, the picture is restored to its original status, indicating the final part of the Faustian bargain. Wilde presents a complex relationship between art and life through the portrait. While Dorian's youth is preserved, the picture ultimately bears all the marks of his sins. His outward beauty becomes a facade that enables him to walk through society unchallenged while his inner corruption goes unhinged. This dichotomy represents Victorian anxiousness associated with beauty and appearance, and the possibility for evil to exist behind superficiality. The consequent decay of the portrait functions as a visual metaphor for moral degradation. Each sin Dorian commits marks the picture, creating a monstrous representation of his inner decay. The transition of the portrait from an object of beauty and adoration to a horrendous object met with disgust highlights the consequence of the importance given to vanity.

Several key moments in the novel highlight Dorian's growing moral decay, like the brutal rejection of Sibyl Vane, which made her commit suicide, Basil's murder at the hands of Dorian, representing the death of artistic truth, the blackmails that Dorian receives and the last try of Dorian to damage the picture itself. Each of these moments is significant as they project how vanity, once endured, can only lead to growing moral corruption in pursuing pleasure and savouring reputation.

Wilde presents a complex relationship between art and moral responsibility. The novel outlines Wilde's aesthetic philosophy and, at the same time, raises questions about the role of the artist in the artwork. The portrait made by Basil presents both the victory and the dangers of art. He created a work beyond simple representation to become a supernatural reality due to his passionate attachment to Dorian's beauty.

### **Conclusion**

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde explores the relationship between beauty, art, vanity and life. By drawing from the traditional Faustian bargain trope and amalgamating it with his contemporary Victorian issues, Wilde created a work that still resonates with the modern concerns of appearance vs reality and the authenticity of looks.

With the growing domination of perfectly curated public appearances and an obsession with pursuing eternal youth and beauty, the novel could also be read as a cautionary tale against unchecked narcissism and vanity.

Wilde explores the Victorian concerns associated with vanity and offers timeless insights into the nature of beauty and the human pursuit of eternal youth and beauty. The price of Dorian's vanity and moral decay serves as a warning bell about the consequences of giving importance to beauty over morality.

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