A Martyr of His Soul

In the lone novel of Oscar Wilde’s career, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, buried among his marveled plays, he writes the stories of his own life, full of symbols that represent the degradation of one’s soul. In his efforts to mold Dorian with his philosophies, Lord Henry leads him down a corrupt path. Through three different analyses of this novel, Oscar Wilde illustrates the idea that having an obsession with being young and beautiful, can leave one’s soul old and ugly. Marina and the Diamonds hits the nail on the head in her song, Power and Control “Yeah, you may be good looking, but you’re not a piece of art.”

The Formalist critique of this novel is heavily focused on the symbolism that Wilde expresses through the aging of Dorian’s portrait as a reflection of his twisted, narcissistic soul. When looking through a Historical lens there is a need for attention in regard to Oscar Wilde’s own life, and how much of it is echoed in each of the three main characters. Wilde was a gay man, and consequently there is a great deal of homoerotic energy between the male characters throughout the novel. And finally, the feminist critique of this novel will compare and contrast Lord Henry’s relationship with his wife and Dorian’s relationship with his fiancé, as well as discuss Lord Henry’s loathsome attitude toward women.

The story begins in London in the home of Basil Hallward, a painter, who is discussing his latest unfinished painting with a friend, Lord Henry Wotton. The painting is a portrait of a young man, Dorian Gray, whom Basil met at a party. Since then Dorian has become not only his best friend, but his muse as well. A few days later Dorian is sitting for Basil when Lord Henry arrives. Once Basil is finished with the painting, Lord Henry suggests that it is in fact Basil’s best work and that he should display it. Basil is hesitant about the idea and expresses that he has put far too much of himself in it. Lord Henry also mentions that the painting has captured Dorian’s youth and that he will never look quite as young as he does in the painting. Dorian becomes upset by the thought of growing hideous, ugly, and old, and he makes the mistake of wishing that the painting would be the one to age instead of him. Basil has his painting framed and gifts it to Dorian.
As time goes on, Dorian starts to develop a greater friendship with Lord Henry, and begins favoring him over Basil. The two spend nearly every day together going to the club or to the Opera. Dorian takes several trips alone to the theatre as well, where he becomes infatuated with a young actress, Sibyl Vane. After three days Dorian tells Lord Henry that he has asked Sibyl to marry him, and he invites Lord Henry and Basil to come watch her play Juliet the next night. The men go to the theatre expecting the performance of a lifetime, but Sibyl falls far short of spectacular. Basil and Lord Henry are unimpressed, even Dorian’s high opinion of Sibyl is marred by her performance. After the show Dorian goes to Sibyl to question her about her poor performance. She tells him that now that she has love she no longer needs to play the part of a woman looking for it, and says she does not want to act anymore. Dorian becomes angry and heartbroken by this and announces that he doesn’t love her anymore.

When Dorian arrives at home he notices a change in the painting, a smirk drawn up on the corner of his mouth. He is overcome with shame and vows to make amends with Sibyl the next day. The next morning Lord Henry arrives at Dorian’s house to tell him that Sibyl Vane is dead and that she had poisoned herself; more than likely due to the impulses of a broken heart. Dorian wants to confess to the police that Sibyl’s death is a fault all his own, but Lord Henry corrupts him by beginning to feed Dorian’s ever growing ego and telling him that her death has nothing to do with him and he should not concern himself with it.

Basil arrives at Dorian’s home the next day to express his condolences about Sibyl’s death and to ask Dorian for the painting so he can have it displayed. Dorian becomes angry and refuses to show Basil the painting. Dorian questions why he has changed his mind as he was very reluctant to show it before. Basil confesses to Dorian that he has always thought of him as much more than a friend, much more than just an artistic influence even. Basil was so unwilling to show it before because he feared it would be seen as a public display of his obsession with Dorian. Basil leaves and Dorian moves the painting to the locked school room in the attic, hiding it under a satin sheet. Hiding with it the evidence of any sins that he has committed.

When Lord Henry had visited a few days prior, he left Dorian a book. Dorian becomes fixated on the yellow book and its ideas so much so that they begin to influence his behavior, and he continues to commit dark, soul changing sins that reappear and age
the painting further while Dorian remains youthful. The sight of the portrait occasionally fills Dorian with horror at what sins he is capable of committing, while in other instances he marvels at it and is grateful that he himself is spared youth and beauty while the painting suffers their opposites.

As Dorian is walking home from the club one night he meets Basil in the street after not seeing or speaking to him in years. Basil questions him about the rumors he’s heard of Dorian’s ungodly behaviors. Dorian doesn’t deny them and shares with Basil the painting’s reflection of his soul. Basil hardly recognizes his own painting and is confused as to how it got that way. Dorian explains that he’d been cursed by his wish the day that Lord Henry had mentioned to him that the painting would forever hold his youth. Basil deems the changes in the painting as an awful lesson for Dorian being so obsessed with youth and beauty. Dorian becomes so enraged at Basil’s comment that he stabs him repeatedly until he is dead, and locks his body in the attic with the painting.

The next day Dorian is still angry, and still left with a body in his attic. He calls upon a former friend of his, Alan Campbell, who is a chemist, in hopes that he can aide him in destroying the body. Alan comes, but only under the impression that he’s been summoned for a “life or death” situation, since the two had had some sort of falling out years ago. Dorian tells Alan that Basil is dead, but leaves out the details of how he died. Alan has no sympathy and refuses to take care of it. Dorian then tells Alan that he is the one who murdered Basil, but he is still unsympathetic toward Dorian. Finally, Dorian blackmails him and Alan spends the night ridding Dorian’s house of Basil’s body. Dorian begins to come to terms with the idea that he can’t erase his sins, and instead decides to forget them by spending the night in an opium den. Dorian comes face to face with Sibyl Vane’s brother, James, who threatens to kill him for breaking his sister’s heart. Dorian argues that he is much too young to have known Sibyl Vane who died eighteen years ago, and James apologizes and lets him go. Later that evening a woman in the bar reveals to James that that was in fact Dorian Gray, and he sets out to find him again. Dorian is constantly paranoid of James Vane appearing, so much so that he falls under frequent fainting spells.

Several weeks pass before Dorian sees Lord Henry again, and he tells him of how he broke a girl’s heart to spare her. They then begin to discuss the whereabouts of Basil Hallward. Dorian confesses that he murdered Basil, but Lord Henry doesn’t believe
him. Lord Henry leaves and Dorian ventures upstairs to the portrait, hopeful that it may have become less ugly with his good deed of sparing the girl. Instead the picture is the ugliest it has ever been. He realizes his actions weren’t out of good but hypocrisy and decides to destroy the painting in an attempt to forget it all. With the same knife that he killed Basil, Dorian stabs the painting. His servants hear a cry from downstairs and rush to see what the matter was. They find the portrait of Dorian looking just as young and handsome as when Basil had painted it, and Dorian himself withered and old with a knife in his heart.

Through the Formalist lens, Oscar Wilde illustrates Dorian Gray’s broken soul through his own portrait with a great deal of symbolism. A common theme throughout the novel also helps to find subtle meanings within the text.

When Dorian comes to London he is a baby in society. He is barely coming of age as he steps into a world corrupt by the evils of society’s great obsession with the young, wealthy, beautiful, and immoral. It seems that out of instinct Dorian clung to the first person to give him any affections of attention, and Basil was the one to shower him with it. Under the influence of Dorian’s ora, without intention, Basil painted Dorian a map of his own conscious; the inner workings of his soul. “So you think it is only God who sees the soul, Basil? Draw that curtain back, and you will see mine” (Wilde 159). The ever present cliché “be careful what you wish for” can quickly be characterized as theme that lingers throughout the novel as Dorian dwells in the luxuries of being forever young.

After Dorian leaves Sibyl in the theatre, broken hearted and suicidal, he notices the first change in his portrait. He feels a bit of remorse he when realizes that the sneer drawn on his lips is a result of his immoral behavior, but the feeling is ultimately overpowered with the thought that he’ll never have to be the one to suffer the scars of his sins. It is in that moment that the goodness in his soul begins to melt away and his innocence is lost. Dorian’s reality is distorted by his selfish battle to hold onto his youth and beauty, and he crushes existing friendships for the sake of conforming to societies standards.

Any grief that Dorian feels after Sibyl’s death is squashed by Lord Henry. Lord Henry is the overbearing influence that begins to mar Dorian’s ego. He feeds it to keep him vain, and consequently Dorian’s soul starts to tarnish and narcissism becomes his fatal disease. Once the picture begins to show a greater change than the flaw in his
smile, Dorian starts to recognize the changes as symbols of his faults and is shamed by them. For the first time in his life Dorian’s conscience is present as a reality, and he does not want the rest of the world to witness his back-and-forth moral vs. immoral debates. He begins to see himself as being very selfish, holding too much pride in his envied beauty and youth. When the painting molds his sins into a representative reality, he can’t come to terms to thinking that society might see through his persona and recognize even the tiniest of flaws. His soul is then grayed with the darks of his developing personality, and when the painting begins to psychically symbolism his immorality he hates himself for it. By some miracle Dorian has come to posses a sort of supernatural power, but it in turn it striped him of his skin and he is left naked with his murky soul to bear.

We are always careful to hide the flaws that we carry about ourselves, we are far too embarrassed by even the thought of others recognizing or worse, criticizing them. Sure we are guilty of criticizing ourselves, but we repress and rationalize the fact that we’re stuck with a personality flaw. However, that battle is purely internal. When Dorian Gray becomes aware of his harbored evils, they are made real as they are mirrored through Basil’s painting. “Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away. The rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful” (Wilde 161). The moment Dorian Gray signed off the deed to his soul, he became a supernatural being with a very human conscious that haunts him. Dorian’s appearance may not reflect the flaws in his soul as the painting does, but having his conscious painted in front of him begins to define his personality and his behaviors. He is molded by his sins and they psychically become a part of who he is. As he tries to better himself and transition his immoral behaviors to honorable ones, he recognizes his actions as being hypocritical. Dorian seeks to become a better person but only because he wants it to be reflected in the painting, not because he wishes to be a good person.

Dorian’s devotion to the study of all things beautiful, his growing obsession with the words of the book Lord Henry gave him, also aides in the degradation of his soul. It is his fascination with material things and superficial qualities in people that shelter him from understanding and recognizing real human qualities. At the end of the novel, when Dorian has truly come to realize his faults, he even materializes his soul. “The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, sold, and bartered away. It cab be poisoned or made
perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it” (Wilde 221). A person’s soul, dark or pure, is perhaps the most human quality about them, to actualize the most nonmaterial part of him is a sin in itself.

The Formalist critique is very useful in uncovering Oscar Wilde’s message to his readers. Through his eloquent symbolism and themes he stays true to the aesthetic nature of his writing.

An artist’s work usually reflects much more of himself as opposed to the subject he is painting. Brush strokes mimic pieces of the artist’s own life to tell a story rather than represent what is right in front of them. “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself.” (Wilde 7) Just as Basil Hallward mentions how he had put too much of himself in his masterpiece painting of Dorian, Oscar Wilde does the same through his writing of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. “[the novel] contains much of inc in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry is what the world thinks of me: Dorian is what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps.” (Wilde, Gibson 35) The New Historical analysis of this novel will discuss the allusions that Wilde makes to his own life and point out the homoerotic undertones that are present throughout.

From the very beginning of the novel the reader immediately begins to sense a detail about Basil Hallward. When Lord Henry asks of how he came to know Dorian, Basil describes with a subtle eloquence the story of how he developed a genuine sort of crush on him. He goes on to tell of how Dorian became his muse, posing influence on many of his latest artworks. From Basil’s reluctance to want to display his masterpiece in public, the reader can infer that he fears someone may notice his secret obsession painted within the portrait. The 1890 date of publishing of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* confirms that any kind of homoerotic relationships were very much taboo. The way Basil carries on about Dorian is reminiscent of a man in love, more so than just an artist inspired. “The opening pages leave little doubt that Basil Hallward, the painter of Dorian’s portrait, is in love with his subject” (Ross 64).

While Basil’s character only emits hints of homoerotic energy in his confession to Lord Henry, it is even more present when he confesses to Dorian.
“Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of the unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshiped you. I grew jealous of everyone to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When you were away from me you were still present in my art ... Of course, I never let you know anything about this. It would have been impossible. You would not have understood it; I hardly understood it myself...I grew more and more absorbed in you.” (Widle 117)

Ironically, Oscar Wilde also inputs statement from Basil that opposes not only the ideals of historical criticism, but also the idea that an artist's work should be free of himself.

“An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Some day I will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray.” (Wilde 13)

Wilde’s choice to include this passage in his novel only further proves Basil’s fear of being rejected for his feelings toward Dorian. He is hesitant to make a confession to Dorian, who isn’t the most accepting of his feelings, having society ridicule his sexuality through his art would be much more terrifying.

Basil’s infatuation is not only one that lingers among the male characters. Basil shares with Dorian countless words of praise and adoration, but Lord Henry rolls them off his tongue just as often as Basil; however his motives are not quite the same. Lord Henry recognizes Dorian for his naiveties. He idolizes his youth because he sees a mind to mold with his philosophies, an experiment perhaps he hopes to be published for. He lures him from his friendship with Basil with schmooze and seduction so he can carry on his tests. The energy Lord Henry passes to Dorian isn’t so much romantic, but more so a sense of pride in himself and his accomplishments. It is arguable that Oscar Wilde had quite a genius for his epigrams. Much of his fame is devoted to them, the rest to this novel, his plays, and his years spent in prison. The entire preface of the novel is on ongoing list of Wilde’s epigrams that explain the secrets within the novel, through a sort
of aesthetic code. Lord Henry is quite similar in that the majority of his vocabulary is saturated with witty epigrams, as if he’d bit his tongue. He speaks in a language of philosophies that he wants to embellish upon his subjects. Oscar Wilde’s voice is written in Lord Henry’s dialogue as satirical comments of late 1800’s London society, concluding Wilde’s idea that his readers would recognize him as the Lord Henry character of the *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is accurate. In his article discussing Wilde’s life in relationship to the novel, Alex Ross argues the same point. “Lord Henry is a Mephistophelian aesthete who seems to be Wilde’s mouthpiece...” (Ross)

It’s difficult to argue with a dead man, but a disagreement must be made in regard to Wilde’s view of himself as the character of Dorian Gray. Perhaps he is correct in saying that he a character that he would like to be, but as it is written there is another character in Wilde’s life that seems to better fit the mold. Paralleling research with fiction there seems to be a greater sense of Wilde’s lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, in Dorian. Dorian’s character is one that seems to test the waters with his lifestyle, and his commitments to his “passions” are never quite as zealous as he exclaims them to be. Similar to Dorian, Douglas was talked about as being a bit flakey with his tastes. “Douglas has been described as spoiled, reckless, insolent and extravagant. He would spend money on boys and gambling and expected Wilde to contribute to his tastes” (Ross). Both Wilde and Douglas were open with their sexuality and with their relationship; however Wilde was the only one to suffer for the cause. In 1895 Oscar Wilde was arrested under the charges of Marquess of Queensberry, Douglas’ father, for being a homosexual, while Douglas faced no criminal charges. Ironically, enough passages from this novel were used in Wilde’s trial against him as proof of his homosexuality. In regard to Wilde’s and Douglas’ relationship, there is a striking similarity in context to the novel, when Basil Hallward is the only one to suffer for a fault that both he and Dorian conceived. Dorian is angry with Basil for painting his immorality on canvas, but he’s just as guilty for committing the sins that at the end of the day are what ruin the painting. Dorian’s selfishness and denial of his own tarnished personality is ultimately what leads to Basil to suffer a fatal demise.

It has been over one hundred years since *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been published, and while it may not be as taboo, homosexuality is still a controversial topic in today’s society. Society has moved past the complete outlawing of homosexuality, and
forward toward acceptance. Looking at this novel with historical lens has shown that evidence of homosexuality is present throughout history, gives a timeline of just how far society has come, and gives merit to this novel for helping to pave the way to a change in society.

Ultimately, feminism in this novel is largely unseen, but where it can be found, it is highly evident. I would not venture to call The Picture of Dorian Gray a “man's book”, but there is certainly a heavy focus on the male characters. In fact, any female characters mentioned throughout the novel are purely secondary. Lord Henry, however, wouldn’t quite call the women of this story “characters”; he would instead objectify and refer to them as “decorative sex”. Throughout the novel even the least critical practicing feminist would pick up on the snarky remarks that Lord Henry directs at women. Lord Henry’s attitude toward women could very well be related to Oscar Wilde’s sexuality. His comments could be the tools of a defense mechanism in an attempt to either hide, or make public his sexuality. Wilde voiced his epigrams and thoughts on society through Lord Henry’s wit, why not preach his opinions of women through the same character? Regardless of his motives, whether they were in fact Wilde’s or just character traits of Lord Henry, women suffer a great deal of degradation in the novel, even as such minor characters.

“Lord Henry told him that, and Lord Henry knew what women were” (Wilde 95). Lord Henry’s know-it-all personality makes him feel that he is allowed to speak of women as if he is one, how else would he know what women are? Any modern female reader might take the former statement with a grain of salt and sarcasm. It falls far short of accurate seeing as though Lord Henry speaks so harshly of women, there is never any inkling of sympathy in his opinion of them. He admires them for their “decorative sex” appeal, and need for male attention, nothing more.

There is also an interesting parallel that Wilde creates in regard to Dorian’s relationship with Sibyl Vane and Lord Henry’s relationship with his wife, Victoria. The men in this novel (or maybe just men in general) seem to have an obsession with power. Society has always recognized men as the dominant sex, so for a woman to make a man question his power or strip him of it in any way create a great struggle within a relationship.
Lord Henry and his wife are trapped in a seemingly loveless marriage. Victoria spends her time at parties without her husband, while Lord Henry does the same, spending most of his time at the club or trying to mold Dorian’s mind. Victoria is very in control of her own life, she has little need for any attention from Lord Henry at all and it seems to almost weaken his manhood. When Basil is discussing his love of secrecy with Lord Henry, Lord Henry agrees with him as he tries to justify his own wife’s secrecy within her lifestyle.

“You seem to forget that I am married, and the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties. I never know where my wife is, and my wife never knows what I’m doing. When we meet—we do meet occasionally, when we dine out together, or go down to the Duke’s—we tell each other the most absurd stories with the most serious faces. My wife is very good at it—much better, in fact, than I am. She never gets confused over her dates, and I always do. But when she does find me out, she makes no row at all. I sometimes wish she would; but she merely laughs at me” (Wilde 6).

Victoria’s independence is threatening to Lord Henry’s ego. Her influence over him as a strong woman makes him feel belittled and he seeks attention for the dominant role elsewhere, he seeks it in Dorian. Because there really is no relationship for Lord Henry to dominate, he reaches outside of his marriage. He clings to Dorian because he senses the same “naivety” that he recognizes in women, and feels that his philosophies could be put to good use in such a simple minded person. Lord Henry fears strong women who need no permission; they are far too clever for him.

Dorian’s relationship with Sibyl Vane is quite different from Lord Henry and Victoria’s, although there is similar power struggle within the couple. Dorian and Sibyl are head over heels in love. Sibyl even nicknames Dorian “Prince Charming”. When the reader is introduced to Sibyl she seems to be the stereotypical naive woman, but as quickly as she and Dorian fell in love she makes a transition. Sibyl’s choice to throw her performance as Juliet was a form of rebellion. It was an act to show that she no longer needs to play a role, she has taken control of her own life. Like Lord Henry, Dorian feels cut down by his woman. Originally he admired her for her devotion to her art, not the most useful of qualities. It is a bit ironic that a man who spends his days at the club, doing next to nothing, is intimidated by a woman has a “useless” talent. Perhaps
Dorian’s infatuation stemmed from a subconscious thought that she would have the same devotion to him as she does her acting. He fell in love with her because she was powerless, she was just an actress, but once she wants to do something more with her life Dorian feels the same threat Lord Henry does in his marriage.

All three criticisms of The Picture of Dorian Gray, Formalist, New Historicist, and Feminist have served to show that immorality tears at the seams of the goodness in one’s soul. Although each one is in important in its analysis, the Formalist critique of this novel does the message of this book its justice. The New Historicist is also very accurate because it gives meaning and reason to the character relationships. This novel truly shows how one’s morality (or immorality for that matter) can forever shape and change the goodness of one’s soul.

Works Cited
Ross, Alex. "Deceptive Picture." Print.