Identity Construction in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract: The article is a study on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and its Landscapes of the Self, in which the theme of identity assumes pivotal importance. Identities, considered in their fictional and dynamic nature and as discursive constructions, are fundamentally intertwined with the socio-cultural environment. The study is focused on an analysis of aesthetics and the dialogical relationship between art and language as a means of constructing identity within Wilde's novel. The aim of the article is to pinpoint their constructive and destructive functions for identity formation, also taking into account the contemporary social and cultural contexts surrounding the creation of Oscar Wilde's work, emphasizing the intrinsic connection between literature and its cultural and societal backdrop. The analysis uncovers how the fears, anxieties, and social dynamics of the fin de siècle are intricately woven into literature. Recognizing the richness of Oscar Wilde's references to the social and cultural practices of the Victorian and late Victorian periods, this study employs an interdisciplinary approach rooted in Cultural Studies, utilizing its diverse perspectives.

Introduction

Oscar Wilde's notorious work *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, whose complexity has led to—and continues to generate—a plurality of interpretations, offers the readers the possibility of immersing themselves in a *world* where the Landscapes of the Self are depicted masterfully. The theme of identity in Wilde's novel, in which the socio-cultural background where it is produced is portrayed, assumes a peculiar role and requires further analysis from a plurality of perspectives. In this article, we will take into consideration identity as a broader concept, aiming at pinpointing two of the most crucial strategies used for its representation in the narrative process, to shed light on new aspects that have not been investigated deeply.

As far as the concept of identity is concerned, Anthony Elliott (2011), editor of the *Routledge Handbook of Identity Studies*, highlights its subjective and private nature. Nevertheless, considering identity as pertaining only to the inward "realm" of the self is problematic. Identity is unquestionably " '[a]n enigmatic paradox!'," concerning "the complex ways in which identity wraps together subjectivity and objectivity" (Elliot 2011, xv). First and foremost, this paradox is inherent in the term itself, as David Buckingham (2008)

rightly explains. Indeed, its Latin root *idem* implies similarity and difference simultaneously. Identity is inherently unique, being what distinguishes the self from the others. Nevertheless, its semantics also implies a relationship with an "other-than-me," with a social group of individuals. This ongoing debate about identity derives to a great extent from this peculiar aspect intrinsic in the term itself. Human beings are torn between "[t]he struggle to 'be myself' or 'to find my true self'—which reflects the quest for personal identity—and 'multiple identification with others, on the basis of social, cultural, and biological characteristics, as well as shared values, personal histories, and interests' " (2008, 1). Thus, the "I" is the product of his or her personal biography, and, on the other hand, it varies according to various factors.

Buckingham poses himself and the reader a crucial question: "[a]re not society, culture, history, and politics written all across the 'texts' of human identity?" (2008, 1). This perspective suggests that identity is inextricably linked to the (social) *outer world*, where culture, history, and politics operate. Stuart Hall, in "Who Needs 'Identity'?" highlights the dynamic and *performative* nature of identity, stressing the fact that it is not a matter of being but of *becoming*. Furthermore, Hall argues that identities "arise from the narrativization of the self" (1996, 4). However, "the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity" (4). Identities, as discursive constructions, must be understood as produced in a precise context, "in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices" (4) and through "specific enunciative strategies…within the play of specific modalities of power" (4). Therefore, instead of being the sign of an identical unity, they are "more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion" (4). Finally, emphasizing the importance of representation, Hall declares that "[i]dentities are…constituted within, not outside representation" (4).

Literary texts are imbued with contexts and experiences of a specific epoch. They are, as Birrento emphasizes (2008), filled with the recorded culture and its dominant and emerging structures. Accentuating the importance of context(s) and the performative nature of texts, Anthony Easthope observes that texts "take on meaning according to the discourse within which they are construed and the context in which they are read" (1991, 38). Birrento states that it is crucial to focus on the analysis of literature as a discourse and as a significant form of the means and conditions of production. Indeed, literary texts carry the marks of the processes that produced them and document human experience and thought (2008). Based on the assumption that literary texts are not merely aesthetic but also cultural products, Cultural Studies combines various approaches and uses them to investigate texts that construct and represent realities and identities. In Cultural Studies, it is assumed that one of the crucial features of a text is its *polysemy*.

It must be said that the analysis of any work of art is not an easy process and that the complexity inherent in the process is directly proportional to the ontological complexity of the work itself, whose meanings increase its value while complicating the analysis of it. As stated by Oscar Wilde in *The Critic as Artist*:

> You see, then, how it is that the aesthetic critic rejects those obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile, and seeks rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true and no interpretation final. ([1891] 2013, 370)

In this passage, it is suggested that the critic should prefer those "modes of art" that do not deliver a unique message and that are not, therefore, "dumb and sterile." Instead, he or she is encouraged to interpret those works whose "imaginative beauty" renders any final interpretation unreachable. The critic is then emboldened to participate in the "construction" of its proliferating meanings. As far as Wilde's novel is concerned, it potentially possesses infinite levels of reading and understanding, therefore producing an interminable number of interpretations, depending on the perspective(s) from which the reader or critic looks at it and on what they take into consideration when approaching it. Nils Clausson states that "*[w]hat* a text means is inseparable from *how* it is read" (2016, 339).

Moran Maureen (2006) argues that critical and cultural theory have recently introduced new themes into the analysis of Victorian Literature, producing "culturally inclusive" interpretations. There exists a crucial relationship between Victorian culture and literature, the latter using "the rhetoric of many contexts to reflect and even redefine the culture of which it speaks" (Maureen 2006, 9). The Victorian cultural environment "incorporates multiple voices, competing for control over the shaping of knowledge, the interpretation of experience, and the formation of individual identities" (9), and all is reflected in the literature of the period. Therefore, there is the necessity of regarding Literature as one of the various dynamic and influential cultural forms of the Victorian period (Maureen 2006).

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s cultural background is reflected in the work and assumes a crucial role. Therefore, it is necessary to lay emphasis on the cultural and intellectual contexts of the Victorian and late Victorian epoch. Despite the complexities, there are a multitude of reasons why it is relevant to question this period. First, Robin Gilmour rightly points out that we live "in the aftermath of that powerful and seemingly assured civilization" (1993, 1), being the heirs of our Victorian ancestors and looking back to them with a mixture of different feelings. In this long period, life underwent a considerable acceleration under various points of view and "the modern urban-industrial world was born and passed from confidence to anxiety and crisis" (1). It was an epoch of contrasting feelings, marked by an ambivalence about past and future. As Richard Walker affirms, it was a time of an inner conflict between what is old and what is new, in which there was an emerging apprehension "of a pre-modern world and a modern and apparently chaotic world" (2012, 3). Due to the crisis Christianity was experiencing, the Victorians were deprived of "the security of a confident world-view until science began to provide one in the 1860 and 1870" (Gilmour 1993, 19). Individuals were aware of the crisis yet felt powerless to respond, which led to a novel form of anxiety characterized by a feeling of emotional isolation. The

underlying context for the belief in progress was rooted in a fear of regression, accompanied by an evolving discourse surrounding the tension between certainty and doubt. Lynda Dryden (2003) states that by the end of the nineteenth century, Darwin's theory of evolution and Nietzsche's anti-Christian philosophy had shaken the religious faith of many people, changing the possible explanations of human existence. For many thinkers after Darwin, the struggle for survival became the only answer to the question of the meaning of human existence. Finally, generalizing about the period derives from "the society's public discourse about itself" (Walker 2012, 3). Indeed, the Victorians were prone to generalizing about their epoch, and they were aware of their time, conscious that they were living in a unique period, a period that required definition.

The Victorian period was also an epoch marked by an exaggerated morality that, together with the "time-hauntedness," an excessive preoccupation with history and a nostalgia for the solidity of a vanished world characterize the Zeitgeist of the long nineteenth century, a period in which, as Maureen (2006) argues, the cultural contexts are grounds for both dialogue and opposition. In this cultural milieu, the Aesthetic movement enters the scene and, according to Gilmour, it was "a mixture of straightforward rebellion against Victorianism, new theorising, and extravagant posing" (1993, 235).

The first part of the article proposed an analysis of aesthetics as a strategy for identity construction within Wilde's work. As far as the relation between art and language is concerned, the second part of this study focuses on their dialogical relationship as a means for shaping identity in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The aim of this study is to analyze Wilde's novel from other perspectives and shed much light on art and language as strategies of identity formation, which has deep philosophical, psychological, and sociological roots, evolving over time as societies and intellectual traditions have explored questions of selfhood, individuality, and belonging. This article examines the cultural and social context of Wilde's novel, showing how *fin de siècle* fears and anxieties are embedded in the literature. Being cognizant that Oscar Wilde's work is rich in references to the social and cultural practices of the Victorian and late Victorian epoch, the interdisciplinary approach of Cultural Studies, with its plurality of "lenses," will be used.

Strategies of Identity Construction in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Aesthetics and the Construction of Dorian Gray's Identity

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* opens with the image of the studio of an artist, invaded by a mesmerizing scent of flowers, producing a strong sensory impact on the reader who enters this fictional world through the eyes of an omniscient narrator. In this dandy milieu, the first character is introduced. Lord Henry Wotton appears in a static atmosphere,

animated only by "the fantastic shadows of birds in flight" and "the sullen murmurs of bees" (Wilde [1890, 1891] 2020, 5).[1]

The focus suddenly shifts to the center of the studio, where "the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty" (*DG*, 6) lies majestically. Some distance away, the painter, Basil Hallward, looks at "the gracious and comely form he had so skillfully mirrored in his art" (*DG*, 6) and is immersed in some private oneiric images forming in his mind. The form he "mirrored" in his art through his great abilities is, therefore, a reflection of his "mysterious young friend" who, according to Lord Henry Wotton's words, "never thinks" (*DG*, 7), a "brainless, beautiful creature" whose name has not been revealed yet. This unnamed creature is absent, and in its absence this creature is already there, ready to enter the scene, as if it were a big, but static and silent stage.

Basil Hallward's mysterious young friend is present as a reflected image, mirrored in a canvas. The first image we have of Dorian Gray is thus his own representation. The colored canvas mirrors his extreme beauty. Static, but effectively true. Present, yet implying a physical absence. Dorian Gray is first presented—and present—as a representation, created through Basil Hallward's hands. Afterward, he is announced and created through Basil Hallward's and Lord Henry's words, highlighting the significant role that art and language play in the protagonist's formation. Indeed, as Lian and Zhong (2021) claim, "Henry, Dorian, and Basil possibly represent three aspects of Wilde's self or personality structure. The entanglement and struggles between these characters reveal Wilde's multiple psychological appeals" (94).

Wilde outlines a fictional landscape of the self, mapping moments and feelings that help in the construction of the characters and their identities. A text's title plays a key role in revealing its possible meanings. Focusing on the title of Wilde's novel, what is extremely interesting is that the picture is prepended to what it represents, unquestionably assuming a pivotal importance. Form precedes content. The signified precedes its signifying. As Christopher Craft (2005) accurately points out, Wilde draws particular attention to visual technology. For the scholar, Wilde appropriates Ovid's myth of Narcissus and specular mimesis for the construction of individual identity (2005). The following excerpt offers an understanding of Dorian's identification with his portrait:

> Dorian…passed listlessly in front of his picture, and turned towards it. When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time.…The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before. (*DG*, 25)

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[1] From this point onward, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will be mentioned as *DG*.

In this sudden epiphanic moment, Dorian's eyes capture his image in the picture for the first time and it is "as if he had recognized himself for the first time" (*DG*, 18). This scene is of vital importance for the understanding of the construction of identity throughout the whole fictional work. Like Ovid's Narcissus, Dorian Gray falls in love with his image (Craft 2005), declaring "I am in love with it….It is part of myself. I feel that" (*DG*, 27). Relying on his sensations, he deeply feels that the picture is part of himself.

There is, however, an important distinction between Ovid's and Wilde's mirrors. Ovid's is a natural reflector mirroring a mere surface, while Wilde's is an artificial and supernatural one reflecting an internal degradation, mirroring the soul. "This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul" (*DG*, 89). The radicality of Wilde's use of the portrait for the construction of Dorian Gray's identity lies in the fact that the picture reverses the conventional relation between surface and depth, as Craft points out, allowing Dorian to notice "the legible condition of his inner being" (2005, 115) that would otherwise be hidden.

Art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* assumes a deconstructing function, for it reverses the binary concepts of depth and surface. It contains *ambiguities, paradoxes,* and *shifting meanings* rather than presenting a fixed interpretation. Indeed, depth and content progressively lose their importance, while surface and form are privileged. As Koen Van Cauwenberge (1997) rightly points out, Wilde borrows binary oppositions from the hegemonic culture to overturn the pyramid scheme that has depth and content at its top. According to him, Wilde adopts a strategy to subvert Victorian morals by using paradoxes, a strategy like the method(s) of Derrida's Deconstruction. Patricia Waugh argues in *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism* (1992) the hegemonic unspoken presuppositions of transcendental truths are exposed as ideological constructs whose covert assumptions are revealed using the various strategies deconstruction avails itself of, dismantling the base of metaphysical truths. Cauwenberge (1997), about Wilde's critical radicalism, asserts that his subversive strategies are like this method of the reversal of binary oppositions, in which the terms present in a dominant culture are reversed.

Wilde intricately weaves the theme of identity formation in the novel through the interplay of the supernatural picture and the mirror. Dorian Gray is body, he is surface. The picture is his soul, it is depth. The latter reflects what is "sin" for society, contrasting with the aesthetic philosophy of New Hedonism propounded by Lord Henry. "The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification," affirms Lord Henry (*DG*, 20). What society defines as "sin" for him becomes mere "action," deprived of its morality. A cathartic action. After Dorian Gray cruelly rejects Sybil Vane, some reflections on cruelty arise. "Cruelty! Had he been cruel? It was the girl's fault, not his" (*DG*, 77). After seeing the picture transformed and after listening to Lord Henry's words, Dorian welcomes his philosophy and does not consider his behavior toward Sybil Vane to be wrong. It is the change in the picture, the reflection of his soul, that makes him judge his actions as immoral. Michael Patrick Gillespie (2015), assuming a radical perspective, argues that aside from

Dorian's assumption, there is no evidence to support the notion that his portrait alters as a judgment or representation of his moral state. Dryden asserts that the portrait is regarded as an object that is monstrous in nature, yet that it possesses a sense of vitality, embodying corruption and an indestructible essence, serving as a tangible representation of malevolence. Functioning as a physical embodiment of Dorian's tainted soul, the picture plays a crucial role in establishing the theme of duality within the narrative (2003).

Some of the various binary oppositions present in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are surface-beauty/depth-moral values and role/essential self (Dollimore 1991). Dorian Gray's beauty is shown and glorified throughout the whole fictional story, in contrast to society and its moral values, which are perpetually discredited by Lord Henry. Furthermore, Dorian's public identity—his role—is privileged to his personal identity. His essential self is accurately hidden in a private space, thus being a big semantic metaphor of his inner being, an unspeakable truth. What is of considerable relevance is the fact that in his schoolroom, although physically separate from the picture—his essential self—Dorian can be "entirely" himself, without the necessity of being in disguise. Moreover, the two people with the privilege to see his personal identity are Basil Hallward and Andrew Campbell, both of which die. Hallward—the creator—being stabbed in an act of Frankenstenian reminiscences by his creature, "resurrecting" metaphysics after living a life devoted to purely aesthetic beauty, reproaching Dorian for what he has become and begging him to repent. Campbell, committing suicide after being forced to destroy Basil's body, not being able to bear the burden of Dorian Gray's inner nature.

As far as aestheticism is concerned, it is crucial to insist that Wilde, through art, expresses the individual ego leading to self-realization, as Allison Pease remarks (2004). Aestheticism, particularly as articulated by Swinburne, Pater, and Wilde, placed a heightened emphasis on form as art's primary signifier. In this context, form not only characterized art but also served as its focal point, celebrating art's autonomy and emotional impact. While philosophical rebellion against rigid expectations have continued to develop, its influence has evolved, and its core idea—that beauty alone is enough—continues to challenge the way we perceive art today. As Gilbert asserts in *The Critic as Artist* (1891), the true artist draws inspiration solely from form. At the same time, Wilde's principle asserts that expression necessitates form for its realization. Dorian's reflections in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where he contemplates the nature of words and their ability to provide structure to the intangible, serve as a tribute to the significance of form and its influence on shaping consciousness. In a Wildean paradox that highlights his dialectical approach, Wilde perceived form as an indicator of consciousness or deliberate intention, which subsequently influenced the work of art. Pease points out that Wilde, like Pater, favored the specific rather than the general, perceiving art not as a reflection of a universal truth but rather as an embodiment of individual truth (Pease 2004).

> In The Picture of Dorian Gray, told by a third person narrator, questions of Aestheticism are intimately linked to those pertaining to identity and temptation, to narcissism and homoeroticism, to class, gender, and religion. Wilde's novel can also be read as an aesthetic, and at the same time, metafictional mise en abyme, since it refers back to and mirrors the reading of novels and their sometimes lifechanging influence. (Bach 2020, 470)

Wilde conceived art as individualism, consistently highlighting the notion that the former serves as a manifestation of the individual ego, representing the conscious self. Individualism, states Wilde in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891), is that "disturbing and disintegrating force" seeking to disturb "monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine" (20), articulating his conviction that art functions as a vehicle for individual dissent against societal norms, enabling a reimagining of reality. Culture, according to Wilde, represents a journey of personal growth and evolution. The interplay of consciousness and will—essentially, how individuals think and articulate those thoughts—plays a pivotal role in Wilde's aesthetic philosophy. Pease remarks that art is a means for individuals to discover a more powerful expression through which they can challenge and resist the established norms of reality (2004).

To be free, the individual should live in a society that differs from Wilde's *fin-de-siècle* context portrayed in his work. As Lord Henry Wotton remarks during the initial meeting with Dorian Gray,

> The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties. The duty one owes to one's self. (*DG*, 19)

Victorian society was embedded in an extreme moralism and impediments to the development of personal freedom of individuals not in line with moral conduct of the epoch. The power of aesthetics is then to fight a given reality. Wilde's aesthetics can be defined as progressive, for he contraposes it to ethics to the extent that the latter is considered inferior to the former because progress derives from aesthetics (Pease 2004). Art, deprived of moralistic patterns, is a way to rebel against the received reality and a way of developing one's unique identity. As Regenia Gagnier rightly points out in the introduction to *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde* (1991), in the long nineteenth-century aestheticism rises as a form of revolt "against Victorian utility, rationality, and realism" (3).

Nevertheless, in the novel the function of art for identity construction is problematic. As we shall see, arising to fight the given reality, the radical New Hedonism ends up being a potential obstacle to the self-development of individuals.

The Expression of Aesthetics: Identity Construction Through Art and Language

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* surface and form are considered superior to depth and content. In the novel, words (form) are compared to music, but:

> Music was not articulate. It was not a new world, but rather another chaos, that it created in us. Words! Mere words! How terribly they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. Mere words! Was there anything as real as words? (*DG*, 20)

If words "seemed…to have music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute" (*DG*, 21) it means that they have their autonomy, they have an essence of their own, independently from the content, the signified. "They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things" (*DG*, 20). They possess the ability of giving shape to amorphous or unformed things. What can be extrapolated from this passage is that, in Wilde's perspective, words may possess the ability to create a new reality, and not merely to represent an existing one. Gillespie states that Lord Henry articulates the idea of materialism, moving past mere aphorisms to present a pragmatic framework of his perception of reality (2015). Through an elaborate discourse, which employs a lighthearted tone to conceal its profound skepticism, he formulates an alternative worldview. This perspective dismantles the principles upheld by the Victorian society in which he exists, condemning those who cling to these values as misguided. He starts his argument by highlighting the distorting impact that societal norms exert on an individual, proclaiming his devotion to self-indulgence, encourages others to see the world from the same perspective, and refuses to accept any responsibility for the consequences his views might have on others (2015).

Lord Henry's words do have a strong impact in the work. Indeed, from an in-depth analysis and assuming a radical perspective, it emerges that they take part in the formation of Dorian Gray's identity. "It is simply expression, as Harry says, that gives reality to things" (*DG*, 90), Dorian declares when talking to Basil. This conception recalls the poststructuralist view of reality because of the utterance of words, as stated by Cauwenberge (1997).

As Victoria Gordon remarks, [Dorian] "does not form himself for the reader" (2016, 18). Therefore, his character is formed in the reader's mind through the voices of the other two main characters already present in the scene. The excerpt quoted is the description of the effect Lord Henry's words have on Dorian Gray, who is captured by the intense musicality of the words pronounced by the former, which do have their radical semantics. Lord Henry dismantles Victorian values and points at the fear his contemporaries have of rebelling against society. "The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion—these are the two things that govern us…[T]he bravest man among us is afraid of himself" (*DG*, 19–20). Through the voice of Lord Henry and his ode to New Hedonism, any moralistic tendency is discouraged and perpetually challenged. Gillespie

(2015) asserts that this philosophy "is not an ethical system but rather the systematic rejection of such a possibility" (459). Indeed, "it embraces the arbitrariness of the world through its privileging of experience" (459). Art's semantics is conveyed through words. In *The Preface*, Wilde asserts that "[t]hought and language are to the artist instruments of an art" (1891, 3). Lord Henry's words are an instrument to spread the principles of New Aestheticism. During his first meeting with Dorian Gray, Lord Henry praises youth, which is "the one thing worth having," and beauty, "a form of Genius" with "the divine right of sovereignty" (*DG*, 22). His eloquent statements persuade Dorian that he might be a "visible symbol" of a new Hedonism. "A new Hedonism—that is what our century wants" (*DG*, 22–23). Dorian Gray has everything to embody these ideals, namely, the universal persuading language of beauty and youth as well as the naivety of the young people. Embracing these powerful and influential words and putting them into practice, he constructs his identity accordingly.

The social circle is crucial for the construction of Dorian Gray's identity. Throughout the novel, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry emphasize the importance of a new mode of art. Basil remarks about the fact that Dorian himself, his *persona*, inspired in him this new mode of art. An art that in Frieta's opinion (2017) is a way to create lies; Lord Henry gives form to this ethereal ideal through his eloquent words, which Dorian actively internalizes and embodies. Linda Dryden (2003) states that the environment surrounding Dorian Gray is unmistakably filled with individuals who are both corrupt and capable of corrupting others. The narrative exposes a widespread immorality that permeates the upper classes of London society. Wotton's influence has led Dorian down a path of moral decay, and, as a result, Dorian has similarly tainted many others throughout the city. The themes of vice and corruption in the novel extend beyond the main character, illustrating a pervasive issue within the elite circles of London.

Initially, Dorian Gray is a pure creature, "unspotted from the world" (*DG*, 17). He is purely static, in a sort of dormant state. Clausson claims that, subsequently, Dorian awakens "under the twin influences of Basil's homoerotic painting and Lord Henry's subversive philosophy" (2016, 345). This new form of art, and the ideology it encompasses, is performed by Dorian Gray. Before the painting was created, he was portrayed as boyish and innocent, with a "willful, petulant manner" (*DG*, 17). This innocence is manifested in the lack of performance. Lord Henry, with his eloquent speech, unveiled to Dorian Gray the pleasures of performance, serving as a powerful influence and manipulating force in his transformation. Lord Henry Wotton vindicates that "[t]he mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives" (*DG*, 20), therefore persuading Dorian Gray to act, since "[e]very impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us" (*DG*, 20). Therefore, Lord Henry remarks that every impulse we attempt to suppress festers in our minds, ultimately leading to our own corruption. His subversive words deconstruct social and moral bias, thus offering a radical perspective and enabling Dorian Gray to act and sin, embracing his desires and transgressing devoid of moral restraints, without the burden of ethical limitations. Gillespie affirms that Lord Henry expresses his

conviction that the world is fundamentally material, fleeting, episodic, and arbitrary. He consistently upholds his skepticism, demonstrating no desire to yield to any moral framework, whether traditional or alternative. While he can be seen as a passive supporter of New Hedonism, he takes on the role of an observer, more captivated by watching than by participating in events (2015). In this sense, he can be viewed as a mere spectator; however, he remains rigidly connected to the materialistic principles that define his interpretation of New Hedonism. As far as experience is concerned, Lord Henry proclaims that "[t]he body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification" (*DG*, 20). This cathartic effect of sin is verbalized by Lord Henry and performed by Dorian, who constructs his identity in action, performing this new mode of Art. Indeed, as Lord Henry states, "[t]he only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (*DG*, 20). This performativity contrasts with Lord Henry's perpetual stativity. The latter projects onto Dorian what he has never performed, showing the relationship between the astute ability of power and the naïve actions of the people and demonstrating, to a certain extent, how young people pay a high price for the performed ideals sold by others.

As far as sin is concerned, it occupies an important role for the construction and development of identity. In *The Critic as Artist*, it is seen as a means through which progress can be attained.

> What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified individualism it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the highest ethics. (Wilde [1891] 2013, 359–360)

The artist opposes himself or herself to social constraints and, in their rebellion, they aim at achieving a higher ethics. In Wilde's perspective, concepts such as sin and deception—contrasted with virtue and truth—take on a constructive significance, serving as catalysts for the individual to liberate themselves from moral constraints, and to forge and develop their own identity. Nevertheless, all is problematized by the fact that in the novel, there are a series of unresolved—and unresolvable—conflicts.

Cauwenberge (1997) argues that Wilde deconstructed the Decadent aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He does it by revealing the threats and dangers related to art, one of which being the fact that Dorian Gray confuses life and art and lives accordingly. Linda Dryden states that through the Gothic elements in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde critiques the superficiality of an aestheticism that neglects the essential role of human conscience (2003). Joseph Carroll (2005) defends that in the novel there are unresolved conflicts derived from the incompatibility between the aesthetic and moral sides of identity, as it is conceived by Wilde. Carroll affirms that Wilde incorporates the cultural structures of his time, using

them to articulate his individual identity, and argues that the conflicts present in the narrative mirror the internal divisions within Wilde's own personality (2005). According to the scholar, human nature is viewed in two conflicting ways in the novel. The first evolves from Walter Pater's aestheticism, while the second comes from a traditional Christian conception of the soul. Both deprive the individual of their identity. Dorian Gray's identity is thus born, it is constructed deprived of crucial elements for its survival.

Drawing from Charles Darwin's psychology, Carroll asserts that Wilde's identity is composed of sensual pleasure and moral pathos, conflicting with one another (2005). The scholar argues that Pater's doctrine of aestheticism is not conforming to human nature, since it erases two crucial parts of moral life, namely, the relational bonds—contrasting with enduring affectional bonds—and the extension of identity through time. Lord Henry, a proponent of Pater's aestheticism, underlines that " 'the aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here to do' " (*DG*, 19). However, the self cannot develop without relational bonds with other beings, nor being deprived of his past memory—since "it bears within it the burden of all its past acts" (Carroll 2005, 401). Finally, Carroll argues that Wilde only partially accepted Pater's philosophy and that it is demonstrated by an unresolved conflict in the novel.

Linda Dryden states that the literature of duality fundamentally explores themes of identity, often highlighting its absence or fragmentation. This exploration becomes even more complex as it acknowledges the existence of the self's "other," which further complicates the notion of a singular identity (2003, 39). Dorian Gray exhibits a disturbing obsession with the deteriorating visage reflected in the marvelous portrait of himself. As the story unfolds, the concept of identity emerges as an increasingly complex challenge. It intertwines with themes of social class and ethics, as well as the dualities of pleasure and suffering, beauty and repulsiveness, and the notions of evolution and decline. The doppelgänger in Gothic fiction, as Dryden remarks, embodies a profound sense of anxiety by presenting a sinister "other" that disrupts the unity of the self. "To be haunted by another, by a spectre, is uncanny enough, but to be haunted by yourself strikes at the foundations of identity" (41). Furthermore, narratives centered around doubling typically explore the dichotomy between good and evil, revealing deeper moral conflicts and existential dilemmas.

Identity and its duplicity are also represented in the geographical space of the narrative, where London is depicted as doubled and contrasting. Indeed, the geographical context of late nineteenth-century London serves to symbolically reinforce the text's thematic duality. Dorian's hedonistic beliefs are manifested in his luxurious environment, while his more sinister tendencies are represented by the opium dens and shadowy alleys of the Docklands, as well as in the haunting imagery of his portrait. This urban landscape accentuates the contrasting experiences that define the protagonist's journey (Dryden 2003).

The last scene of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains a crucial element for our understanding of art and language as a strategy for identity construction within the novel. In the silent house of Dorian Gray where, "[e]xcept for a light in one of the top windows, the house was all dark," silence is ruptured only by the whispers of the "frightened servants" (*DG*, 184).

> When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who *it* was. (*DG*, 184–185)

What is immediately striking is that the focus is on the portrait, described as "splendid," "in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty" (*DG*, 25). This final perspective recalls the initial scene, when Dorian Gray's image mirrored on a canvas prepended the individual it represents. Moreover, the sequence is described from the servants' perspective, a completely new one in the novel. Everything seems restored. The picture returns to its original state, and attention is again given to form—artistic form—in its perpetual beauty. Contrasting sharply with this marvelous splendor, the presence of some *thing* is presented. The picture is "of [the servants'] *master*," yet the name of Dorian Gray is notably absent in these concluding lines, evoking a sense of stillness reminiscent of the opening of the work and its static atmosphere. As soon as the focus shifts to what is lying on the floor, there is a lexical change that reflects the semantics of this last passage. There, on the floor a "dead man" was lying, who "was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (*DG*, 102), dreadful, lifeless and uncanny. The servants were not capable of recognizing "who *it* was," until they examined the rings. Moreover, what is left is an artifact. Nevertheless, those rings are an important metonymy that needs further consideration. A ring is an object, an artifact, an ornament, a decorative element. It is "a metonymy from which identity can only be inferred" (Craft 2005, 123). Gillespie affirms that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* apparently ends as a morality tale when Dorian, after trying to reform, seemingly cannot bear the weight of his own conscience. However, according to the scholar, none of these classifications provide a clear direction for interpretation. He argues that the most comprehensive approach to interpreting the novel follows the stark perspectives of post-Modern thinking: the picture relinquishes its role and returns to its original form, with the whole episode simply affirming the arbitrariness of human existence (2015). Nevertheless, this aspect is problematized, since the concept of morality plays a crucial role in the whole novel, articulated in the narrative game that rejects it and, simultaneously, calls it into question.

Art and language, and their influential power, play a pivotal role in this sense. The influence of Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton leads Dorian Gray to act in the path of degeneration, which is both moral and physical. Linda Dryden (2003) highlights the fact that

the picture is "the unifying image of the novel" (134) and that both represent "a perverse pleasure and a dreaded responsibility" (134) and, together with his desires, it drives Dorian Gray into further evil. Dorian Gray's belief that Basil Hallward's murder was suggested by the image on the canvas reveals a profound delusion: the portrait embodies Dorian Gray, and they are inextricably linked. Hallward's lifeless body has transcended its humanity, becoming merely an object, a representation of the Gothic "unspeakable" (134, 136–137).

Dorian, acting out his degenerate behavior, at the end of the story is "loathsome of visage" (*DG*, 184–185), unrecognizable by the people who surround him, and, like Basil, he is reified. Dorian Gray, throughout the narrative, undergoes a process of dehumanization, becoming a modern urban beast, as Linda Dryden (2003) affirms. Indeed, the figure of the modern criminal, exemplified by Dorian, who deliberately sheds his ethical boundaries, represents not a regression to primitive humanity but rather the embodiment of the urban beast in a modern context. The influence of Darwinian theories and Lombroso's work, who explored the relationship between physiognomy and criminality, helped to bridge the gap between past and present, prompting late nineteenth-century authors to delve into the concept of the inherent "beast" within individuals. Additionally, Freud's explorations of the human psyche, along with a broader intrigue in the supernatural and psychological phenomena, characterized the cultural landscape of the 1890s (Dryden 2003).

Conclusion

At the end of the story, Dorian Gray is not redeemed. Indeed, as Carroll remarks, "suicide is not a form of resolution" (2005, 409). Dorian, living a life devoted merely to sensual pleasures, eventually ends up destroying his life. There is no final resolution; instead, the narrative highlights the everlasting conflict between the aesthetic and moral dimensions of identity. Carroll opines, indeed, that the central artistic purpose in *Dorian Gray* is to articulate the anguish in the depths of Wilde's own identity (2005). Nonetheless, even though Wilde's biography may have influenced his work, it is essential to distance the author from the narrative context. It is the context of the late nineteenth century, infused with fears and apprehensions and its intrinsic transformations and accelerations reflected in the literary production of the epoch, that shapes the conflictual nature of identity depicted in the novel. Modernity, as Dryden remarks, is characterized by a significant erosion of boundaries that inherently imply a sense of duality (2003). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this blurring is evident in various relationships: the distinction between the real Dorian Gray and his artistic portrayal, the connection between Dorian and Lord Henry, who derives vicarious enjoyment from Dorian's life, and the dynamic between Dorian and Basil Hallward, the unintentional creator of his alternate *persona*. Finally, Dorian Gray arises as a mere representation. He is form deprived of moral content, the latter being projected to a supernatural canvas, which reflects his personal—and corrupt—identity. Dorian Gray has a performative nature, which

enables him to act in a modern world in perpetual motion. Having chosen a life of hedonism, as Dryden remarks, he becomes irrevocably tied to the horrifying portrait that encapsulates and mirrors his guilt and moral decay. Similar to other narratives exploring the theme of duality, the sole escape from this torment ultimately lies in death (2003).

To conclude, if, on the one hand, the performed New Aestheticism is seen as propulsive for progress and self-development, freeing the individual who can construct their identity devoid of moral limitations, on the other hand, it does also represent a constraint, complicating the picture. Finally, in the fictional world of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian Gray is reified, dying represented by an object. He is unnamed. All is form. There is no final meaning but only perspectives. The author's, the characters,' the reader's, in an infinite chain of constructed meanings.

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The authors declare that informed consent was not required as there were no human participants involved.

Conflict of Interest

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