

THE MISOGYNY OF DORIAN GRAY: A FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN OSCAR WILDE'S WRITING

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, despite being legally and morally questioned at the time of its publishing, has endured the passage of time to establish itself as one of the canonical classics of English literature. To this day, The Picture of Dorian Gray entertains a wide readership from all over the world. However, Wilde's portrayal of female characters still remains highly problematic. This paper addresses misogyny in The Picture of Dorian Gray and focuses on Wilde's stereotypical and oppressive ideological treatment of the female characters. It employs Michelle Lazaar's Feminist Critical Discourse praxis in order to analyze whose interest Wilde portrays throughout the novel and to what extent do the female characters get to have their own voice. The analysis reveals that Wilde stereotypically categorizes women and strips them of their agency. The male characters describe most of the female experience in the book and therefore, none of the information about any woman in The Picture of Dorian Gray comes from a reliable source. Moreover, Wilde manipulates Sybil Vane's character to portray a highly unrealistic, exoticized woman through a girl of barely seventeen. The research uncovers how with the survival of great classics the misogyny of these books continues to survive into the present as well.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Women's representation.

Introduction

In recent years, the domain of Critical Discourse Studies has evolved to explicitly incorporate feminist concerns in its dissection of power imbalances and gender ideologies in the texts. The themes of traditional gender ideologies, with men being overtly or covertly superior to women, have severely impacted female representation in all domains of media and literature and have invited a slew of feminist critique from various scholars. Feminist scholarship in recent years has sought to explain that gender, in its traditional binaries, is a political concern (Lazaar, 2005). Gender ideologies are as much a part of literary works, as they are a part of film, advertising, or other forms of dynamic media. Classical works of literature are known for their enduring timeless immortality which is why they have been able to survive for generations after generations. These works have played a pivotal role in constructing the ideologies which seem natural in today's world. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde is precisely one such work.

The Picture of Dorian Gray first appeared in 1890 in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* as the lead story and was instantly assaulted by a swarm of voracious critics deeming it immoral and hedonistic. In 1891, Wilde expanded the story in the form of a novel, the only one he ever published, where he added a new preface, subtly addressing the critics, and six more chapters. Wilde (2000) defended the aesthetic significance of art saying that, "Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming". For him art did not pertain to any moral necessity rather it served the purpose of presenting an aesthetic

inextricably intrinsic to it. Oscar Wilde was one of the main proponents of the art for art's sake movement of the nineteenth century. The fame of the movement ended with Wilde's downfall and imprisonment in 1895 (Seiferle, 2009). The Picture of Dorian Gray was used in various subsequent trials against Wilde when the Victorian age deemed him sexually deviant for his homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred. The legacy of The Picture of Dorian Gray is often viewed as part discussion on art and the artist, part a clash of morality and aestheticism, and part an anthology of Wilde's own repressed desires. Much of its charm today lies in its unapologetic liberal ideas and its stark representation of the ugly consequences of the inevitable human desire for eternal youth and beauty.

While it focuses mainly on the aesthetic pleasures of life and the lust for beauty, The Picture of Dorian Gray is not exempt from misogynistic critique of women, a long standing tradition in writing that dates well before the Victorian Era. The novel explores themes like hedonism, obsession, morality, vanity, and the duality of human nature mainly in relation to its male characters only. All of these aspects have made the book a lasting and universal piece of literature. The unfading endurance of the novel ensures that its ideologies continue to survive even today. Consequently, it remains important to explore the almost immortal ideologies of classical literature and the impact they can have on the social treatment of different groups in society.

This research aims to uncover the hierarchical binaries of gender ideologies in The Picture of Dorian Gray through the use of language. It explores the way descriptions of female characters calcify them as subservient to and less than men. This concern sits on the nexus of both the notion of gender as a political category and its representation in literature along with the implications of such a representation. To uncover these binaries, this research paper adopts the following research questions:

1. What kind of descriptions does Oscar Wilde use to describe female characters in The Picture of Dorian Gray?
2. What implications do these descriptions have for the representation of female gender in The Picture of Dorian Gray?

Literature Review

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been widely examined as a fin de siècle text that undermines Victorian gender norms while also reinforcing subordination of women's expression. Brias Aliaga (2020) studies that Wilde's novel is shaped by the absence of female narrative, and he constructs a male-centered aesthetic world in which effeminacy thrives, resulting in marginalizing or completely erasing female presence. As the article argues, "Women are silenced and eradicated from the text, as a consequence of the naturalism that decadent authors qualified women with" (p. 1). From a feminist critical discourse analysis perspective, this silencing reveals how femininity is displaced onto male characters, Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry, whose effeminacy destabilizes traditional masculinity but also reinforces male dominance through male-centric spaces. Characters like Sibyl Vane are shown as tragic objects, their agency is denied through narrative closure, while witty but insubstantial women like Duchess of Monmouth are created just to show diversity or to fulfill an expectation, but they lack agency or any meaningful influence, simultaneously challenging but also sustaining gender hierarchies in the novel.

Van Eck (2019), in her thesis, examines the representation of female gendering in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, highlighting how women are ideologically constructed through the thematic focal points of power, beauty, and romance. The analysis reveals that female characters are consistently subordinated, male figures are the arbitrators of female voices or are in control to define or marginalize female characters reinforcing patriarchal

control. As the study notes, "The fact that female characters' thoughts and expressions are verbalized by men constructs the idea that men literally control women's messages and ideas" (p. 9). This kind of control demonstrates how discourse denies women's agency while simultaneously aestheticizing them into ornamental roles making beauty the central axis of judgement while those who deviate from the societal standard of beauty are mocked. Ultimately, Wilde's novel shows how female identity is constructed as dependent, ornamental, and punishable when transgressive, situating the text within a broader discourse of patriarchal silencing that Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis seeks to expose.

Fanani et al. (2024) situate *The Picture of Dorian Gray* within a patriarchal discourse that consistently marginalizes female characters, reducing them to ornamental or tragic figures. Through a feminist lens, the study argues that women in the novel are subordinated both linguistically and narratively, their presence serving primarily to highlight male-centered aestheticism and homoerotic desires. Male characters are granted agency and complexity, while women are constructed just as a beautiful or a tragic object confirming that patriarchal discourses always highlight male desires while erasing female voices completely.

Fayard's (2017) work approaches Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through the lens of power, ideology, and commodification, emphasizing how rhetorical influence functions as a form of social control. Fayard goes beyond sexuality and aestheticism, showing that the novel reflects broader power structures where Lord Henry's rhetoric exemplifies the "infectious influence" of ideology that manipulates and silences individual freedom. It highlights how discourse not only aestheticizes beauty, but also objectifies marginalized figures, creating an "other" through commodification and reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies. Her study expands the feminist reading of the text by showing how silencing operates not only through gender but also through transmission of ideas and commodification, making the novel a strong example for studying how language shapes power and identity.

Saba, Siddiqui, and Hamid (2021) demonstrate how Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) can be applied to literary texts to uncover the ways language constructs and reinforces gendered and ideological hierarchies. Their study of *The Bride and Burnt Shadows* uses Lazar's FCDA framework to analyze how discourse reflects patriarchal norms and shapes female identity, connecting linguistic choices to broader social and cultural power structures. The authors show that women in these novels are often positioned as the "Other," with their agency constrained by both gender norms and ideologies embedded in the text. This study shows the versatility of FCDA in examining how text arbitrates power relations by highlighting the discursive strategies that reinforce social inequalities. Methodologically, this work provides a strong precedent for applying FCDA to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where male-centered discourse similarly marginalizes female characters and reinforces patriarchal structures.

In their analysis of Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Khan and Bilal (2023) emphasize the significance of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis in literary research. Using Lazar's framework, the authors examine how narrative language discursively constructs female characters within patriarchal social structures, effectively shaping their identity and limiting their agency. This study highlights how discourse shows women as subordinate while reinforcing male dominance also demonstrating the intertwined relationship between language, ideology, and power. Although the cultural and narrative context differs from Wilde's Victorian England, the methodological insights offered by Khan and Bilal (2023) show that FCDA is an effective tool for uncovering the subtle ways that texts reproduce gendered hierarchies, supporting its application to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to reveal similar patterns of patriarchal discourse and marginalization of women.

Zafar and Imran (2025) provide an additional illustration of FCDA applied to literary fiction through their study of Atia Abawi's *The Secret Sky*. The authors analyze how patriarchal structures are reproduced in narrative discourse through Lazar's theoretical framework demonstrating how female characters are showcased in situations where men hold more dominance and power. Their findings reveal how the novel's language reinforces gender inequalities while also determining the social and ideological statuses of the characters. By emphasizing the discursive construction of power relations, this study confirms that FCDA is not only effective in examining social texts but also in literary contexts, offering a methodological justification for applying the same analytical approach to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to explore how language enforces patriarchal norms and silences female voices. Despite the amount of work done on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a clear gap remains in understanding how language within the novel constructs and maintains gendered power relations. While previous studies have examined themes such as morality, aestheticism, and social influence also focusing on female presence and patriarchy in Wilde's work, the attention largely remains on thematic or moral analysis rather than on the discursive strategies through which patriarchal ideology is reproduced and challenged. Although Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis has been successfully applied to other literary texts to reveal how narrative language enforces social hierarchies and positions characters within systems of power, no study has yet employed FCDA to analyze Wilde's novel. Even though *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains multiple instances where male characters exercise authority, manipulate ideology, and marginalize female voices through discourse, the text presents a rich site for investigating how language shapes power and identity. Therefore, using FCDA in this study fills this gap by showing more clearly how language in the novel shapes power, ideas, and gender roles in Wilde's work.

Theory and Method

The research undertaken is qualitative and approaches the representation of women in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through a feminist lens. It is analytical and descriptive in nature and employs Michelle Lazaar's (2007) framework for Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. According to Lazaar (2007), Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, 'aims to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements' (p. 141). The main principles of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis adopted in this research are described below:

Feminist Analytical Activism

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis is concerned with making actual social change by challenging the set boundaries of gender hierarchies. In introducing the feminist concern to Critical Discourse Analysis, it is possible to uncover the deep-rooted patriarchal ideologies that privilege men as a social group over women. This turns the feminist criticism to make substantial social change and thus the academic analysis itself becomes an act of activism and social revolution against patriarchy.

Gender as Ideological Structure

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis is concerned with the critique of traditional gender binary (that of men and women) which is ideologically oppressive. Lazaar (2007) explains that gender ideologies act through naturalization and are accepted as common sense in society, thereby acting as hegemonic power structures. Gender ideologies are structural forms of power and they are constantly mediated and renewed through social practice.

Gender and Power Relations

'Power relations are a struggle over interests, which are exercised, reflected, maintained, and resisted through a variety of modalities, extents, and degrees of explicitness (Lazaar, 2007, p. 149). Power, through its discursive production, in a patriarchal society oppresses women as a

social group. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis aims to uncover how unequal relations of power affect women through discourses and textual reproductions of misogyny.

Gender Relationality in Discourse

In Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, it is significant to understand gender in relation to the other gender and with itself. This includes an exploration of the way men are represented in discourse and the way such representations take part in oppressive practices. Similarly, women's oppression is explored through its relative representation with the male gender and also with the way women stand in solidarity with each other against patriarchal oppression.

The research adopts a text based approach. Through an especially close reading of all the passages describing female characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's descriptions of female characters were analyzed for ideological differences. Instances where female characters lack agency and where their innocence, physical beauty, talkativeness, and victimhood were emphasized were carefully noted. It was noted whether the representation of women seemed authentic or originated only as a by-product of male experience.

Analysis

Oscar Wilde, in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, describes the female characters by distinctly focusing on their physical attributes. Almost every time a woman appears in the book, her dialogues are preceded by a definition of her annoying voice or her crooked nose. In the first chapter of the book, Lord Henry describes how he and his wife live a life of "deception", something he considers a prerequisite for married life (Wilde, 2000). However, he mentions how his wife, a woman, is better at it. This pertains to the stereotypical assumption that women are deceivers and liars. To this we can add when further on in the very same chapter Basil Hallward gives an account of how he met Dorian. In his dialogue Wilde gives unnecessary negative descriptions of women, most of which include a physical attribute. For example when Basil Hallward says about Lady Brandon, "'You are not going to run away so soon, Mr. Hallward?' she screamed out. You know her curiously shrill voice?" (Wilde, 2000, p. 67). To which Lord Henry replies with, "Yes; she is a peacock in everything but beauty" (p. 67). Comparing Lady Brandon with a peacock and making the exception of beauty in this comparison reinforces the idea that a woman's worth comes first and foremost from her physical appearance. Ideologically a woman's association with physical appearance robs her character of having access towards the intellectual discourse often afforded to men. These instances in the very beginning of the book set the tone for the way Wilde deals with the female characters of the novel.

Stereotypical Representation of Women

A defining feature of the women in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that they all fit the stereotypical criteria. Mills (2005) describes that writers use a "shorthand" to portray characters that pertain to stereotypical schemas in the minds of the readers; making up their "literary competence". Assumptions associated with the way women talk, the way their dresses have too much embellishments, and even the way their noses are shaped can be found in the book.

It is no mystery that Oscar Wilde was an aesthete. His extraordinary appreciation and uncanny observation of art and beauty is very evident in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Through Lord Henry's character Wilde represents the idea of living for beauty and pleasure in life. However, when Lord Henry says, "Women have no appreciation of good looks; at least good women have not" (p. 75), he exempts women from this observation of life. It sets them apart from the ideal that Wilde has created throughout the book suggesting that women have no appreciation for anything good and are thus self-absorbed and indifferent. This is in accordance with the themes of physical attribution that have been ascribed to female characters in the novel. "Good women" are specifically mentioned here and this criteria for

being a “good woman” comes from a male character who is not familiar with the female experience. This is associated with the stereotypes of virtuous women who are supposed to be indifferent to men and good looks but this idea does not have any similar restriction for good men. The ideology of ‘good woman’ acts only to place restrictions on women’s autonomy under the guise of decorum and purity.

Another instance of this representation occurs when Lord Henry says about Lady Agatha, “When aunt Agatha sits down to the piano she makes quite enough noise for two people” (p. 78). Here the focus shifts away from her playing the piano to the “noise” she makes and aligns with the stereotype that women talk too much and make too much noise. It suggests that Lady Agatha is too brash and outspoken, traits that do not align with conventional assumptions associated with femininity.

At one point Lord Henry remarks to the duchess about the propriety of the blush in a woman (Wilde, 2000). To which the duchess replies with, “When an old woman like myself blushes, it is a very bad sign. Ah! Lord Henry, I wished you would tell me how to become young again” (p. 112). The character of the Duchess is shown as a woman obsessed with being young. Someone who asks for advice on being so from a man. The man i.e Lord Henry is shown to be superior and intellectual, with his witty remarks and his casual bluntness, Wilde shows how adept he is at forming opinions on the experiences of women. Lord Henry can be seen talking about women and their obsession with age and beauty when he says:

There are only two kinds of women, the plain and the colored... They paint in order to try and look young. Our grandmothers painted in order to try and talk brilliantly. *Rouge* and *esprit* used to go together. That is all over now. As long as a woman can look ten years younger than her own daughter, she is perfectly satisfied. As for conversation, there are only five women in London worth talking to, and two of these can’t be admitted into decent society (Wilde, 2000, p.121).

At the height of stereotyping, Wilde deems it fit to confine all the women in the world into two categories. The categories themselves are dull and demeaning. The classification of “plain” and “colored” suggests that women can only be considered in terms of two extremes. They can either be too plain or too colored. Wilde repeatedly incorporates older female characters in the narrative and then shows them longing for their youth, reinforcing women’s stereotypical obsession with physical beauty. While men in *The Picture of Dorian*, on the other hand, are free to partake in the intellectual and vast discussions on art, aesthetic, morality, society, and fashion, all of which does not afford them any stereotypical treatment.

At one point in the book Lord Henry advises Dorian Gray to never marry “a woman with straw colored hair” because “they are so sentimental” (Wilde, 2000, p. 120). Where Wilde talks about influence and aesthetics in the book in a philosophical and logical way, he has also reserved space in his writing for an illogical representation of all women, an example of which is the aforementioned relation between a woman’s straw colored hair and her sentimentality.

These discriminatory remarks are casually scattered throughout the book, both in the dialogues of characters and the narrative descriptions. These statements serve no real purpose and contribute nothing to the narrative of this book. They occur mostly as second thoughts and are lost in the dialogue as soon as they surface.

The Infantilization of Sybil Vane

Sybil Vane exists as a figment of Oscar Wilde’s imagination in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The way her character is exoticized by the writer leaves no room for reality in her portrayal. Her presence flits from page to page as a conveniently disposable plot device once she has haunted the narrative enough. Dorian’s first description of Sybil Vane comes as following:

Harry, imagine a girl hardly seventeen years of age, with a flower-like face, a small greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose. She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life (Wilde, 2000, p. 125).

This account of Sybil Vane starts with the fact that she was barely seventeen. Wilde attempts to set forth her age in order to exoticize her character since the narrative asserts the importance of a woman being young in order to be pretty before the introduction of Sybil Vane's character one too many times. Dorian appears to be marveling at the woman that she is, deeming her, "the loveliest *thing*". Wilde uses such words to describe Sybil Vane a number of times. Lord Henry muses to Dorian saying, "I suppose she will belong to you someday" (Wilde 2000, p. 127). The idea of Sybil Vane *belonging* to Dorian Gray strips her of agency and renders her as a passive receptor of male action. Dorian complained to Lord Henry that he never told him how the only "thing" worthy of love is an actress (Wilde, 2000). Wilde keeps Sybil Vane's character away from reality. Dorian keeps emphasizing, again and again, how Sybil is perfect only because she plays different heroines well. Her charm, as a woman, is that she is good at pretending to be someone who she is not because "she knows nothing of life" (Wilde, 2000, p. 130).

Wilde uses Sybil Vane, a girl of barely seventeen, in order to portray vulnerability, innocence, and as a foil to the older female characters in the novel. While Dorian himself is often shown as a shy, frightened boy at the beginning of the book, Wilde never infantilizes him and makes him dependable in the same way that he does to Sybil Vane.

Sybil Vane confesses to her mother of feeling unworthy of Dorian's love, saying she is "beneath him" yet it makes her "feel humble" (Wilde, 2000 p. 140). Wilde creates a hierarchy with Dorian at the top and Sybil under him. He infantilizes Sybil Vane's character both through Dorian's and her own dialogues. The confession that she feels less than Dorian suggests that Sybil, as a woman, is aware of her own inferiority and therefore accepts it. When her brother tells Sybil that Dorian wants to "enslave" her she expresses her wish of never wanting to "be free" (Wilde, 2000, p. 148). She is ready to accept the love of her "prince charming" even at the cost of her freedom, further reinforcing the idea of her inferiority and her stripped agency in the novel.

And thus, Wilde infantilizes Vane to his own benefit in the story. Her character serves only as a shift in Dorian Gray's narrative. Her death seems as a careless disposal of something that no longer serves its purpose. Both the stereotypical characteristics and the infantilization ideologically contribute towards the oppression of women through the naturalization of discourse which portrays men as intellectual and artistic.

Conclusion

The Picture of Dorian Gray remains one of the most important classics of English literature. It deals with both male and female characters frequently and these characters are introduced through descriptions of their characters. However, in the case of women, the description leans towards stereotypically characterizing them in terms of their appearance and physical attributes. The book does not contain any significant intellectual dialogue and discussion between female characters or between female and male characters. Men, on the other hand, spend considerable time engaging in discourse on art, morality, social conventions, and artists. These differences between the gendered representation of characters stem from, and are reinforced by, the social conventions which put women on disadvantage as a social group. These assumptions thus highlighted the way women are perceived and treated in society even today. The insights provided in this paper can be used to analyze how and why The Picture of Dorian Gray continues to thrive in the literary landscape today with very few people addressing the misogyny enveloped in its pages. The analysis is limited in the sense that it

only examines a single work by Wilde. However, it does provide a foundation for further research on the portrayal of women in various plays written by him.

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