

investigating how language is used to explore the themes of beauty and youth in both literary and non-literary discourse

English Lit & Lang coursework



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Introduction and aims

# When choosing which literary text, I was initially drawn to exploring the theme of youth for my investigation, hoping to select a literary piece that explored morals and messages to children and young adults, like Peter Pan. I chose to explore this theme as it often an integral theme in many books as youth is the start of character development and following my original intentions, I wanted to explore how youth was represented to a younger audience and its relevancy through time and age. On further research, I chose ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’ to explore this, as his youthfulness has been encapsulated in portraiture, and this desire for youth is developed into an object to obsess and corrupt over. Following this, I found a Guardian article on male youth beauty standards, which I thought complimented my literary choice as they both focus on unreasonable beauty pressures on males, alongside the influence of media – with the former topic arguably not having the same awareness women’s beauty standards have. This theme of youth in Dorian Grey is closely linked to the theme of beauty, which encouraged me to explore both themes in a simultaneous way. We can see this relationship mirrored in modern society, with the constant advertisements of aging creams and facial surgery to retain a youthful, glowing exterior – society has construed that beauty is youth. In the initial characterization of Dorian Gray, his beauty is likened to famed figures in Greek mythology, such as Adonis and Narcissus. This is continued throughout the novel and suggests beauty can be linked to status, which may contribute to Dorian’s obsession with maintaining his face and standing in society. I intend to explore this comparison in my analysis and to further look into youth in early literature for my secondary recourses. This comparison can also be seen made in the non-literary; ‘I worry for my teenage boys’ – the beauty standards for young men are out of control -

with males from love island being likened to “chiselled gods” and men in the media being portrayed as superior and possessing un-mortal powers. I intend to compare the motif of impossible beauty pressures in both of these texts in my analysis section.

What is normally a desired trait, Dorian’s innocence/youth can also be his Achille’s heel, as these lead to his conversion of character, with said traits being manipulated and by other characters, particularly Lord Henry and even painter, Basil Hallward. We see his youth become a disciple of the “new hedonism”, where Henry constantly preaches living in the pursuit of pleasure and immoral experience. Arguably, as a result of Lord Henry’s influence and his corruption of innocence, Gray treats his young love, Sybil Vane, so cruelly and coldly that his subversion leads her to commit suicide for her love of him, becoming something akin to a martyr for love. Sybil, much like Dorian, embodies an artistic ideal and through her characterization, explores the sub-theme of aesthetics. Another character who is directly linked to the motifs of art and the aesthetics is Basil Hallward, the painter of Dorian’s portrait. Basil as a painter subconsciously manipulates Dorian’s innocence through his act of painting Dorian. The picture of Dorian and the likeness it assumes, overwhelms Basil and his later work fails to reach the level of Dorian’s portrait. However, Dorian becomes enraged when equipped with the knowledge of how his portraiture has dictated Basil’s passion and kills him – almost a parallel to the deterioration of Sybil Vane too. Basil becomes another sacrifice to art, to society’s obsession with beauty and aesthetics. In comparison with the non-literary text, I intend to explore and contrast the idea of a deteriorating sense of identity in both texts, where in Dorian Gray, portraiture is portrayed as almost a constraint, whilst in the modern-day article, a constraint on identity is media influence. I plan to develop this sense of losing personality and humanity further in my analysis.

At the end of the novel, Dorian has an almost anagnorisis and destroys the painting, wanting to sever his attachment to eternal youth and beauty, and the consequences of his own acts of obsession has caused. However, by destroying the embodiment of his everlasting youth, he simultaneously kills himself. His portrait previously provided a visual representation of his soul and his degradation from purity, and his ending provides the suggestion that his life had been consumed by art. I intend to explore the self-destruction of Dorian’s humanity and character, linking to my non-literary text, which explicitly associates societal pressures with a deterioration of mental health. In both texts, young impressionable males begin to obsess over their youth and beauty – in my detailed analysis I will investigate the psychological and physiological consequences of obsessing over maintaining a socially desirable exterior.

\*need to edit again and insert/link more to specific extracts used in analysis section

\*need to cut down/ edit down introduction and aims section – summary sections are too long

Review