
Gothic Literature In The Woman In Black By Susan Hill And The Picture Of Dorian Gray By Oscar Wilde

The term Gothic fiction refers to a style of writing that is characterized by elements of fear, horror, death, and gloom, as well as romantic elements, such as nature, individuality, and very high emotion. These emotions can include fear and suspense. The two texts 'The Woman In Black' written by Susan Hill and 'The Picture Of Dorian Gray' written by Oscar Wilde- illustrate numerous occasions of which gothic literature is presented. Dark desires and forbidden pleasures are at the heart of 'the picture of Dorian gray' just as fear of the unknown is at the heart of 'The Woman in Black'. Both texts explore different themes however it is clear they both use similar gothic motifs to do this.

Gothic elements such as those in 'Dorian Gray' and 'The woman In Black' are meant to invoke fear, in both the reader and the characters. In chapter 1 Susan Hill juxtaposes a warm family atmosphere and mock-horror ghost stories to the real agitation stirred in Arthur Kipps to help set up the novel and build tension for the reader. Words such as 'banshee', 'ash', 'collapsed' which suggests ideas of death and corpses is juxtaposed to more positive words such as, 'cheerfully', 'sparkle', 'glitter' this causes an ominous mood of centred on the past which is still shrouded in mystery. Furthermore, Hill numerous uses dramatic imagery to present the theme of gothic, 'as if rising from the water itself, a tall, gaunt house of gray stone with a slate roof, that now gleaming steadily in the light'. The use of personification here makes the house appear to be alive and have a malevolent kind of presence like a ghost. The use of the words, 'rising', 'gleaming', and 'gaunt' helps give the house an identity and personality. This in turn creates an eerie and gloomy setting of which acts as a foreshadowing element of what is later to come, of which is commonly used in gothic literature.

The whole story of The Woman in Black is set in some indeterminate historical setting. Though it seems like historical fiction because of the pony and trap and the steam train, we never get a clear sense of the date. This is a deliberate choice chosen by Hill because of the pull between the past and the present that is pervasive throughout the book. Arthur is a modern young man when he comes to Crythin Gifford, carrying out modern gestures such as using telephones and expecting cars to come pick him up. However, the woman in black represents the past and some aspects of the novel resemble Victorian England— the fact that we can't quite pinpoint the setting also makes the entire novel a little more unsettling and mysterious as it keeps the reader in the unknown. Likewise, the picture of Dorian gray is set in nineteenth-century in a Victorian model society whereby there were high moral standard of which Dorian Gray exploits. Gothic literature in the Victorian era was ceased to be a dominant literary genre.

In addition, Architecture is an important motif in Gothic horror—from Dorian's huge empty house, to Eel Marsh family graveyards, and both of which serve as physical symbols of the emotional or atmospheric conditions within. In The Woman in Black, Susan Hill uses this technique to suffuse Eel Marsh House with an eerie, claustrophobic, isolated sensibility. This is shown in the 'big, empty, old house'. Arthur finds himself cut off from the rest of society when he arrives at eel marsh house, making the reader feel scared as it is as if Arthur has betrayed safety and security. The simplicity of adjectives used is subtle yet effective in the way they appear to be abrupt and startling for the reader. This is further supported by the personification, 'a seething,

blanketing, almost tangible silence' that lives within Eel Marsh House. Personification here suggests that the silence is a living entity in itself and Susan's technique adds an expressionistic element that further puts in the stress between natural rationalizations and supernatural thus creating a mysterious tense atmosphere.

Furthermore, the use of setting such as the motif of a secret room which is displayed in both texts adds to the suspense that is created in gothic literature. For Dorian it is shown in the truly gothic place in the house is presented in the former schoolroom. The initial hint of its mysterious nature is indicated by its location, at the top of the house, locked as if keeping its secret inside. It is clear that the room served as a place where Dorian spent his lonely childhood and later as a study room. Now, however it serves a new purpose whereby he hides away the painting to help conceal the truth. The juxtaposition of the school room which has connotations with the purity and innocence of children with the decaying, evil painting makes the reader feel uncomfortable and is a common attribute featured in gothic literature. This is shown in the quote, 'He recalled the stainless purity of his boyish life, and it seemed horrible to him that it was here the fatal portrait was to be hidden away'. The use of the statement 'stainless purity' is ironic as the room is to hide away such a monstrous, grotesque portrait. The hiding away of the portrait adds to the mysterious nature that seethes throughout the novel. This is disturbing for a reader as it shows how every spec of innocence has been engulfed by corruption. Whereas in the *Woman in black* the secret room is the nursery of which 'was the door without a key hole, which I [Kipps] had been unable to open' in turn linking further to the same ideas developed in Dorian's schoolroom. Nurseries are associated with children and 'purity' however in the novel this becomes the catalyst of evil and mystery.

The supernatural element is brought into the novel through the painting. When Dorian wishes to trade fate with his portrait it seemingly obeys. The idea of a double life is central to the plot of the novel. It is first featured in chapter one when Dorian says he 'would give [his] soul'. Once Dorian realises his portrait will bear the scars of his corruption-thus leaving his actual appearance unstained – Dorian decides to ignore the pious morality that pervaded the Victorian era. As the novel progresses 'hour by hour, and week by week, the thing upon the canvas was growing old. It might escape the hideousness of sin, but the hideousness of age was in store for it'. For a contemporary audience beauty was an attribute associated with being moral and pure and to act in a sinful manner as Dorian does would have been frowned upon. For Dorian the portrait would be something that 'would breed horrors and yet would never die' suggesting the seriousness of his wish to remain youthful while the portrait aged. The phrase 'breed horrors' creates a vivid image in the reader's mind and shows the portrait has become a character in itself almost devil like. It is elements of the book such as this that caused the novel to be criticised by contemporary readers for being immoral and scandalous. Furthermore, the woman in black also uses the supernatural through the ghost of Mrs Drablow (*The Woman in Black*) featured first in chapter 4. Hills use of adjectives 'used to describe the ghost creates a disturbing image for the reader, 'the thinnest layer of flesh was tautly stretched and strained across her bones'. The use of grotesque imagery suggests ideas of death and illness as if 'suffering from some terrible wasting disease' making the reader feel uneasy as gothic literature sets out to do. The use of the supernatural is portrayed effectively in the film version of the '2016 *The Woman in Black* directed by James Watkins' whereby the soundtrack is used to build up tension and suspense of the reveal of the woman in black. The appearance of the ghost in the film is horrifying and unsettling for the audience which executes its role of being a traditional gothic horror story just as the novel does. Ghosts are also prominent in *Dorian Gray* when the 'face of James Vane [was] watching him'. At this point in the novel it is clear Dorian

has begun to bear guilt and the excess of his poisonous sins has caused him to be deluded. This is startling for readers and creates elements of fear that is commonly characterized in gothic literature.

Wilde's descriptive style in chapter 17 is Gothic in its grotesque, macabre, and fantastic imagery and chilling detail. He fashions a mood of desolation and despair. His similes, which appear seldom in other chapters, are very effective in relating the grimness of the world Dorian now occupies. The use of the similes, the 'moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull,' and the streets are 'like the black web of some sprawling spider.' Note that the moon resembles a 'yellow skull,' an allusion to death that so pervades the novel in these late chapters. Likewise, in the woman in black Hill uses similes to describe, Eel Marsh House to what "looks like the fragmentary ruins of some old church or chapel". Hill is showing here that nobody watches this place and that the huge house is too neglected. Eel marsh being described like a 'church or chapel' is a common motif used in gothic literature and has connotations of funerals thus creating a morbid mood causing the reader to feel agitated.

Throughout Dorian Gray there are many gothic conventions featured. Scary atmosphere is a striking device used frequently in gothic fiction and is created several times throughout Dorian Gray. One moment is where Dorian shows Basil where he has been hiding the painting. The significance of the light at this part of the novel is used as a symbolic device to help create a tense, scary atmosphere. 'The lamp cast fantastic shadows on the wall and staircase' this makes the reader feel on edge and foreshadows that something evil is in play. The symbolic 'shadows' leaves the reader in a state of unknown thus adding to the suspense. The significance of the candle is later shown after Basil's murder, 'then he remembered the lamp'. Wilde's revisiting of the lamp within this chapter adds further emphasis on the symbolic meaning of light, showing how the candle represents reality. The use of the word 'remembered' shows how the candle is an afterthought to Dorian and acts as the façade of which Dorian hides his immoral ways behind. The same is true in the woman in black whereby light and the loss of light is used to build suspense and foreshadow when something bad is going to happen. Light and dark is commonly associated with good and bad and therefore this technique is perfect for creating an eerie atmosphere. When there is a loss of light it is evident that something sinister is about to take place for example, there is a semantic field of words present in the absence of light such as, 'fear', 'nervous', 'murky' foreshadowing that something sinister is about to take place. This makes the reader feel on edge as the loss of light contributes further to creating an eerie atmosphere.

Basil's Murder itself is something that is shocking and disturbing for readers, 'crushing the man's head down on the table and stabbing again and again' the use of the repetition of 'again' is disturbing for readers as it shows Dorian's enjoyment in committing this gruesome murder. Furthermore the common noun, 'man' strips away Basil's identity to no longer have any significance or importance. This is further supported in the following paragraph whereby Basil is referred to as 'the thing' thus in turn dehumanizing him. Wilde has done this deliberately to make readers feel uneasy as it is the ultimate act of Dorian's insanity. Death is also a prominent feature in the woman in black, 'our baby son had been thrown clear, clear against another tree. He lay crumpled on the grass below, dead' the use of imagery here makes the reader feel horrified and sympathetic. The use of the word 'baby' is associated with innocence and purity that has now been corrupted and destroyed. This links to the death of Basil who also represented innocence and decency. Both deaths are of which are used to evoke fear within the reader. This is shown further in Dorian Gray when 'horror seemed once

more to lay its hand upon his [Dorian's] heart', the use of this metaphor here suggests that horror is something that can't be escaped and something that will always be with him. For a contemporary audience, this would be deemed outrageous as it goes against their high moral standards. Going against moral standards adds to the gothic elements prominent in the novel as it adds emphasis on the corruption that engulfs gothic literature.

Overall, it is clear that both texts are effective in the way they deliver gothic elements of fear and horror in order to evoke emotional responses from their readers. For 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' gothic literature is presented from Wilde's ability to create the decaying portrait and Dorian's 'no terror of death. Whereas for 'The Woman In Black' Hillis uses an array of literary devices to create an eerie gloomy setting for example the use of pathetic fallacy in order to set the mood and build tension. Both texts, although different, use similar gothic motifs such as; death, secrets and the supernatural that create a pleasing sort of terror, which is what makes them so successful in gothic literature.