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Men, Monsters and Morality: Shaping Ethics through the Sublime and Uncanny

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Abstract

Authors and philosophers in the long 19th century were heavily influenced by the concept of the sublime – especially the interpretations developed by Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke in the 1700s – as an ethical transcendence and temporary bewilderment of the imagination triggered by an experience with the irresistible force of nature. As an aesthetic and ethical experience, sublime elements in art and literature were essential features meant to draw a strong emotional response from the observer. To emphasize the moral qualities attached to it, Gothic novels of the Romantic period often juxtaposed the sublime with monsters – frightening creatures both extraordinary and unnatural, often of vast or grotesque proportions. In Gothic literature, monsters are imbued with uncanny elements and serve to externalize repressed fears and desires lurking in the cultural unconscious. Using a framework of ethics, this thesis explores the relationship between monsters and the sublime within three 19th century novels: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Bram Stoker's Dracula. Examining each text in these terms provides insight into how monsters in Gothic literature are used to reflect social disharmony and how such ethical struggles are tempered by the sublime.

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MEN, MONSTERS AND MORALITY:

SHAPING ETHICS THROUGH THE SUBLIME AND UNCANNY

Authors and philosophers in the long 19th century were heavily influenced by the concept of the sublime – especially the interpretations developed by Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke in the 1700s – as an ethical transcendence and temporary bewilderment of the imagination triggered by an experience with the irresistible force of nature. As an aesthetic and ethical experience, sublime elements in art and literature were essential features meant to draw a strong emotional response from the observer. To emphasize the moral qualities attached to it, Gothic novels of the Romantic period often juxtaposed the sublime with monsters – frightening creatures both extraordinary and unnatural, often of vast or grotesque proportions. In Gothic literature, monsters are imbued with uncanny elements and serve to externalize repressed fears and desires lurking in the cultural unconscious. It was during the transition from the Romantic Era to the Victorian Era that the Gothic novel shifted its focus from the sublime to the uncanny as an aesthetic moderator of ethics, moving away from vast, nature-centered awe and terror towards an internalized sensation of strangeness or horror, a change prompted by industrialization and increased social restrictions. Therefore, the uncanny can be seen as an alternate form of the sublime which derives its terror from an inward rather than outward focus:

> With the Gothic, the aesthetic mode of the sublime no longer articulates the other-worldly; rather, it reveals the inherent inconsistency and incompletion of the newly emerging immanent-oriented view of the world. […] the Gothic sublime is utterly without transcendence, and it takes us deep within rather than beyond the human sphere. (Cameron 19)

This relationship between monsters, the uncanny, and the sublime within a Gothic framework can be explored within two novels published during the long 19th century: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Examining each text in these

terms provides insight into the ways in which monsters in Gothic literature are used to reflect social disharmony and how such ethical struggles are tempered by the sublime and the uncanny.

The period labeled as 'the long 19th century' – roughly between the years of 1789 and 1914 – signifies a distinguished era beginning with the French Revolution and ending with the dawn of World War I. Bracketed by two political upheavals that produced extended periods of military conflict, the long nineteenth century was an epoch of revolution and radical reform expressed aesthetically, politically, sexually, and culturally. The subsequent developments in British art, literature, and intellectual values are traditionally divided into the Romantic and Victorian movements. Despite each era being ideologically distinct in terms of ethics and aesthetics, they possess overlapping characteristics in terms of the sublime and the uncanny as applied to ethics. In order to sufficiently grasp the relationship between aesthetics and morality before applying them to specific texts, it is useful to examine these concepts individually, as well as studying John Ruskin's influential works of art theory.

As the preeminent art critic of the Victorian era, John Ruskin and his critical theory of art had enormous influence on the ideas of the sublime and what constituted 'great' art. Ruskin's ideals are most clearly expressed in his magnum opus *Modern Painters*, wherein he describes the qualities of great art and, in particular, lauds the paintings of J.M.W. Turner as the most successful amalgamation of these characteristics. Kate Flint's *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* provides a clarifying view of *Modern Painters* and helps define Ruskin's ideals of beauty, in addition to showing how such ideals are expressed in his commentaries on art; what appears is a common thread stressing the importance of individual perception and participation in art, celebrating ultimate artistic beauty as an expression of God.

Ruskin maintained that there was an intimate connection between the senses and a higher type of perception, and this belief is what formed the basis of his philosophy of art. His critical values emphasized the connections between art and ethics and helped to further extrapolate what he believed was art's most important function. Addressing representation in the first volume of *Modern Painters*, he posits that mimetic realism is not a necessary component to great art, although the ability to paint a faithful representation of an object shows mastery of painting to the extent that "a man who has learnt how to express himself grammatically and melodiously" has mastered a language; what separates this mastery of speech from the status of poetry, however, is what the language is applied to. Similarly, Ruskin believed that the true indicator as to the caliber of an artist is not "the mode of representing and saying, but… what is represented and said" (Norton 1338). A painting may be comprised of the most meticulous brushstrokes and masterful techniques, but this amounts to nothing if the subject is ineffectual or meaningless.

Following this line of logic, Ruskin declared that the greatest work of art "is that which conveys to the mind of the spectator the greatest number of the greatest ideas" (Norton 1338). His philosophy espouses the principle that pleasure is derived, above anything else, from the moral value of art; if visual pleasure was wholly dependent on mimesis, then any work of art that is not imitative would be unworthy of critical consideration. Because there are many beautiful examples of the former – Ruskin specifically cites Raffaelle's mosaic "arabesques" in *Modern Painters* – it is clear that he considered beauty based on imitation alone to be absurd.

Ruskin felt his ideals were best captured by the paintings of J.M.W. Turner, who used the overwhelming power of nature to enforce a moral message. In his painting *The Slave Ship*, a violent storm rages as slaves, having been tossed overboard into the sea, sink below the waves in the foreground. Ruskin declared that "the whole picture [was] dedicated to the most sublime of

subjects and impressions": the focus on the blood-red of the sun and waves, in comparison to the

smaller and less impressive image of the ship, suggests nature's superiority to man and

foreshadows the storm engulfing the vessel and its cruel captain (Norton 1339). This idea of

nature instilling awe and terror in humans by its sheer might is an expression of the sublime, an

idea central to art and literature most popular during the Romantic era. In art, the sublime

functions as an "aesthetic gratification" which "diminishes the individual in terms of their

worldly importance" (Flint 298). Paintings capturing the sublime, such as Turner's landscapes,

achieve a unique aesthetic quality:

> …their refusal of limitations, achieved not just through the fluidity of the paint
>
> work but through the fact that they are structured around colour, rather than clear
>
> linear perspectives, these paintings present a sublime version of nature powered
>
> by energies both dangerous and awe-inspiring. (Flint 301)

The concept of the sublime is part of the discourse of philosophical aesthetics and literary

criticism, and for many centuries its meanings have been debated and contested. Beyond

academic circles, generations of artists, writers, poets and musicians have sought to evoke or

respond to the term. The sublime is many things: a judgment, a feeling, a state of mind, and a

psychological or spiritual response to art or nature. The term is most closely associated with the

philosopher Immanuel Kant and his *Critique of Judgment*, which deals at length with the notion

of the sublime and arguably remains the most philosophically subtle and systematic exploration

of the idea. Kant writes that "the sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is

small," a definition which remains consistent with later depictions of the sublime as an

overpowering sensation of awe (109). However, by the time Kant's *Critique* was written in

1790, the term already had a long and rich history, the foundations of which were laid by

Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise on aesthetics titled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. The Romantic thinkers were heavily influenced by the concept of the sublime, seeking it in natural occurrences such as mountains and storms. Romantic-era authors tended to focus on the notion that certain aspects of the sublime style (such as grandeur of thought, combined with intensity of passion) are dependent upon a nobility of soul or character.

Whereas the sublime is one of the oldest aesthetic concepts in Western Europe, the uncanny, or *unheimliche*, is one of the few modern aesthetic concepts developed after the 1750s. Although many works of art, poems, and novels were produced from the 1750s onwards that included characteristics of the uncanny, it was only with the 1919 publication of Sigmund Freud's famous essay *"Das Unheimliche"* ("The Uncanny") that it finally received a theoretical consecration. The nature of the uncanny as an ethical and aesthetic category functions somewhat differently than the sublime; rather than instilling 'terror' – an emotion brought on by encounters with natural vastness and the indeterminacy of events to come – the uncanny "arouses dread and horror... [and] certain things which lie within the class of what is frightening" (Freud, 339). Both terror and horror are unpleasant psychological sensations, but the uncanny is further distinguished from the sublime in that it derives its fear not from something external, alien, or unknown, but from something strangely familiar which is inextricable from the self.

Freud distinguishes between the *heimlich* ("homely," indicating that which is familiar) and the *unheimlich* ("unhomely," translated from German as "uncanny"), the latter being "in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*" (421). The uncanny is capable of inducing fear precisely because it is not known or familiar to the perceiver, though Freud extends the range of fearfulness by suggesting that unknown (and thereby fearful) things may lie concealed within the

most familiar of environments or individuals. As a function of the uncanny, the safe haven of

one's conscious becomes self-haunted by ghostlike traces of the unconscious, a phenomenon that

transforms an otherwise comfortable and familiar setting into a place that feels inexorably

strange.

According to Freud, "everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and

hidden but comes to light" (420). In addition, the uncanny is "nothing new or foreign, but

something familiar and old – established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process

of repression"; therefore, the uncanny is the return of that which has been repressed (429). The

material which constitutes the source of the uncanny may take one of two forms: a resurgent

childhood complex (of which there are numerous classifications), or a previously surmounted

animism – that is, a primitive belief which attributes souls to non-human beings or objects. To

summarize, the uncanny is anything experienced in adulthood that reminds the subject of earlier

psychic stages, aspects of unconscious life, or the primitive experience of the human species.

In literature, one common expression of the uncanny is the *doppelganger*, otherwise

known as the 'double.' A double may bear a strong or perhaps identical resemblance to another

character, or they may parallel the character's situation, traits, or perhaps even their name,

inciting the reader to draw further connections between the two. Doubling displays an individual

who somehow cannot *be* an individual, one who functions as two simultaneous beings (or else

two aspects of the same being), or one whose reintegration into a whole is frequently figured in

terms of a fatal encounter. The motif of the double has connections with "mirrors, with shadows,

guardian spirits, with the belief in the soul and the fear of death," and often represents a splitting

of the self (425). Once considered "insurance against destruction of the ego," the image of the

double has become "the ghastly harbinger of death," particularly in works of Gothic fiction

(425). The uncanny is a concept that is widely applied in modern Gothic criticism because of the genre's historical associations with the representation of concealment and deceit, its frequent recourse to dramatic modifications in character or behavior, and its use of the supernatural as an operating presence in the supposedly "normal" world. One of the earliest and most definitive Gothic novels, *Frankenstein* is illustrative of both the Romantic sublime and of the uncanny which would later take precedence in the Victorian Gothic.

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, published in 1818, was born out of the Romantic ideals that sprung forth as a backlash to the Enlightenment movement. *Frankenstein* is stitched together by the thread of the sublime; it is one of the recurrent themes of the novel, most often provided in landscapes of mountainous regions and picturesque scenes of natural power. But these images also tend to surround the story's main subject: the wretch, a synthetic creation brought to life by the ambitious Victor Frankenstein. Although the wretch inspires the sensations of fearfulness and overwhelming power associated with the sublime, he is not himself part of it; rather, he is an uncanny inversion of the sublime meant to throw into question the morality of creating artificial life by means of his own unnatural existence and by revealing his creator as an equally wretched character. Within her narrative, Shelley alternates between a Romantic sublime and a Gothic sublime as she turns the focus inwards – moving from the protagonist's surroundings, she explores the inner, uncanny qualities of the protagonist himself.

Victor Frankenstein serves as a representation of Enlightenment characteristics which the novel seeks to critique, part of which is accomplished through observation of his creation. Frankenstein is a man of science and learning, consumed by fervor even at a young age to discover the most intimate secrets of nature. Once his prodigiously brilliant mind discovers the components required to engineer life, his very next goal is to create a new being from scratch.

Frankenstein's motives for doing so are rather muddled: does he wish to help humankind by reversing the effects of death on the prematurely deceased, or does he merely desire to conquer his own mortality? Although one or the other may be the primary driving force behind his actions, there is another attractive reason for undertaking such a laborious and risky experiment. Creating a race of superior human beings would mean, in Frankenstein's own words, that "many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me… no father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" (55). This statement speaks volumes about his intentions. Even if Frankenstein is an innately sympathetic man, the fact that he seeks to create a situation in which others are forced to respect, admire, even to love him, without an option to do otherwise – analogous to a relationship with an eternally forgiving God who will endlessly approve his creations – reveals his selfish desires and blind ambition. But if his motivations are not morally wholesome, then the manner in which he treats his creation is even less so.

On the night Frankenstein finally brings to fruition his vision of creating life, he finds himself horrified by the creature before him. Far from the "beautiful" being he had envisioned, his scientific endeavor produces something which appears more monster than man:

> His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips. (58)

The description of Frankenstein's monster fits closely with definition of the 'grotesque,' a concept closely related to all artistic renderings of the Gothic, including those in art, literature

and architecture. Grotesque art invokes the fantastic, ugly and bizarre, and its subjects are frequently mythological creatures and other strange or physically malformed monsters. In terms of literature, the aesthetic of the grotesque is generally an unpleasant one, denoting a character which induces both pity and disgust in the reader; this combination of compassion and revulsion lends understanding as to why Frankenstein's creature is often referred to as "the wretch" by other characters. His external appearance renders him an outcast, and despite his earnest attempts to earn the trust of humans by means of kind acts, it is his physical shell that ensures his continued treatment as an 'other' – he is wretched because society has no place for him. It is this rejection which facilitates his adoption of monstrous behavior, making his interior congruous with his exterior.

Although the wretch is certainly possessed of grotesque qualities, there is also a remarkable uncanniness surrounding him. Upon viewing his creation for the first time, Frankenstein is instilled with such horror that he flees the room and shut himself in his bedchamber, where he experiences a frightening dream about Elizabeth, his fiancée:

> I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the graveworms crawling in the folds of the flannel. (59)

Upon waking from this nightmare, Frankenstein finds the creature in his bedroom, grinning and gesturing to him. The wretch's appearance in Frankenstein's chamber is uncanny in its own right; there is little else more "unhomely" than having the most private of living spaces invaded

by a creature that was lying cold and lifeless on a slab only several hours before. In addition, the presence of the wretch immediately after a dream laden with images of death – the "corpse," "graveworms," and "hue of death" echoing his origin as a patchwork of exhumed bodies – is particularly unsettling; as well as the dream's evocative images of death, a device frequently observed in the Gothic genre, it seems as if Frankenstein's unconscious is manifesting itself in reality and using the wretch as a self-haunting presence.

There are, in fact, many instances where the wretch appears as Victor's uncanny double, and the former recognizes his creation as an extension of himself when he acknowledges his complicity in the string of murders committed by the wretch: "I not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer" (96). In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a work akin to aspects of *Frankenstein*, Prospero admits his responsibility for the monstrous Caliban – "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine" – but Frankenstein's response to his creation is first to flee from it, and then to eradicate it (5.1.290). He chooses to reject his creature in lieu of nurturing him, preferring to lose himself in the external world. Supplementary to the idea of the wretch as Frankenstein's double is his seeming ability to bridge the mortal world and the supernatural world. This quality is abundant in Gothic literature, fusing the ordinary with the extraordinary in ways unintelligible by rational means. Frankenstein's creature exemplifies this by having an eerily accurate detection of his creator's presence; whatever Frankenstein's location, the wretch appears to be privy to by some mysterious means of communication. This uncanny link between the two further reifies the doubling of the two characters. The psychological motif of the wretch as Frankenstein's double becomes particularly apparent when collocated with the sublime, and the result is a cyclical denial of consolation which destabilizes the protagonist.

Throughout the novel, Shelley dazzles the reader by placing Victor Frankenstein against some of the most marvelous backdrops nature can offer: the placid Lake Lausanne, the great summit of Montanvert, and the majestic Mont Blanc. In addition to ancient castles and other grand structures, sweeping landscapes are a common image in Gothic romance; their effect can be inspiring, threatening, or a combination of the two. These sights are pure creations of nature, neither tampered with nor tainted by the touch of humanity. When confronted with such large-scale manifestations of nature's might, Frankenstein simultaneously experiences his own infinite smallness and a sense of spiritual awe. Once the scene before him is contemplated and recognized as the sublime, he is immediately given to feelings of admiration and pleasure. This profound effect is greatly marked upon his ascent of Montanvert, just before an encounter with his creation:

> From the side where I now stood Montanvert was exactly opposite, at the distance
> of a league; and above it rose Mont Blanc, in awful majesty. I remained in a
> recess of the rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene… My heart,
> which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy. (101)

Such images clearly allude to the famous ode 'Mount Blanc', written in 1816 by Mary Shelley's husband, Percy Shelley. Like the "awful majesty" of the mountain in Mary Shelley's text, Percy Shelley's poem recognizes the sublime power of nature while simultaneously addressing its inherent duality:

> The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
>
> Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
>
> So solemn, so serene, that man may be
>
> But for such faith, with Nature reconciled;

> Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
>
> Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
>
> By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
>
> Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (76-83)

By listening to the "voice" of such embodiments of the sublime, Shelley argues, the "wise" members of humanity can understand the malevolent and benevolent properties of nature, for both are contained within. Accordingly, his poem takes the classic Romantic stance that nature takes predominance over the human mind as "the everlasting universe of things" (1).

Because nature is the wellspring from which life is renewed, it logically follows that Frankenstein should feel refreshed by his encounter with the sublime beauty of the mountains. While this experience is wholly due to nature, the thrill of horror provoked by the sight of the wretch is moderated by a different mechanism. The creature does not belong to nature and therefore cannot produce the same effects inherent to it; he is the antithesis of nature, a revival of dead tissues consolidated by synthesized chemicals and sparked by unnatural means into the alien realm of the living. Not only is he abhorrent to look at, but he provides neither peace of mind nor spiritual renewal to those who gaze upon him. When considering him, there is no play between one's capacity for reason and intuition because he is a thing that has no reason for existing in nature. The mind immediately recoils from the monster's form in horror and seeks to escape from the perverse abomination before it. Without providing capacity for realization of the divine, the wretch is clearly not a subset of nature, yet his artificial construction and superhuman abilities are not qualities of humankind. This unique position of existential separation offers him a perspective on human behavior and ethics completely outside of human judgment and its biases.

Their first encounter demonstrates that Frankenstein is unwilling to take responsibility for his "child," despite his own eagerness to bring it into the world. From the moment he abandons his failed attempt at creating a beautiful human, his life begins unraveling one thread at a time. As he grows more and more disconsolate, he seeks out the sublimity of nature to soothe his troubled mind – but each time he does so, it brings him another encounter with the monster. It is as if nature is reinforcing his Frankenstein's guilty conscience by juxtaposing itself with the horrific presence of the wretch. With each subsequent meeting, Frankenstein waxes sullen, dejected and detached from society; in fact, he is slowly coming to resemble the wretched creature he has brought to life. The sublime, as an ethical symbol, reveals the wretch in both creator and creation.

When all of this is taken into consideration, Shelley seems to imply that humanity, with all its vices, degenerates virtue while nature acts as a restorative agent, employing sublimity as an outlet for a higher morality – a Romantic ideal which would be met with approval from Ruskin. Humans, Shelley believes, aren't meant to create a superior product of nature or that which seeks to embody the sublime; the sublime exists outside of the imagination and therefore cannot be manufactured by human hands or minds. Attempting to modify or somehow improve nature for one's own glory will ultimately lead to one's own undoing, just as Frankenstein's morally slanted experiment was destined to create an unnatural, destructive monster. Like *Frankenstein*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* addresses the artificial subversion of nature, though with a heavy emphasis on art.

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) is a novel of the late Victorian Gothic with many ties to the uncanny. The plot revolves around the eponymous protagonist and his *doppelganger,* a painting of his likeness presented to him by his friend Basil Hallward. The

uncanny is represented in *Dorian Gray* mainly through Dorian's portrait and his relationship to it, mirroring the changes of his character in accordance with his actions. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* intertwines the physical and psychological, depicting a very different take on aesthetics and morality than the traditionally Romantic *Frankenstein*. Oscar Wilde, perhaps the most famous of all aesthetes, provides an intriguing if sometimes difficult to interpret commentary on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics by creating a narrative permeated by the uncanny and ideals of beauty; although the Romantic sublime is absent from the narrative, there is a great deal to be said about its close relative, the uncanny.

The novel opens with a scene in artist Basil Hallward's studio, where he observes in awe his most masterful work of art to date: the portrait of Dorian Gray, a young London aristocrat of exceptional physical beauty who has been a recent fixation in Basil's life. Dorian's image (and within a short time, Dorian himself) is also admired by Basil's afternoon companion, Lord Henry Wotton, a man whose wit, reputation for "wickedness," and philosophy of life proclaims hedonism to be the superior lifestyle. Responding to Lord Henry's inquiries about the beautiful youth in the painting, Basil hesitates to reveal Dorian's name; he reasons that "secrecy" is "the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvellous to us" and brings "a great deal of romance into one's life" (6). Basil's romantic ideals are held at least to some degree by Lord Henry as well. After hearing Lord Fermor, Dorian's uncle, recount the boy's tragic history – an eloping mother, a villainous grandfather, and a suicide coloring his past – Henry silently declares Dorian's ancestry "a strange, almost modern romance" (38). Indeed, both Dorian's status as an orphan and his sublime beauty make him a paragon of Gothic romance, for it is the contrast between the beautiful and the ugly which is heavily featured in the aesthetics of Gothic literature. Lord Henry accordingly muses that "behind every exquisite thing… [is] something tragic" (39).

This theme of hidden properties, of one thing concealing another, continues to be explored throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, especially in respect to the portrait itself. Richard Haslam further explains the connection between the uncanny and the Gothic in his article "'Melmoth' (OW): Gothic Modes in the *Picture of Dorian Gray*":

> The desire to make modernity strange and marvelous, romantic and mysterious pervades the gothic mode in general and produces in *Dorian*… tensions between the aesthetic and the ascetic, the decorative and the demonic… Gothic art is (implicitly) one of the 'modes' that 'possesses' that element of strangeness that is so essential to romance. (308)

In addition to Gothic elements of plot, aesthetics play a major role in Wilde's novel. Both Henry and Basil are enamored with the physical beauty of the painting of Dorian, the result of Basil's tireless investment of passion and creative energy. But when Lord Henry suggests that Basil submit the portrait to a gallery for exhibition, Basil gives a surprising response: "I can't exhibit the picture in an art gallery. I've put too much of myself into it" (7). Basil's notion that he can imbue an object with traces of himself is somewhat uncanny in nature; in addition, he fears his deep admiration for Dorian can be read by anyone who views the painting, an anxiety of secret and hidden thoughts being brought to light for all to see – much like the return of the repressed in Freud's explanation of the uncanny. Basil exclaims to Lord Henry, "I will not bare my soul to their shallow prying eyes," fearful of others viewing that which he wishes to conceal (13). This fear, however, is soon proven unwarranted – it is Dorian himself who finds the portrait too closely reflective of his own nature.

In the beginning, Dorian Gray is not the type of person who tends towards dangerous behavior – in fact, he is described by Basil as rather naïve, a boy with a "simple and a beautiful

nature" (16). But his life is cleverly steered in hedonistic directions by the manipulative Lord

Henry, who convinces Dorian to yield to his temptations and act on impulsive desires. Lord

Henry's intentions are considerably more sinister than simply mentoring the young man in his

personal philosophy:

> Yes; he would try to be to Dorian Gray what, without knowing it, the lad was to
>
> the painter who had fashioned the wonderful portrait. He would seek to dominate
>
> him – had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his
>
> own. There was something fascinating in this son of Love and Death. (40)

Lord Henry's desire to work through Dorian in secret ways, to inhabit his mind and influence his

behavior without Dorian being aware of it, mimics a specter haunting a dwelling – an apt

comparison, as architectural space is integral to the psychological machinations of Gothic fiction.

As might be suggested by Freud's terms of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, the image of the home is

representative of the unconscious; coincidentally, architecture and space has an essential purpose

in Gothic literature. According to Mark Hennelly, Jr., "most studies of the Gothic… recognize

architecture as the "pillar" of the genre…. whether it involves castles, cloisters, haunted houses,

or other Gothic antistructures" (77). These various forms of architecture reveal "overlappings

between 'unfamiliar' demonic threats and 'familiar' domestic tranquility during the Gothic

exploration of household hosts, hostages, and parasites" (Hennelly 79). This correlation between

the mind and familiar/unfamiliar spaces of inhabitation is an important theme in Gothic-era

fiction and bears a strong resemblance to the Freudian uncanny.

 In addition to Lord Henry's desire to possess Dorian, there are instances when Dorian

himself finds thoughts drifting into his mind concerning possession. Strolling through the

gallery of his home, he gazes up at the portraits of his ancestors. One painting in particular

catches his eye: the likeness of Philip Herbert, who was revered for his beauty just as Dorian is

adored by others for his pleasing countenance. Dorian muses over their comparable lives,

speculating strange and disquieting ideas:

> Was it young Herbert's life that he sometimes led? Had some strange poisonous
>
> germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own? Was it some dim sense
>
> of that ruined grace that had made him so suddenly… give utterance… to the mad
>
> prayer that had so changed his life? (146)

Dorian moves from portrait to portrait, contemplating the similarities between himself and his

immortalized ancestors. Wondering if their souls are able to persist after death, Dorian has a

flickering, uncanny sensation that someone (or something) might be acting through him,

possessing his mind and causing him to behave in a morally questionable manner. This seems to

fit the description of Freudian animism, for Dorian attributes sentient qualities – souls, even – to

the paintings in the gallery. Are the similarities between himself and his deceased kin too

profound to be mere coincidence? Could they be driving him towards a fate they were unable to

fulfill during their own lifetimes? What if his thoughts and actions are not really his own, but the

machinations of outside spirits? The uncanniness from this particular scene stems from Dorian's

troubled thought that an unseen force might be working through him; he questions if his thoughts

are truly his own and if he is in fact a stranger to his individual will.

The Picture of Dorian Gray takes this uncanny experience even further when it addresses

the main subject: Dorian's portrait. After the painting is completed, Dorian exclaims to Basil

and Lord Henry that he would trade his soul to remain youthful and beautiful while the portrait

aged in his place, and it is not long before Dorian finds that his wish has been realized. After

callously breaking off his engagement to a young actress named Sibyl Vane, he returns home to

find that his portrait has mysteriously altered – it now bears a "touch of cruelty in the mouth" (94). Alarmed, he draws up the blinds to allow for more light. He examines the painting once more, only to find that "the quivering, ardent sunlight showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing" (94). Dorian, perplexed by this phenomenon, consults his reflection to confirm or deny the portrait's accuracy: "He winced, and, taking up from the table an oval glass... glanced hurriedly into its polished depths. No line like that warped his red lips. What did it mean?" (94). The subtle change in the portrait is at once unnerving and intriguing, overtaking Dorian with a Narcissus-like fascination with his newfound double. The contrast between his portrait and his image in the mirror gives him a sort of perverse pleasure, for "only with two reflections can Dorian's enjoyment counterpose images of his enduring beauty against those of his emerging ugliness" (Craft 109). The subsequent event of Sibyl Vane's suicide, prompted by Dorian's abrupt dismissal of her, makes the portrait's sneer more apparent. After a period of contemplation, Dorian resolves to lead the life Lord Henry has recommended to him: a life of pleasure, passion, and sensuous endeavors. In regards to his picture, he refuses to heed any moral implications between its hideous appearance and his actions; conversely, Dorian believes "there would be a real pleasure in watching it. He would be able to follow his mind into its secret places… [a]s it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul" (110).

Dorian's relationship with his portrait illustrates several related themes of the Gothic and the uncanny. In Gothic literature, physical manifestations of the uncanny often take the form of monsters, representing a return of repressed impulses or complexes unacceptable in society. In Dorian's case, his portrait reflects the monstrosity he has become – a grotesque reflection of his

conscience which, ironically, portrays his true self. He hides the portrait while enjoying the pleasures he previously denied himself, steeping his name in scandal and committing countless transgressions, all while enjoying immutable youth and beauty. Dorian is proof that even a monster is capable of having a pleasing countenance and resembling aesthetic ideals: "By exchanging places with his own portrait, Dorian becomes an image pretending to be a man, a 'gracious shape of art' that assumes the appearance of life" (Gomel, 80). No longer a singularity, Dorian's identity has been split into two halves: the beautiful, corporeal half, and the grotesque half which bears the (perceived) ugly reality of his soul.

Dorian recognizes himself in the painting, but simultaneously feels like a separate entity – a stranger. He recognizes yet does not recognize himself and the portrait to be the same person at the same time, creating a cognitive dissonance within himself. The pleasure he takes in viewing his double waxes with each scandalous activity, marked by Dorian's admiration of his reflection in a mirror after committing new improprieties: "The sheer recursivity of this process – from sin to altered image; from altered image to image-altering sin – only enhances the uncanny power that holds Dorian in thrall to portrait and mirror alike, precisely because they are so unlike" (Craft, 116). Dorian's delight with his reflection in the mirror is a stark contrast to the uncanny portrait, which "turns Dorian inside out so his eyes may witness what, by definition, they cannot see at all – the legible condition of his inner being" (Craft, 114).

The portrait's inexplicable behavior is another aspect of the Gothic, serving as a magic or supernatural object which facilitates the main plotline. Described as the "most magical of mirrors," it defies rational explanation and is never fully explained (110). Dorian's speculation over whether the picture's apparent aging might have some "curious scientific reason" or is in fact the result of "prayer" never transcends ambiguity, lending mystical qualities to the narrative

(110). This unseen operation of the painting's subtle changes invokes the uncanny sensation that it may even have a type of intelligence. Addressing the uncertainty of sentience, Freud quotes psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, explaining that effective conditions for stimulating the uncanny exist when the observer "doubts whether an apparently inanimate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" (421). Dorian encapsulates this idea when he describes the portrait as a living thing: "What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty, and eat away its grace. They would defile it, and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would always be alive" (122). The Gothic theme of supernatural items and beings closely resembles the uncanny notion of inanimate objects appearing to act of their own accord, both of which are illustrated by Dorian's mystifying portrait.

Dorian's repression of his sins takes a violent turn when Basil confronts him about his increasingly tarnished reputation and requests to see the portrait. After throwing off the painting's cover and confessing to his debauchery, Dorian is suddenly taken by an uncontrollable desire to harm Basil, blaming the artist for his fate: "The mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him, and he loathed the man who was seated at the table, more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything" (162). Taking up a knife, he stabs Basil to death and locks the body in the room until he is able to dispose of it. That Dorian should hide a body in a room meant to conceal his means of immortality contains an uncanny irony; it is also fitting that Dorian's repressed fear of death and aging should be the cause of his uncanny demise at the novel's conclusion.

Instead of viewing Dorian's death as punishment for living the life of a hedonist, it can be argued that Dorian's belief in his portrait's ability to reflect the state of his soul violates the

principles of aestheticism since, within that philosophy, art has no moral component. After all,

Wilde notes, "it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (2). What Wilde attempts to

convey in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the differential nature of the spheres of art and ethics,

clearly of the opinion that art should not be judged by a moral standard – a philosophy opposed

to Ruskin's moralism. Wilde posits that if literature creates a sense of beauty, then it is a beauty

irrelevant to social morals – rather than moralize, art should transcend morals altogether. It is

Dorian's decision to reject ethics entirely in order to preserve his aesthetic beauty that causes the

uncanny to surface, transforming the portrait into a reflection of his own conscience.

> Aesthetically, the novel *Dorian* aims to encompass poison and perfection, but
>
> (ethically) the character claims that the soul 'can be poisoned *or* made perfect'…
>
> and even though Wilde also interpolated Lord Henry's argument that art could not
>
> poison, … the final focus of the novel is Dorian's inadvertent self-destruction,
>
> which is represented as the result of either/or choices. (Haslam 310).

Having lived a life of excess and sensation, poisoning his soul to achieve perfection, Dorian

desires to remove the last obstacle in his enjoyment of physical excess. Through his attempt to

kill his conscience by stabbing the portrait, he inadvertently kills himself in a moment of sheer,

uncanny irony. The image of the self-proclaimed artist of life with a knife plunged through his

heart, lying beside the presiding portrait of a beautiful youth, is an image which continues to be

interpreted with a level of uncertainty; however, it is this sense of the unknown and

unexplainable which continues to endure in the Gothic tradition.

In later Gothic novels, the Romantic sublime continues to be eclipsed by the Gothic

sublime and its featured component, the uncanny. *Dracula* (1897), by Bram Stoker, continues to

play with the relationship between the psychological and the architectural by making an ancient

castle in Transylvania the home of the novel's infamous antagonist. The undead nature of the vampire is made even more alien to his mortal counterparts by his apparent psychic powers and ability to deprive others of their will. Dracula's uncanny doubling with Mina, an assistant schoolmistress who dutifully studies modern technologies like the typewriter so as to be useful to her husband, serves as a social critique: "Despite the fact that, under hypnosis, Mina and Dracula share an exchange of powers and knowledge which leads to Dracula's destruction, Stoker denies Mina decisive authorial agency, and even uses her to mock the figure of the New Woman" (Grimes 149). Although the ethical implications of Gothic novels continue to shift in accordance with the times, aesthetics of the genre remain more reflective of the Victorian tradition than the Romantic.

The Gothic, the sublime, and the uncanny correlate on several levels: they inhabit spaces physical and psychological, awaken a deep sense of fear and horror, and find expression in certain aesthetics. In works of 19th century literature, they all possess an inherent relation and use concepts of surface and depth, the familiar and the unfamiliar, to explore how ethics and aesthetics interact. From the sublime's overwhelming and infinite greatness to the uncanny's haunting images of locked rooms and contrasts between the grotesque and beautiful, the Gothic seeks to reveal the unconscious material which constitutes man's most intimate and primal secrets. Gothic literature and its machinations of the sublime and uncanny will always hold a certain appeal, for the forbidden, unknown, and infinite elements of the world that fascinate us and evade attempts to map them find their expression in the Gothic's dark imagination.

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