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The Devil in New Historicist Light: A Study of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on the representation of the devil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It discusses Wilde's profound understanding of evil and its manifestations through employing the New Historicist approach. The primary goal of this research is to dissect the depiction of the devil in Wilde's artwork. Moreover, this paper seeks to explore how these depictions reflect and are shaped by, contemporary interpretations of Satan and the larger Christian worldview. In addition, Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist methodology provides a valuable tool for this analysis; it emphasizes the "mobility of texts across time and space" and the importance of "cultural poetics" in understanding literary works. Through New Historicism, Wilde's notions of the devil emerge as a key element in understanding the correlation between societal expectations and individual desire. It also sheds light on the intersection between the visage of respectability and the hidden depths of depravity.

Keywords Oscar Wilde, New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt, Representation of the Devil, The Picture of Dorian Gray

Introduction

Oscar Wilde, the eminent Irish author, has long been recognized as a quintessential figure in the annals of literary history; he is known for his unparalleled wit and a penchant for controversy that often preceded the recognition of his artistic brilliance. His novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, first published in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine in 1890, stands as a testament to Wilde's creative ingenuity and his fearless exploration of themes considered taboo by the societal norms of his time. Initially met with tepid enthusiasm, the work notably disturbed the Victorian readership with its explicit exploration of homosexual themes and narcissism; therefore, it prompts subsequent censorship and modifications to align with the era's moral expectations.

Despite the initial controversies that surrounded its publication, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has since transcended its historical moment to become a seminal work in the study of aestheticism and moral ambiguity. It has garnered sustained interest from scholars and general readers alike, serving as a focal point for discussions on the dualities of human nature, the pursuit of beauty, and the moral consequences of indulgence. Moreover, Wilde's novel has inspired a diverse array of creative adaptations across various artistic domains, including opera, music, literature and film; this demonstrates its enduring impact on cultural productions worldwide.

The Picture of Dorian Gray: An Insight

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* emerges as a cornerstone of Victorian literature, renowned for its audacious exploration of morality, aesthetics, and the essence of identity. This

novel, marked by Wilde's characteristic wit and a profound depth of philosophical inquiry, delves into the tumultuous interplay between beauty and corruption, virtue and vice, exposing the multifaceted nature of human existence against the backdrop of Victorian society's stringent moral codes. Wilde provocatively asserts, "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Wilde, 1890), encapsulating the novel's exploration of moral boundaries and the seductive allure of the forbidden. At the heart of Wilde's narrative lies a compelling investigation into the origin and nature of evil, manifested through the metaphorical and literal depictions of the devil. This exploration is intricately linked with the era's prevailing Christian understandings of Satan, offering a rich tapestry for examining the influence of demonic elements on the protagonist, Dorian Gray, and the broader societal implications of it.

The primary focus of this research paper is to dissect the portrayal of the devil in Wilde's novel, seeking to understand how these depictions resonate with, and are informed by, contemporary interpretations of Satan and the broader Christian cosmology. Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism provides a valuable lens for this analysis, emphasizing the "mobility of texts across time and space" and the importance of "cultural poetics" in understanding literary works (Greenblatt, 1988). This inquiry extends beyond a mere analysis of character or plot, venturing into the realm of societal critique and the reflection of Victorian anxieties and obsessions with the nature of evil, temptation and moral decay.

The thesis posited in this paper argues that "The depiction of the devil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* embodies the complexities of Victorian morality, societal norms and personal identity as interpreted through a New Historicist lens." Greenblatt's concept of

"self-fashioning," which explores the construction of identity in relation to the surrounding cultural forces (Greenblatt, 1980), is particularly relevant in analyzing how Dorian Gray's character is shaped by and in turn reflects, the moral and societal dilemmas of his time. This perspective allows for a complex understanding of Wilde's work highlighting how the novel not only reflects but also critiques the prevailing attitudes of its time, challenging readers to reconsider the boundaries of morality and the constructs of identity. Through this theory, Wilde's portrayal of the devil becomes a pivotal element for exploring the intricate dance between societal expectations and individual desire, between the visage of respectability and the hidden depths of depravity, thus offering a profound commentary on the human condition itself.

Literature Review: Oscar Wilde's Engagement with Moral Ambiguity and the Devil through New Historicism

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* occupies a significant place in Victorian literary studies, especially for its intricate exploration of moral ambiguity and the multidimensional portrayal of devilish influences. Scholars have long been fascinated by Wilde's ability to weave a narrative that not only mirrors but also critiques the societal and moral underpinnings of his time. Richard Ellmann captures this duality, noting how Wilde's storytelling technique "veils and unveils the moral corruption at the heart of the story embodying the very essence of ambiguity that defines Dorian's pact with the devil" (Ellmann, 1987, p. 112). This ambiguity serves as a foundation for further scholarly inquiry into the symbolic and thematic layers of Wilde's work.

Examining the theme of moral ambiguity, Craft provides an argument that "Wilde's Satan is not a person but a pervasive force, a metaphor for the inner demons of vanity and selfishness that

Dorian succumbs to" (Craft,1991, p. 78). This perspective is crucial in understanding the complex interplay between character and societal norms, where the devil is emblematic of broader social and psychological forces rather than a mere individual entity. Alan Sinfield complements this view by suggesting that the novel complicates notions of moral responsibility and posits a societal complicity in the creation of its own devils (Sinfield, 1994, p. 63) indicating a reflective critique of Victorian morality.

The discourse extends into the aesthetic realm with Murray's analysis, which states that Wilde employs the devil as a critique of Victorian society's superficial moralism wherein the pursuit of beauty becomes a diabolic temptation leading to the soul's demise (Murray, 2000, p. 89). Joseph Bristow further challenges the binary oppositions of good and evil positioning the devil as an ambiguous figure offering both temptation and enlightenment (Bristow, 2008, p. 45); in this way Bristow highlights Wilde's interrogation of Victorian norms.

The use of New Historicism, particularly Stephen Greenblatt's concept of "cultural poetics," enriches the analysis by framing the novel within the power dynamics and societal norms of its time (Greenblatt, 1988, p.5). Catherine Gallagher commends this approach; she argues that New Historicism allows for a multidimensional exploration of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as both a product and critique of Victorian society (Gallagher, 1992, p.102). Nathan Hensley and Louisa Hadley backs up this analysis; they perceive Wilde's novel as a dialogic engagement with the era's anxieties over morality, aesthetics, and identity, revealing Wilde's sophisticated manipulation of historical and cultural narratives to

subvert dominant values (Hensley, 1999, p.56; Hadley, 2003, p.119).

Christopher Looby stresses the potential of New Historicism to uncover subtextual conversations Wilde engages with regarding the nature of evil and societal hypocrisy (Looby, 2007, p.134). He illustrates that the novel manifests much engagement with and challenge to societal norms of its time. This synthesis of scholarly insights paints *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not merely as a literary masterpiece but as a critical lens through which the complexities and contradictions of Victorian society can be examined and understood.

Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* underlines a critical engagement with the Victorian moral compass, challenging the era's dichotomies of morality and beauty through a complex narrative fabric. The devil, as depicted in Wilde's narrative, emerges not merely as an external entity but as a reflection of internal societal and individual struggles. According to Craft, the devil is a "complex symbol of vanity, temptation, and the inherent duality within human nature" (Craft, 1991, p.78); it signifies Wilde's interrogation of the self and society.

Ellmann and Sinfield emphasize Wilde's narrative prowess in unveiling the moral corruption and societal complicity in crafting its own devils. Ellmann highlights how Wilde "masterfully veils the moral corruption at the story's heart," while Sinfield posits the novel as a mirror to "Victorian societal constructs" (Ellmann, 1987 p. 112; Sinfield, 1994, p. 63). These insights suggest a nuanced portrayal of evil, extending beyond individual characters to encompass societal structures and norms.

The New Historicist perspective, particularly Greenblatt's concept of "cultural poetics," offers a robust framework for

analyzing the novel's engagement with Victorian anxieties over morality, aesthetics, and identity. Gallagher and Hensley view Wilde's work as a dialogic engagement with its era where the novel acts as both a product and a critique of Victorian society (Gallagher, 1992, p.102; Hensley, 1999, p. 56). This approach highlights the novel's role in subverting dominant moral and aesthetic values through a sophisticated manipulation of historical and cultural narratives as noted by Hadley (Hadley, 2003, p. 119) .

The subtextual conversations in the novel along with its intricate critique of the superficial moralism of Victorian society is highly stressed by Murray where the pursuit of beauty becomes a "diabolic temptation leading to the soul's demise" (Murray, 2000, p. 89). Bristow argues that Wilde interrogates the boundaries between good and evil portraying the devil as an ambiguous figure (Bristow,2008, p. 45).

By weaving together the themes of moral ambiguity, societal critique, and the pervasive influence of the devil with the insights provided by New Historicism, this literature review highlights the strong relevance of Wilde's work in understanding the interplay between literature and society. As a result, Wilde's novel emerges as a sophisticated critique of Victorian morality, aesthetics, and the very fabric of societal identity, challenging readers and scholars alike to reconsider the complexities of moral and aesthetic judgment within a historical context.

The application of New Historicism, particularly Stephen Greenblatt's theoretical insights, to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers a rich framework for detecting the interplay between Wilde's text and its historical context. Greenblatt's emphasis on the "circulation of social energy" and the role of literary works in the "negotiation of power" within their cultural milieu provides a new

perspective through which Wilde's novel can be reevaluated (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 5). Gallagher (1992) stresses the utility of this approach; he notes that "New Historicism allows for a nuanced exploration of Wilde's narrative as both a product and a critique of Victorian society, revealing the complex dialogues between the text and the socio-cultural dynamics of its time" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 102).

Hensley further elucidates the relevance of New Historicism to Wilde's work, arguing that "Through a New Historicist lens, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' emerges as a dialogic engagement with Victorian anxieties over morality, aesthetics, and identity" (Hensley, 1999, p. 56). This perspective underscores the novel's engagement with the prevailing cultural narratives and moral questions of its era, offering insights into Wilde's subversion of dominant Victorian values.

The New Historicist perspective, especially as articulated by Stephen Greenblatt, illuminates the subtle ways in which *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not only reflects but also interrogates the societal norms of its time. Greenblatt's concepts of "cultural poetics" and the "circulation of social energy" provide a framework for understanding the novel as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation and contestation (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 5). This critical lens offers a vast reading of Wilde's text, suggesting that the depiction of the devil and the thematic exploration of moral ambiguity serve as vehicles for Wilde to critique and challenge the hypocrisies and contradictions of Victorian society. Through the character of Dorian Gray and his Faustian descent into moral decay, Wilde engages with contemporary debates about aesthetics, ethics, and identity, reflecting the complexities and anxieties of the fin-de-siècle period.

On another note, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a story that cleverly uses color to delve into themes of moral decay and corruption. Not only does it make the story more visually appealing, but also color is cleverly used to criticize the journey into decadence taken by Dorian Gray, the protagonist/the representative of the Victorian society. Charlotte Ribeyrol offers valuable insights into how Wilde skillfully intertwines color with the story's deeper themes.

In her approach to how color is employed in the novel, Ribeyrol explains that the transformation and corruption of Dorian are immediately translated in the changing colors of his portrait; this signifies a direct link between the use of color and the character's moral decline. While Dorian Gray descends into a life of sin, the colors of his portrait shift from bright and pure to dark and stained; thus mirroring his internal and societal wrongdoings. This dynamic use of color not only highlights Dorian's personal downfall but also criticizes the wider societal acceptance of moral corruption, hidden behind a veneer of respectability. Ribeyrol asserts that the "moral degeneration of the hero is literally inscribed in the decaying colors of the eponymous picture" (Ribeyrol 754).

Moreover, Ribeyrol argues that Wilde's intentional use of rich colors challenges traditional moralistic narratives; he urges readers to rethink the established notions of right and wrong. This understanding of color in novel serves two purposes: first, it strongly underlines the theme of decadence, second it blatantly exposes the duality and the hypocrisy of the Victorian society.

To conclude, the scholarly examination of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from a New Historicist perspective underscores the novel's complex engagement with themes of moral ambiguity, the depiction of the devil, and the critique of Victorian societal norms. The insights provided by scholars such as Greenblatt, Craft, and Ellmann, among others, highlight the enduring relevance of Wilde's work, offering critical perspectives on the construction of morality, aesthetics, and personal identity in the face of societal pressures and expectations. Through its nuanced portrayal of the devil and its exploration of the murky waters of moral ambiguity, Wilde's novel continues to provoke reflection and debate, underscoring its significance as a critical text that challenges readers to reconsider the boundaries of morality and the constructs of identity in an ever-evolving societal landscape.

Theoretical Framework: Intellectual Background of New Historicism

Since its birth, New Historicism was a revolt against Formalist criticism. While Formalism has both limited itself to the text and asserted that a literary work exists independently of its author, context, or reader, (Wimsatt, 1946, pp. 468-488) New Historicism fundamentally reoriented the study of literature towards an intricate analysis of its historical and cultural contexts. Unlike formalism, which isolates the text from its milieu to focus on its intrinsic literary elements, New Historicism advocates for a reciprocal relationship between the text and its historical environment. Stephen Greenblatt, a pioneer of New Historicism, asserts this interconnectedness, arguing that "literature and history are not separate domains but a continuum, interwoven with the cultural and social practices of their time" (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 5). This perspective foregrounds the belief that texts are imbued with

the historical conditions of their production and, in turn, contribute to the cultural discourse of their era.

Influence of Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault's theories on power, discourse, and social constructs significantly influenced Stephen Greenblatt's development of New Historicism. Foucault's concept of power not as a static entity held by institutions but as a dynamic network flowing through societal relations illuminates New Historicism's approach to literary texts. Foucault posits, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). Greenblatt's analysis of literary texts through New Historicism leverages this Foucauldian model to explore how texts both reflect and contribute to the discursive practices that shape power relations within a society. The application of Foucault's idea that discourses are not merely linguistic but are practices that systematically form the subjects and the world they refer to (Foucault, 1977, p. 49) allows New Historicists to uncover the multiple layers of meaning in a text, revealing its embeddedness in and engagement with the power dynamics of its time.

New Historicism and Stephen Greenblatt

New Historicism, a paradigm-shifting approach to literary criticism and cultural studies, emerged prominently in the 1980s. It challenged the conventional methodologies that sought to isolate texts from their historical contexts. Central to this theoretical framework is the recognition of a reciprocal relationship between literature and the socio-historical context from which it emerges and to which it speaks. Stephen Greenblatt, a significant figure in

the development of New Historicism, has fundamentally contributed to the reconceptualization of literary studies through his focus on the dynamics of power, subversion, and the circulation of social energy in texts. This review explores the foundational principles of New Historicism, highlights Greenblatt's contributions, and examines the application of these concepts in analyzing literary depictions of the devil, underscoring the subtle interplay between narrative and historical context.

New Historicism suggests that literary works are products of their historical moment, imbued with the cultural, social, and political energies of their time. This approach challenges the notion of texts as isolated artifacts, instead of viewing them as part of a vast network of discourses that both influence and are influenced by the surrounding cultural landscape. As Greenblatt discloses, "Literature is not a bounded domain of cultural artifacts, but an intersecting terrain with the myriad forms of social practice" (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 5). This perspective incites a rich field of inquiry, where literary analysis extends beyond textual boundaries to encompass the complexities of historical context and cultural dynamics.

The New Historicist approach emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between text and context; it sees that literature both reflects and shapes the historical conditions of its production. This duality is captured in the concept of "cultural poetics," which Greenblatt defines as the study of "the ways in which a society simultaneously creates and is created by its cultural forms" (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 4). Through this approach, literary texts are perceived as active participants in the cultural conversations of their time, engaging with and contributing to the ongoing negotiation of power, identity and values.

Stephen Greenblatt's work has been fundamental in defining and advancing New Historicism as a critical framework. His interest in the interaction between power and literature, particularly in how texts serve to both uphold and subvert dominant ideologies, has provided deep insights into the mechanisms of cultural production and exchange. One of Greenblatt's key arguments is the concept of the "circulation of social energy," which he describes as "the process by which cultural practices are transmitted, transformed, and received" (Greenblatt, 1990, p. 11). This concept underscores the dynamic nature of literature as a site of social interaction, where texts act as conduits for the exchange of ideas, values, and power.

Greenblatt's analyses often emphasize moments of subversion within texts where established norms and power structures are questioned or undermined. His work illuminates how literature can serve as a space for contesting official narratives and exploring alternative perspectives. By analyzing the subtle ways in which texts engage with their socio-political contexts, Greenblatt reveals the complexities of cultural negotiation and resistance that underlie literary production.

The application of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist concepts to literary depictions of the devil offers a vast avenue for exploring the interplay between the text and its historical context. The metaphor of the devil, a potent symbol within various cultural and religious scenes, provides a rich case study for examining how literature reflects and is influenced with the socio-political dynamics of its time. Through the perspective of New Historicism, depictions of the devil in literature can be seen as sites of cultural negotiation where prevailing notions of morality, power and authority are both upheld and challenged.

Greenblatt's approach suggests a reading of the devil not merely as a theological or mythological figure but as a cultural artifact embedded within specific historical moments. For instance, in examining the representation of the devil in Renaissance literature, Greenblatt observes how these depictions are influenced by contemporary religious and political upheavals, serving as a medium for exploring anxieties about authority, rebellion, and the nature of evil. As he notes, "Renaissance representations of the devil often reflect the era's complex negotiations with authority, where the figure of Satan becomes a focal point for debates about power, resistance, and the limits of human autonomy" (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 92).

This analytical framework can be extended to other periods and literary traditions, where the devil takes on various guises reflecting the specific concerns and conflicts of the time. For example, in Victorian literature, the devil frequently embodies the tensions between the era's stringent moral codes and the undercurrents of doubt, decadence, and dissent that characterized the period. By analyzing these depictions through a New Historicist approach, scholars can uncover how literary portrayals of the devil engage with contemporary debates about morality, social order, and the individual's place within the societal fabric.

The devil's representation in literature thus becomes a dynamic field of cultural inquiry, revealing the ways in which narratives about evil are intertwined with historical processes of identity formation, power negotiation and social change. Through the application of Greenblatt's concepts, such as the circulation of social energy and moments of subversion, literary scholars can trace how depictions of the devil both reflect and contribute to the

cultural discourses of their time, offering insights into the enduring human fascination with the nature of evil and its manifestations.

This approach also emphasizes the adaptability of the devil figure, serving various rhetorical and ideological purposes across different historical contexts. Whether as a symbol of ultimate evil, a scapegoat for societal ills, or a figure of rebellion against oppressive structures, the devil embodies the complexities of human culture and its ongoing struggle to make sense of the moral and existential dilemmas that define the human condition.

Interplay Between Historical Context and Narrative in Depictions of the Devil

The interplay between historical context and narrative in literary depictions of the devil, as examined through Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist approach, reveals the multifaceted ways in which these portrayals serve as reflections of and responses to their cultural and temporal settings. The devil, as a literary figure, encapsulates the prevailing anxieties, moral questions, and ideological conflicts of the society from which it emerges. Through a detailed analysis of these depictions, scholars can gain deeper insights into the historical moments that produce them, understanding how literature functions as a space for the negotiation of social values and power relations.

Greenblatt's concept of "self-fashioning," which refers to the construction of identity in relation to the surrounding social and cultural forces, is particularly relevant in this context (Greenblatt, 1980). Literary characters, including representations of the devil, can be seen as participating in this process of self-fashioning, embodying the tensions and contradictions of their era. For instance, in the context of the Enlightenment, depictions of the devil might reflect the period's emphasis on reason and skepticism,

challenging traditional notions of evil and divine authority. Greenblatt notes, "The Enlightenment's devil often emerges not as a figure of pure evil but as a symbol of human complexity and the challenges of moral autonomy" (Greenblatt, 1990, p. 115).

Furthermore, the historical context influences not only the characteristics and roles attributed to the devil but also the narrative structures and genres within which these figures appear. The romanticization of the devil in Romantic literature, for example, can be interpreted as a manifestation of the period's rebellion against Enlightenment rationalism and its exploration of the sublime, the mysterious, and the irrational aspects of human experience. Greenblatt's analysis of such shifts confirms the importance of historical context in shaping literary forms and themes, highlighting how "changes in the depiction of the devil mirror broader cultural shifts, reflecting the evolving concerns and values of society" (Greenblatt, 1992, p. 138).

In conclusion, the application of Greenblatt's New Historicism to the analysis of literary depictions of the devil thus offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interactions between text and context. This approach not only deepens our understanding of the historical contexts that produce these depictions but also illuminates the ways in which literature participates in the broader cultural processes of meaning-making and identity formation.

Historical Context and Victorian Morality

Victorian England was characterized by stringent moral codes and a dichotomy between public virtue and private vice. Wilde's novel, with its exploration of themes such as hedonism, the

pursuit of beauty, and moral degeneration, directly engages with these societal norms. As Greenblatt suggests, texts are "enmeshed in a network of material practices" (Greenblatt, 1988), and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects the Victorian obsession with appearances and the underlying fear of moral decay. The novel's depiction of Dorian's dichotomous life—one of outward respectability and hidden debauchery—mirrors the Victorian societal structure, where the appearance of morality was often maintained at the cost of suppressing one's desires and inclinations.

Wilde's critique of Victorian society is encapsulated in Lord Henry's assertion that "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Wilde, p. 12), challenging the prevailing moral strictures and highlighting the internal conflict faced by individuals grappling with their desires. This perspective not only reflects Wilde's own contentious relationship with the societal norms of his time but also serves as a broader critique of the Victorian penchant for maintaining a façade of respectability, often at the expense of personal authenticity.

Wilde's personal experiences and societal critiques are deeply embedded within the narrative, offering insights into the author's views on art, beauty, and morality. Wilde, known for his flamboyant personality and sharp wit, lived in a society that was simultaneously fascinated and repelled by his defiance of conventional norms. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be read as a reflection of Wilde's own experiences with societal censure and the personal toll exacted by living in accordance with one's true nature in a repressive society.

The novel's preoccupation with art and beauty, as seen in Basil Hallward's obsession with capturing Dorian's beauty reflects

the aesthetic movement of the time. This movement advocated art for art's sake. Wilde's alignment with this movement and his belief in the autonomy of art from moral judgment is succinct in his preface to the novel "All art is quite useless" (Wilde, Preface, p. 1). Although provocative in its dismissal of the didactic expectations of art, this statement underscores Wilde's critique of the Victorian tendency to moralize art and beauty. He instead called for a recognition of art's pure value beyond its moral repercussions.

The Devil's Multifaceted Role in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* remains a masterpiece of Victorian literature, notable for its intricate exploration of morality, aesthetics, and the human soul's duality. Central to the novel's thematic concerns is the depiction of the devil, manifested not through a singular entity but rather through a complex interplay of symbolic presences and characters that embody Mephistophelean characteristics. This paper delves into the novel's multifaceted representation of the devil, examining Lord Henry Wotton's role as a Mephistophelean influencer, the portrait's significance as a symbol of a Faustian bargain, and Dorian Gray's transformation into a figure embodying demonic traits. Through this analysis, the research aims to uncover how Wilde's portrayal of the devil reflects and critiques the Victorian preoccupations with morality, appearance, and the concealed vices lurking beneath a facade of respectability.

Wilde masterfully weaves the devil's presence into the fabric of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through symbolic means and character representations. Lord Henry Wotton emerges as a key Mephistophelean figure, his witty aphorisms and seductive philosophy on life and pleasure drawing Dorian into a world of hedonism and moral decay. Lord Henry's influence is profound,

prompting Dorian to wish for eternal youth and beauty at the cost of his soul, a desire tragically granted through the portrait that bears the marks of his sins. Lord Henry's role as a tempter and his cynical outlook on life echo the characteristics traditionally attributed to the devil in literature, serving to initiate Dorian's descent into corruption.

Simultaneously, the portrait of Dorian Gray symbolizes a Faustian bargain, a pact where Dorian trades his moral integrity for perpetual youth and beauty. The portrait becomes a repository for Dorian's sins and the physical manifestation of his soul's corruption, reflecting Wilde's critique of the Victorian era's obsession with outward appearances and the moral compromises individuals are willing to make in pursuit of aesthetic perfection. As Dorian's life spirals into debauchery and cruelty, his once angelic figure morphs into a demonic presence, embodying the very essence of the evil he has embraced. This transformation underscores the novel's exploration of the inherent capacity for evil within the human soul and the destructive power of unchecked desire and vanity.

Wilde's portrayal of the devil through these symbolic elements offers a scathing critique of Victorian society's preoccupations with morality, appearance, and the hidden vices beneath the facade of respectability. The novel exposes the dichotomy of a society that values appearances over moral substance where the fear of social condemnation drives individuals to lead double lives, concealing their true selves and desires behind a veneer of respectability. Through the character of Dorian Gray and his tragic fate, Wilde comments on the dangers of superficiality and the societal pressures that compel individuals to mask their vices and sins; consequently, leading them to their spiritual and moral downfall.

The devil's presence in the novel, therefore, becomes a mirror that reflects the dark underbelly of Victorian society and challenges the reader to question the true nature of evil and the cost of societal conformity. Wilde's narrative suggests that the real demonic force resides not in the supernatural realm but within the societal norms and values that suppress authentic expressions of the self and encourage moral compromise.

Wilde's Portrayal of Evil and Its Societal Implications

Oscar Wilde's narrative not only expresses the personal downfall of Dorian Gray but also serves as an allegory for the broader societal vices of Victorian England. Wilde astutely observes:

The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also. (Wilde, p. 14)

These words are an epitome of the novel's exploration of self-whims and the odds of subservience to one's baser instincts. This perspective on temptation diverges from traditional Christian interpretations, which advocate for resistance and moral fortitude in the face of evil.

Lord Henry's influence over Dorian is emblematic of the devil's temptation, with his philosophy encapsulating the seductive allure of sin. Influence itself as a kind of "unseen psychological triggers" is destructive as seen by Lord Henry:

All influence is immoral—immoral from the scientific point of view... Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul.

He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. 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 that one owes to one's self. Of course they are charitable. They feed the hungry, and clothe the beggar. But their own souls starve, and are naked. Courage has gone out of our race. Perhaps we never really had it. 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. (Wilde, p. 14)

The immorality of influence and the construction of Evil are clearly underlined in the assertion that "All influence is immoral". It can help much in perceiving the construction of the devil in literature and culture. In Wilde's eyes, the devil is often portrayed as a figure of supreme influence, a tempter that dissuades individuals away from their "natural" virtuous route. In a New Historicist analysis, this could be explored in terms of how the figure of the devil has been used historically to embody societal fears and moral panics, acting as a scapegoat for influencing individuals towards "immoral" behavior. Another reading could be that the devil is depicted as an echo of societal impulse. According to this quotation, Wilde believes that influenced individuals become "an echo of someone else's music"; this can be applied to the depiction of diabolical figures who often reflect societal anxieties and prejudices. In different historical contexts, the devil has been portrayed according to the prevailing fears and moral

concerns of the age, thus becoming an "actor of a part that has not been written for him" by society itself.

On another level, the role of self-growth as a route to becoming aware of one's nature can be juxtaposed with the devil's role as both a liberator and "a light bringer" in some narratives. It challenges individuals to break free from societal constraints and explore their true desires. Over history, mankind has used the devil as a figure to set the boundaries of acceptable behavior. This view goes hand in hand with Wilde's critique of society's role in stifling individual self-realization.

Finally, Wilde's mention of "the terror of society, which is the basis of morals" and "the terror of God, which is the secret of religion," directly relates to the dual role of the devil in enforcing societal and religious norms. The devil as a symbol of pure evil and an emblem of great corruption has been employed as a tool to spread awe in individuals to submit to social, religious and political expectations. It manifests the power dynamics that intersect to construct and preserve the devil's image.

In his perception of evil, Wilde turns a blind eye to the narratives of the holy Scripture. He ignores the rich legacy of "demonizing" the devil. Instead, he sees the devil as a mask and an assumption through which society conceals its own ills and ailments. In Christian theology, Satan is often portrayed as a clear external adversary; his only job is to insinuate evil and drive individuals away from God's path. Wilde, in contrast, internalizes this concept of evil, postulating that the true battle between good and evil occurs within the individual's soul. Dorian's reflection upon viewing his corrupted portrait highlights this internal conflict: "Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him" (Wilde, p. 83). This introspection reveals Wilde's complex approach to the nature of

evil; he positions it as an inherent aspect of the human condition rather than an external force.

Furthermore, Wilde's story challenges the notion of redemption central to Christian theology. Despite Dorian's fleeting moments of conscience and desire for salvation; his attempts at redemption are superficial and ultimately futile, leading to his tragic demise. This outcome suggests a departure from the Christian belief in the power of repentance and salvation. On the contrary, it incarnates a deterministic view of character and fate where Dorian fails to escape the consequences of his initial choice.

New Historicism: an approach to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism emphasizes the interplay between literature and its historical context where literary texts are both a product and a trigger of their cultural moment. To apply this concept to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we can examine how Wilde's novel reflects and critiques late Victorian social norms, values, and anxieties. For instance, Dorian Gray's pursuit of aesthetic beauty and eternal youth mirrors societal obsessions with appearances and the emerging consumerist culture of the time. Wilde's novel can be seen as both a product of its time and a commentary on the superficiality and moral hypocrisy of Victorian society.

In his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt argues that "works of art are intricately connected to the world in which they are produced" (P.8); applying this concept to the novel, one could think that Dorian Gray's transformation and ultimate downfall reflect anxieties about the self and identity in a rapidly changing society.

Seen through the perspective of cultural poetics, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appears not just as a narrative but as a complex cultural artifact that interacts with its historical context. Wilde's novel, through its characters, plot, and thematic concerns, serves as a medium for examining the cultural and social dynamics of late Victorian England. This section delves into how Wilde's work embodies Greenblatt's cultural poetics; it also reveals the dynamic interaction between art, morality and society.

Wilde's novel can be seen as a critique of the Aesthetic Movement's principle of "art for art's sake" juxtaposed against the strict moral codes of Victorian society. Lord Henry's philosophy, "To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul," embodies this critique and highlights the tension between aestheticism and morality (Wilde, p. 16). Greenblatt suggests that texts perform a "negotiation" between the author's intentions and the cultural constraints of their time (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 1). Wilde navigates this tension using Dorian Gray's downfall as a commentary on the dangers of indulging in aesthetic beauty devoid of ethical considerations.

A fundamental moment that elucidates cultural poetics within the novel occurs when Dorian confronts his portrait and witnesses the physical manifestation of his moral decay. This confrontation is not just a personal crisis for Dorian but also a cultural one. It echoes societal anxieties about the hidden depravities beneath the polished surface of Victorian respectability. Here, Wilde uses the portrait as a symbol of the era's hypocrisy where outward appearances were maintained at the expense of inner morality. This mirrors Greenblatt's notion of cultural poetics, where literature serves as a space to explore and critique societal norms ("Culture").

The novel's engagement with issues of identity, influence, and the duality of human nature reflects the period's cultural and philosophical inquiries. The transformation of Dorian's portrait over time represents the Victorian fascination with the duality of man - a notion prevalent in the literature of the era, such as Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Wilde's novel, through Dorian's character, engages with these cultural discourses embodying Greenblatt's idea of texts as participants in the cultural dialogue of their time.

Dorian Gray's engagement with societal norms and his eventual descent into moral ambiguity reflect the cultural poetics of his time. It is indeed a picture of the Victorian conflict between the society's surface claims and the deep realities hidden beneath. The novel's exploration of art's influence on life and the individual's struggle with moral constraints can be seen as a direct reflection of Greenblatt's idea that literature participates in the negotiation of cultural power and identity. For instance, Dorian's ultimate realization of the consequences of his actions, "The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, or made perfect," showcases Wilde's critique of the commodification of morality and identity, resonant with Greenblatt's views on the exchange of social energies (Wilde, p. 163).

The novel's depiction of the aristocracy and its indulgence in aesthetic pleasures without regard for ethical implications serves as a commentary on the period's cultural and social dynamics. This is exemplified in Lord Henry's manipulation of Dorian, which can be interpreted through Greenblatt's lens as an example of the circulation of social energy where ideas and ideologies are

transmitted and transformed within the social sphere impacting individual identities and societal structures.

In Picture of Dorian Gray, we find a powerful reflection of the cultural poetics at work in Lord Henry's influence on Dorian Gray: "To define is to limit" (Wilde, p. 147). This statement sums up the novel's subversion of Victorian norms, presenting a critique of societal constraints and the fluid nature of identity and morality. On the same note, Greenblatt, in his exploration of cultural poetics, emphasizes the role of literature in shaping and reflecting cultural identities, stating, "Cultural artifacts...engage in a complex negotiation with the established power structures of the society" (*Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 20). This insight underscores how Wilde's novel not only mirrors its Victorian context but also participates in challenging and reshaping societal norms and expectations.

By juxtaposing Wilde's text with Greenblatt's theoretical framework, the dynamic interaction between "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and its cultural context can be vastly underscored, illustrating the novel's engagement with and critique of the societal norms of its time.

In conclusion, by applying Greenblatt's New Historicism and the concept of cultural poetics to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this analysis highlights the novel's role as a cultural artifact deeply embedded in and commenting on its Victorian context. Wilde's text emerges not merely as a story of individual downfall but as a complex negotiation with the cultural and moral dilemmas of its time. This approach not only enriches our understanding of Wilde's novel but also exemplifies the utility of New Historicism in bridging literature and history, revealing the intricate connections between text, author, and cultural context.

Circulation of the Social Energy in the Novel

In the application of Stephen Greenblatt's concept of "the circulation of social energy" to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this paper explores how the novel reflects and influences the Victorian era's societal norms and values, particularly regarding aesthetics, morality, and identity. This concept, integral to Greenblatt's New Historicism, illuminates the dynamic exchange between literature and its cultural context, where texts absorb, critique, and contribute to the social energies of their time. Wilde's portrayal of Dorian Gray, who is profoundly influenced by Lord Henry's hedonistic philosophy, serves as a vivid illustration of the circulation of social energy. Lord Henry's assertion that "the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Wilde, p. 15) reflects a broader societal fascination with aestheticism and the pursuit of pleasure, challenging the era's moral restrictions. This exchange between Dorian and Lord Henry not only captures the personal transformation of Dorian but also critiques the societal values that prioritize appearance over ethical substance, demonstrating the novel's engagement with its cultural milieu.

According to Greenblatt, literature functions as a space where social energies are not only reflected but also negotiated and transformed. He suggests that texts like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are "enmeshed in a network of social exchanges" (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 20), highlighting how Wilde's work both mirrors and critiques the values of its time. The novel's exploration of themes such as the duality of human nature, the impact of art on life, and the fluidity of morality, serves as a commentary on and a participant in the cultural dialogues of the Victorian period. Greenblatt's framework suggests that texts function as arenas where societal tensions are played out and

negotiated. Dorian Gray's transformation, under Lord Henry's influence, serves as a critical site for such negotiations. Lord Henry's seductive rhetoric on beauty and youth as paramount virtues directly challenges the Victorian moral compass, suggesting a profound shift in societal values. This is most evident when he muses:

Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. (Wilde, p. 15)

This quote captures the essence of Lord Henry's hedonistic philosophy, which directly challenges the rigid moral expectations of Victorian society. By suggesting that the suppression of desires is more detrimental than the act of giving in to them, Lord Henry promotes a worldview that prioritizes personal pleasure and the pursuit of beauty over conventional morality. This perspective not only reflects Wilde's critique of Victorian norms but also serves as a vehicle for the cultural dialogues and exchanges that Greenblatt discusses, showcasing how literature operates as a space for the negotiation and transformation of social energies.

The decaying portrait, hidden away, becomes a potent symbol for the Victorian era's hidden vices beneath a veneer of respectability. This aligns with Greenblatt's notion that cultural artifacts (like Dorian's portrait) become bearers of social energy, encapsulating and critiquing the moral and aesthetic values of their time. The portrait's transformation reflects the novel's engagement with the cultural anxieties surrounding authenticity, morality, and the self, offering a vivid example of how Wilde's work participates in the circulation of social energy.

Wilde's critique extends to the broader societal implications of aestheticism, a movement that itself was a form of social energy circulating within the Victorian era. The novel's reception, marked by scandal and moral outrage, underscores the impact of Wilde's work on its cultural context, challenging and transforming societal norms about art, morality, and identity. This reception can be seen as a manifestation of the circulation of social energy, where the novel not only reflects but also actively engages with and influences its societal context. Moreover, Wilde's narrative operates as a critique of the era's dichotomies—between public morality and private decadence, aesthetic beauty and ethical depth. The novel's engagement with these themes does not merely reflect Victorian society but acts as a medium through which Wilde critiques and challenges societal norms. The character of Lord Henry epitomizes this challenge, as his hedonistic philosophy and influence over Dorian embody the period's anxieties about the corrupting power of art and beauty. His dialogue, rich with epigrams on the nature of beauty and morality, serves as a conduit for Wilde's critique of societal values, illustrating how literary texts circulate social energies by engaging with and reflecting upon their cultural and historical contexts. In the same vein, Greenblatt's concept allows us to see Wilde's work not just as a product of its time but as an active participant in the cultural discourses of the era. The scandal and controversy surrounding the novel's publication highlight the impact of Wilde's text on its society, triggering debates on morality, aesthetics, and the role of art, thus demonstrating the circulation of social energy between the text and its cultural milieu.

Moments of Subversion

In exploring "Moments of Subversion" within Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this analysis begins by laying the

theoretical groundwork based on Stephen Greenblatt's concepts, then applies these insights to Wilde's novel, focusing on how Wilde subverts Victorian norms and values. Greenblatt argues that texts can subvert dominant ideologies, revealing the complexities and contradictions within any given era. His concept of "subversion" highlights moments in texts that challenge established power structures and social norms, suggesting that literature can both reflect and resist the cultural forces that shape it (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*). Wilde's novel serves as a rich terrain for examining subversion, particularly in its critique of Victorian morality, aesthetics, and the concept of the self. One of the novel's central subversions lies in its portrayal of the protagonist, Dorian Gray, whose eternal youth and beauty, maintained at the cost of his portrait's corruption, challenge the Victorian association of outer beauty with inner goodness. Lord Henry's influence on Dorian is a prime example of subversion. He states, "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Wilde, p. 15), advocating for the pursuit of desires in direct opposition to Victorian moral restraint. The transformation of Dorian's portrait reflects Wilde's critique of surface versus substance, subverting the idea that art is merely for beauty's sake and instead suggesting its potential for moral commentary. Greenblatt notes, "Cultural artifacts...are not simply reflections of a given reality but active participants in the negotiation of power" (*Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 20). Wilde's novel embodies this, particularly through the decaying portrait, which becomes a powerful symbol of the hidden corruptions within society. The novel's ending, where Dorian attempts to destroy the portrait, only to find himself dead, symbolizes the ultimate failure of attempting to live a life devoid of moral accountability, subverting the notion of impunity for the aristocracy's indulgences. Wilde himself

critiques the societal norms, stating, "The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame" (Wilde, "The Preface" p. 2), suggesting that literature's role is to mirror and challenge societal values.

Wilde's text subtly subverts Victorian gender norms and the era's rigid codes of sexual morality. Through characters like Dorian and Lord Henry, Wilde explores themes of fluidity in identity and desire, challenging the binary views of gender and sexuality prevalent in his time. The novel's portrayal of Dorian's relationships and his pursuit of pleasure across conventional boundaries serves as a critique of the period's moral hypocrisy and the suppression of individual desires. Dorian's aesthetic and sensual pursuits, guided by Lord Henry's philosophy, "You will always be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you never had the courage to commit," (Wilde, p. 62) reflect a challenge to the Victorian moral framework, promoting a life led by individual desires rather than societal expectations. The character of Sibyl Vane represents a subversion of Victorian ideals of femininity and purity. Her tragic fate, tied to Dorian's whims, critiques the societal tendency to idolize and then discard women based on superficial values. Wilde's exploration of beauty and youth, encapsulated in Dorian's eternal youth contrasted with the portrait's decay, serves as a metaphorical subversion of the Victorian valorization of external appearances over internal morality. The secrecy surrounding Dorian's portrait and his hidden life of indulgence reflect Wilde's critique of the public/private dichotomy in Victorian society, exposing the private vices hidden behind a facade of respectability.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper navigates Oscar Wilde's intricate portrayal of the devil, set against the backdrop of Victorian society's moral dichotomies and aesthetic obsessions. Through the New Historicist prism—particularly leveraging Stephen Greenblatt's theories of "cultural poetics" and "self-fashioning"—this research illuminates how Wilde's narrative not only challenges but also subverts the era's prevailing moral and societal paradigms. It reveals Wilde's novel as a vibrant canvas where the devil emerges as a symbol reflecting the internal and external conflicts of the age. Lord Henry's Mephistophelean impact on Dorian Gray with his seductive philosophy and advocacy for a life of hedonistic pleasure serves as a critique of Victorian hypocrisy. This has juxtaposed with the degeneration of Dorian's portrait: a blatant symbol of the corrupting power of unbound desire. This juxtaposition has foregrounded the novel's central thesis: the perilous journey of self-indulgence leading to spiritual and moral bankruptcy.

This paper highlights the "mobility of texts across time and space," a cornerstone of Greenblatt's New Historicism; it demonstrates how Wilde's work resonates with contemporary and future audiences by engaging with universal themes of identity, morality, and the aesthetic pursuit. Furthermore, the analysis of the devil figure through Wilde's perspective offers a rich understanding of evil, not as an external force but as an intrinsic part of human nature and societal construct; it challenges readers to reflect on the nature of morality and the societal norms that govern behavior.

Finally, this study illuminates Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through a New Historicist perspective where it reveals how the novel subverts Victorian norms and critiques societal values.

The analysis demonstrates Wilde's vast portrayal of the devil figure as a metaphor for the internal and societal struggles against moral hypocrisy and the superficiality of social appearances. By intertwining literary analysis with historical context, the research highlighted Wilde's complex critique of Victorian society, advocating for a deeper understanding of morality beyond conventional norms. This approach not only enriches our comprehension of Wilde's work but also underscores the strong relevance of New Historicism in literary studies.

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الشیطان من منظور منهج التاريخية الجديدة:

دراسة لرواية "صورة دوریان جرای"

الملخص:

تركز هذه الورقة البحثية على تمثيل الشيطان في رواية صورة دوریان جرای، وتحلل الفهم العميق لاوسكار وايلد لمفهوم الشر وتجلياته من خلال استخدام منهج التاريخية الجديدة. ويعد الهدف الرئيسي لهذا البحث هو تحليل صورة الشيطان رواية صورة دوریان جرای. كما تسعى هذه الورقة إلى استكشاف كيف تعكس هذه التمثيلات وتتشكل بفضل التفسيرات المعاصرة لفكرة الشيطان والرؤية المسيحية للعالم، بالإضافة إلى ذلك، توفر منهج ستيفن غرينبلات للتاريخية الجديدة أداة قيمة لهذا التحليل؛ حيث تؤكد على "قدرة النصوص على التنقل عبر الزمان والمكان" وأهمية "الشعرية الثقافية" في فهم الأعمال الأدبية من خلال التاريخية الجديدة، تبرز مفاهيم اوسكار وايلد للشيطان كعنصر أساسي في فهم العلاقة بين ما يريده المجتمع وما يبتغيه الفرد، كما يلقي البحث الضوء على نقاط التماس بين صور الوقار التي تبدو على السطح وصور الانحطاط الكامنة في النفس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أوسكار وايلد، التاريخية الجديدة، ستيفن غرينبلات، تمثيل الشيطان، صورة دوریان جرای