The Making of Monsters: Creativity and Morality in Gothic Novels
Frankenstein and The Picture of Dorian Gray

Elisa Klaassen
elklaassen@outlook.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/allgraduate-thesesdissertations

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/allgraduate-thesesdissertations/7257

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research & Artistry at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact jschumacher@niu.edu.
This study examined Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which foreshadows the Victorian period, and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which reflects on it. The two novels are both monster stories that share many similarities, including themes of creativity and morality. However, the two novels are distinctly different in surprising ways. This thesis serves as an examination of their differing treatments of creativity and morality. In its examination, it reveals the ways in which Shelley couples these themes, foreshadowing Victorianism, while Wilde decouples them, reflecting and refracting on Victorian themes. Thus, this study reveals some of the major cultural changes that occurred across the nineteenth century and interrogates the possible reasons these shifts may have occurred.
THE MAKING OF MONSTERS: CREATIVITY AND MORALITY IN GOTHIC NOVELS

FRANKENSTEIN AND THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

BY

ELISA KLAASSEN
©2021 Elisa Klaassen

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Thesis Director:
Brian May
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members – Dr. May, Dr. Ryan, and Dr. Crowley – for their prompt responses, helpful feedback, and constant encouragement. I am so grateful that I chose the three of them as my committee members. I would also like to thank Gail Jacky, the director of the University Writing Center. She was a constant help and encouragement to me throughout the early stages of my writing process. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my parents, Vaughn and Nancy Klaassen, who are two of the kindest, most supportive, most uplifting people in my life. I could not have achieved my goals without them.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. CREATIVITY AND MORALITY IN <em>FRANKENSTEIN</em></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CREATIVITY AND MORALITY IN <em>THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY</em></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Both Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are, to some degree, creation stories about the making of a monster. Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*, explores the morality of scientific creation, while Wilde’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, explores that of artistic creation. Both novels reveal the struggles of both the creators and their creations, and they raise questions about what makes a monster and what makes a man. Shelley published *Frankenstein* in 1818, more than seventy years before the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). However, its moral implications about the creation of a monster differ significantly from Wilde’s later gothic novel, which involves the making of a man into an immoral monster. Few critics have evaluated Wilde’s novel as a monster story; however, a comparison with *Frankenstein* reveals the many ways in which it does fall into this category. Victor, out of selfish ambition, pieces together bits of human flesh to create a scientific monster—an inhuman creature. However, in doing so, Victor transforms into a monstrous entity himself. On the other hand, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, three different creators play significant roles in the making of a human monster. Basil Hallward, in a fever of love and obsession, somewhat unwittingly fans the flames of Dorian Gray’s vanity. Then Lord Henry purposefully darkens the recesses of Dorian’s mind with his nihilistic outlook on life. Lastly, Dorian’s own “monstrous and absurd vanity” influences his downfall, and he acts as a creator figure in disfiguring his painting and controlling his own fate (Mason 32). He ultimately
contributes to the artwork, in one final creative act, by using a palette knife to destroy the painting that has become a graphic physical encapsulation of his monstrous inner self.

The two novels differ in their treatments of Victorianism. Because of the space of time between the publication dates of Shelley’s and Wilde’s novels, *Frankenstein* anticipates Victorianism while Wilde’s novel reflects on, or even refracts, Victorian ideas. Thus, this thesis, which examines both a pre-Victorian and a post-Victorian novel, will reveal the Victorian period’s effects on British culture as well as the evolution of British culture across the nineteenth century. Because of the gap in time between the two novels, few critics have examined them together. However, both authors display a strong and abiding interest in the same two themes: creativity and morality. The novels’ differing treatments of these two themes reveal the nature of the literary and cultural evolution that occurred over that span of seventy years, so they are worthy of comparison. While Shelley very clearly couples morality with creativity, revealing the moral ramifications of the act of creating, Wilde convolutes this binary. He utilizes three different creators and effectively decouples morality and creativity by showing that “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” (Wilde vii) and that “all art is quite useless” (viii). In both books, the creators and creations are doomed; however, in Wilde’s book, the artwork (and creativity itself) is blameless. Though many critics have argued that the conclusion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* upholds the same moral lesson Shelley’s novel promotes, the fact that Dorian’s death is an artistic act in itself indicates that creativity and morality are not as closely coupled in this novel. This analysis is an attempt to explore the nature of the creator-creation relationships in the two novels and the ways in which Wilde decouples and twists the connections between creativity and morality, which Shelley had established in 1818 in anticipation of a Victorian preoccupation with moralism.
Author Noël Carroll advances a theory of horror that reveals that Dorian Gray is indeed a gothic monster and is comparable to Frankenstein’s monster. He writes about “art-horror,” which is his name for a genre that “crystallized roughly around the time of the publication of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and that has continued, often cyclically, to persist through the novels and plays of the nineteenth century” (51). Carroll presents several criteria for his theory of horror, that is, his “aesthetic inquiry into the nature of horror” (51). Most of his criteria derive from the monsters in horror stories. He writes, “What appears to distinguish the horror story from mere stories with monsters, such as fairy tales, is the attitude of the characters in the story to the monsters they chance upon” (52). The monsters in horror stories are extraordinary and unusual, often shocking other characters. The trolls, giants, and ogres of fairy tales, on the other hand, often appear normal and even ordinary to the characters that encounter them. Carroll also mentions the physical reactions of characters in horror stories; people in horror fiction often recoil from monsters because of “an evident aversion to making physical contact with the monster” (53). Though Dorian’s appearance captivates others throughout the majority of Wilde’s novel, Basil does eventually recoil from him when he reveals his true self: “A twisted flash of pain [shoots] across [Basil’s] face” (112). Carroll notes that such reactions are often followed by the character’s realization that such a monster is a “possible being” (54) and recognition that the monster “has the property of being impure” (54). Audience members and characters alike are shocked by the idea that hideous figures like Dracula, Frankenstein’s monster, or Mr. Hyde could live in this world, even if they are fully aware that no such individuals exist. Carroll’s theory supports the proposal that Dorian Gray is (or becomes) a gothic monster of sorts, given the fact that he is an impure and immoral being who is at heart “withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage” and from whom others eventually recoil (Wilde 165).
The monsters in these two novels are very different from each other, especially in terms of their physical characteristics. While Frankenstein’s monster is very obviously monstrous, Wilde’s monster is a confusing and complex mixture of physical beauty, moral decay, and tarnished artwork. The differences in their physicality reveal the shifts in society’s perception of pseudosciences like phrenology and physiognomy. Additionally, the discontinuity between Dorian’s outer appearance and his interior life indicates a change in Victorian thinkers’ ideas about the transparency of the individual’s inner world. These shifts, as will be shown, reveal Wilde’s proto-modernist tendencies.

Victorian culture’s focus on fear, guilt, and shame had a significant influence on people’s understanding of the self during that period, and this focus on guilt is an important element of both novels. Carroll writes, “It is clear that in order to really understand what is going on with the idea of ‘horror’ in the early nineteenth century, we need to scrutinize the broader cultural context in which it is situated” (90). Marianne Paquin relates Victorian culture’s emphasis on guilt to the “monstrous,” noting how Victorian people’s “desires and needs, if they were even slightly different from the norm, had to be repressed. Otherwise, [people] were threatened with being deemed deviant or monstrous and were rejected from the community” (3). Additionally, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick indicates that the Gothic is founded on “the poisonous effects of guilt and shame” (9) and relates it to “how poisoned and poisonous [gothic characters] feel because of their guilt and shame” (10). Therefore, gothic horror fiction is not just about external monsters and villains. Rather, the horrific quality of gothic novels is intimately related to the innermost thoughts, fears, and desires of even the ordinary people in a story. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, “the question of self became a marker of fear and uncertainty. As Julian Wolfreys observes, the ‘multi-faceted anxieties of the period’ were mostly concerned ‘with the erosion of
Seeing their identities and social roles threatened, many Victorians expressed the
struggles they faced through [their] art” (qtd. in Paquin 1). Fred Botting also reveals the
complicated Victorian sense of self by noting that “Gothic subjects [are] alienated, divided from
themselves, no longer in control . . . [they are the] divided products of both reason and desire,
subjects of obsession, narcissism, and self-gratification as much as reasonable, responsible codes
of behaviour” (12). Indeed, all of the monsters and all of their creators, in both Shelley’s and
Wilde’s novels, are split selves. They are both good and bad—filled with the vanity, curiosity,
and hypocrisy that Dorian sees in his own soul when he looks at the painting of himself (164).
While Shelley’s creator, Victor, experiences all the despondencies of excessive guilt and shame,
Wilde dissevers the binary creator-creation relationship and effectively reallocates the blame,
diminishing the effects of the typical Victorian guilty conscience.

Throughout the Romantic period and then continuing into the nineteenth century, the rise
of capitalism and industrialism led Victorian thinkers to perceive a state of moral decay
throughout Europe. The changing social and economic structures developed even more quickly
in the nineteenth century, when factories began to utilize steam power to run their engines; this
phenomenon then fueled the First Industrial Revolution. Many famous authors wrote about their
observations of these massive societal changes. William Blake’s famous poem “London” depicts
the suffering of children, the cruelty of the upper class, and the failures of the family structure.
Almost all of Charles Dickens’s books reveal the horrors that impoverished people of his time
experienced in the streets of London. Cities rose up and factory work became the norm, even for
children. The writings of Blake and Dickens demonstrate that people in the nineteenth century
were well aware of the problems in their culture and the transgressions of those around them—
even those who initially appeared morally upstanding. These newfound horrors and cruelties,
which made their way into literature, impacted people’s perceptions about the meaning of life and, alongside the cruelties of later wars, led to the rise of modernity. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was written in 1818, before the effects of the societal changes had completely altered society’s perception of morality and religion. However, Oscar Wilde’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was written in 1890, and his combination of Victorianism and modernism, in contrast with Shelley’s ideals, reveals the many rapid cultural changes that took place across the course of the nineteenth century.
Creativity, and especially scientific creativity, is a key theme in *Frankenstein*; Victor Frankenstein’s act of creation is an act of scientific innovation. When he begins to form ideas about creating his monster, he is fascinated with “natural philosophy and particularly chemistry” (50). He is intrigued by the machines, books, and laboratories Professor Waldman shows him in Ingolstadt. However, Maurice Hindle notes that “the word ‘scientist’ had not even been coined in 1818, when Shelley’s novel was first published” (29). Indeed, scientists tended to think “themselves to be as much philosophers as scientific workers and were concerned to maintain their status as thoughtful interpreters of a world which they nevertheless studied primarily in its material aspects” (29). Indeed, Professor Waldman and Victor alike focus primarily on the study of natural philosophers who “performed miracles” and who could “penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding-places” (47). Thus, as a philosopher who is interested in the miracles of nature and the mysteries of the universe, Victor unconsciously constructs himself as not just a scientist, but an artist also. Hindle notes that around the time that Shelley authored her masterpiece, conversations took place between Shelley’s husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the writer John Polidori about “whether man was simply the material but animate product of the ‘system of the universe’, or whether he was a creature created by God with a separate and eternal soul” (33). These conversations were forerunners, Hindle argues, of the “‘science versus religion’ debate that would explode again following Darwin’s publication of
the *Origin of Species* later in the century” (33). Thus, Shelley’s novel reveals a timely cultural concern with science, religion, and the moral consequences of one’s scientific feats.

Victor Frankenstein’s version of creativity forms a stark contrast with the creativity that God demonstrates in the Garden of Eden when mankind is first animated and given breath. The creation of Adam and Eve is life oriented and procreation oriented; Genesis 1 says, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1.22). Later, God tells Adam and Eve, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (2.16-17). Not only has death never before occurred on Earth, but Adam and Eve are forbidden access even to knowledge about death. Also, after Adam and Eve have sinned and fallen from their original pure and innocent states, God slaughters an animal and clothes them in its skins, exposing them to death and violence for the first time (3.21). Clearly, God’s creative actions at the beginning of Genesis are life giving and good, and only sin and fallenness from God lead to humanity’s exposure to death and suffering. Thus, Victor Frankenstein’s actions, in endowing a being with life, breath, and thought, form a stark contrast with God’s nature as a creator. In order to achieve his creative act, Victor “must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body” (52). Victor says, “I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted; I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain” (52). In order to achieve his creative potential, Victor must first be exposed to the knowledge of good and evil that led Adam and Eve to corruption. His creative act is marked by its association not with procreation and life but with death and the corruption of the body. The story of Frankenstein’s monster implies that unlike God, who can create in pure and
life-giving ways, humankind cannot and should not lust after such dark recesses of knowledge and power.

Additionally, many other creation stories, like the story of Prometheus and the story of Ovid’s Pygmalion, precede Frankenstein. Most of these early myths and stories indicate that only deities can bestow the breath of life. However, Shelley’s story twists this traditional idea of divine creation because her ambitious young scientist is entirely mortal yet seizes the role of creator. In his introduction to Frankenstein, Douglas Clegg writes, “In Mary Shelley’s novel, it is modern science and the desire of one mortal man that created the spark of life” (vii). While at the university, Victor learns that “the labours of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind” (49). This motivates him to pursue his creative ambitions with fervor, though he quickly forgets his early desire to benefit humankind. Much like a painter or sculptor, he is fascinated by the structure of the human body, stating, “One of the phenomena which had peculiarly attracted my attention was the structure of the human frame, and, indeed, any animal endued with life. Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed?” (51). At this point in the story, Victor begins to explore “the principle of life.” This exploration is further evidence of what people in Shelley’s time would have seen as an ominous attempt to play the role of God. Thus, his pursuit, from the start, is a sinister one. He writes that examining the principles of life itself is insufficient; he must “also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body” (52). Victor’s creative ambitions lead him into recesses of knowledge about life and death that are dark and ominous. He soon seeks to construct creatures that look much like humans, positioning himself in God’s role as creator. He states, “My imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man” (53).
Victor’s portentous position as a character who attempts to play the role of God presages the severe moral consequences of his creative actions.

The monster, on the other hand, is Victor’s creation and subordinate; from the moment he awakens to life, the monster is quite clearly ugly and detestable:

Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a 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 shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. (58)

From the very beginning, the monster’s appearance importantly reveals the truth about his interior life and foreshadows his evil and cruel actions, such as his murders of the innocent Henry Clerval and Elizabeth Lavenza. Barbara Benedict writes about “the belief that faces show hearts,” saying, “The ancient concept of reading faces revived periodically in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the nineteenth century” (312). Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, many authors utilized physiognomy or phrenology as a means of characterizing the people in their stories as good or evil. For example, Wilkie Collins endows Laura Fairlie, in his 1859 novel *The Woman in White*, with “lovely eyes in colour, lovely eyes in form—large and tender and quietly thoughtful—but beautiful above all things in the clear truthfulness of look that dwells in their inmost depths, and shines through all their changes of expression with the light of a purer and a better world” (49). The villain in Brontë’s 1847 novel also “scowls so plainly in his face; would it not be a kindness to the country to hang him at once, before he shows his nature in acts as well as features?” (50). Throughout the nineteenth century, authors utilized facial features to denote character and moral quality, and Mary Shelley does the same in her novel. Frankenstein’s monster is a physically detestable creation, and that fact reveals the true state of his soul and
mind. Thus, Mary Shelley begins to couple creation and morality together. Victor plays the role of God in creating the monster, and first and foremost, it is the monster’s ugly appearance that reveals how wrong Victor was to do such a thing. The monster’s appearance also rightly indicates that he is a being who is capable of such heinous acts as murder. Shelley utilizes the monster’s appearance, as well as his subsequent actions, to criticize Victor’s creative act.

However, throughout the novel, the contents of an evil soul are not always put on display; though Frankenstein’s monster is detestably ugly, its creator is not. According to Robert Walton, Victor’s countenance is glowing and beaming: “His whole countenance is lighted up, as it were, with a beam of benevolence and sweetness (22). And in Chapter 2, Victor speaks of how the most learned philosophers “had partially unveiled the face of Nature” (39). This same veil seems to cover his face, making him beautiful. Thus, the various expressions of the face are but “veils” that may be stripped away so as to reveal the true contours of one’s soul. Indeed, other Romantic novels use veils to obscure the truth. Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho uses veils and curtains to cover corpses and make hiding places, and the American Romantic story, “The Minister’s Black Veil,” relates the idea that all people wear a symbolic veil that obscures the states of their souls. Thus, in Romantic stories, an ugly face did not always betoken an ugly soul.

While a monster—pieced together with bits of flesh—is physically hideous, the man who creates such a monster can still be quite beautiful. This fact, which is so clear in Frankenstein, is pertinent to a later analysis of Wilde’s novel.

Though Frankenstein’s monster does not mirror his creator’s appearance, creation is often, to some degree, a form of self-reflection for the creator figure. Thus, the relationship between creator and creation is fraught with tension and characterized by duality. According to Johanna Smith’s introduction, “The monster is fated to define himself in relation to Victor,
becoming Victor’s imaginary double, the mirror-self that haunts his every step. If, as Lacan suggests, the I is an Other, then on some level Victor is the monster, and the monster in turn is Victor” (256). Their relationship is a dualistic one, and the monster acts as a mirror for Victor, revealing the parallel monstrosities in his creator’s character. This same dualistic quality of creation is evident in the biblical creation story as well. Genesis 1:27 reads, “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1.27). Additionally, God repeatedly says throughout the biblical creation process that that which he has made is good. Thus, the ugliness of Victor’s creation is a reflection on Victor himself and his own inability to fulfill God’s role as creator. Victor’s very act of unearthing and combining the parts of various dead bodies is disturbing; it makes sense, then, that his counterpart—his creation—would be a monstrous double. If his creation is made in his image, then it is made in the image of a man who does despicable things. Additionally, Victor mirrors the monster’s cruelty when he refuses to make a female partner for his monster and tears apart the female monster’s body; he refuses the monster love in the same way that the monster refuses him love in killing his wife. The monster’s condescending words to Victor also reveal the dialectical master-slave relationship between creator and creation in this novel: “Slave, I have reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!” (181). This reversal of character roles reveals that both characters are monstrous and both are slave and master. Throughout Frankenstein, the creator (Victor) and his creation (the monster) form a dualistic relationship in which they trade positions of power and authority. Paul Cantor agrees, saying, “Although Victor obviously has his moments of triumph and the monster his moments of
despair, the two characters reverse their roles as the book proceeds, until it becomes difficult to tell one's voice from the other” (107). As we will see, this aspect of creation—the self-expression of the creator—is evident in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well.

Pop culture’s ongoing confusion about the names in the novel, which leads people to believe the monster’s name is Frankenstein, unwittingly echoes a duality between creator and creation in *Frankenstein*. Readers often conflate the characters, assuming that “Frankenstein” is also the name of the anonymous monster. Indeed, Paula R. Feldman indicates that Victor’s confrontations with the monster are self-confrontations: “Victor Frankenstein’s flight from his newborn creation makes sense as a scene of unendurable self-confrontation” (68). Victor takes the blame for the murders that the monster commits, saying, “Two I have already destroyed; other victims await their destiny” (191), and “William, Justine, and Henry—they all died by my hands” (201). Pop culture’s confusion about the two characters is not far from the truth. Victor proves himself monstrous many times throughout the novel. He lingers in the graveyard, tears dead bodies apart, refuses the monster any comforts or companionship, and fails to communicate with his family.

Victor’s actions following his creation of the monster, especially in relation to his own family and the monster’s potential family, further reveal that his decision to create the monster was a dire mistake. One of the key flaws in Frankenstein’s ambition for knowledge is its tendency to tear him away from family life. Rather than staying at home and marrying his bride, Elizabeth, he spends all of his time in Ingolstadt and neglects to write to his family (64). By contrast, Walton’s portions of the novel are in the form of letters written home to his sister. He does write to her; however, his very absence from her throughout the entirety of the novel is noticeably similar to Frankenstein’s long absences from home. Indeed, Walton even notes, in his
letter to his sister, that his long and ambitious journey may prevent him from ever seeing her again (13). This separation is evidently a result of his ambitious desire to explore mysterious lands that have never before been traversed. However, the monster’s greatest ambition is to have a family, unlike Frankenstein and Walton. He desires the simplicity of companionship, and he seeks to possess a mate. Somehow, paradoxically, what Frankenstein relinquishes to create the monster—family—is all that the monster could possibly desire. The creature fervently expresses this wish when he asks Frankenstein to create a mate for him, saying, “My companion must be of the same species and must have the same defects” (155). Though the monster wishes for something both good and reasonable, his excessive desire leads him only to grief. Bitterly angry with Frankenstein for failing to create a mate for him, the monster avenges himself by destroying Frankenstein’s chances of marital bliss and family life; he murders Elizabeth on their wedding night (212). Though the monster’s greatest wish differs from the wishes of Frankenstein and Walton, the greedy, insatiable qualities of his desire connect him with the two other ambitious characters. Victor’s actions, in refusing to create a mate for the monster, are morally ambiguous. On the one hand, Victor appears to be cruelly refusing the monster any chance of companionship and contentment. On the other hand, Victor refuses the monster’s request out of fear for the fates of his fellow humans. He says, “I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness, and with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew” (180). Regardless, Victor never would have needed to make such a difficult choice if, in the first place, he had chosen not to usurp God’s role as creator.
Victor’s creative act in *Frankenstein* (whether scientific, artistic, or some combination of both) makes him a hybrid of God, Adam, and Satan. Frankenstein and the monster are certainly both comparable to Adam; for example, both commit his original sin. However, both characters also bear similarities to Milton’s Satan. Leslie Tannenabum notes that “Walton sees Frankenstein in much the same way that Milton intended his audience to first perceive fallen Satan . . . [describing] his companion as ‘being even now in wreck so attractive and amiable’ and ‘noble and godlike in ruin’, echoing Milton's Satan addressing his legions, ‘Majestic though in ruin’” (103). Tannenbaum’s observations are reminiscent of Frankenstein’s connections with the monster since the monster himself is also comparable to Milton’s Satan. Indeed, the monster describes himself as devilish, calling himself “the fallen angel [that] becomes a malignant devil” (239), and Frankenstein also labels the monster a devil (182). Moreover, the monster actually reads *Paradise Lost*. After doing so, he compares himself to both Adam and Satan, recognizing the “bitter gall of envy [that] rose within” him as it once did in Satan (139).

Additionally, like Satan, the monster possesses a sly tongue. Milton’s Satan and fellow devils are chiefly known for their wily tongues. Belial, a fallen angel, uses words that are “cloth’d in reason’s garb” (Milton 2.226). Frankenstein warns others to guard against the monster’s cunning and manipulative rhetoric, and he repeatedly mentions the powerful effects of the monster’s language, saying, “His words had a strange effect on me” (158). Frankenstein also warns Walton that the monster “is eloquent and persuasive, and once his words had even power over my own heart; but trust him not. His soul is as hellish as his form, full of treachery and fiendlike malice. Hear him not” (227). Thus, Shelley repeatedly characterizes the monster’s language as manipulative and cunning. By thus associating both Frankenstein and the monster with Satan, Shelley reveals their greedy ambitions. Satan, unwilling to accept his role as an
angel, attempted to overthrow God and supplant God’s power. Just like Satan, Frankenstein attempts to play God’s role by creating life, and the monster attempts to play God’s role by destroying life. Rather than accepting the natural roles God has given them, Frankenstein and his monster constantly thirst for more, playing the three roles of God, Adam, and Satan all at once.

Victor’s relationships with others in *Frankenstein* also reveal that creative actions have moral consequences. First of all, the deaths of Victor’s loved ones vividly reveal the consequences of his actions. Second, Victor’s character traits differ from those of a morally upright man, his friend Henry Clerval. And last, Victor’s retelling—his act of relating his experiences to Robert Walton—shows how much Victor regrets creating his monster and views that act of creation as abominable.

The deaths of Victor’s loved ones throughout *Frankenstein* are indicative of Victor’s faults and mistakes throughout the story. Most of the characters who die as a result of the monster’s creation are unambiguously innocent, good, and pure. This emphasizes the “wrongness” of the monster’s existence and actions and, in turn, the “wrongness” of Victor’s choice to create such a monster in the first place. Victor’s father, brother, servant, and fiancée all die, in addition to Victor’s best friend, Henry Clerval. Victor considers his brother William and servant Justine “hapless victims” (93), and he calls himself their “true murderer” (92), blaming himself for creating the monster. On the eve of Justine’s death, Victor “gnashed [his] teeth and ground them together, uttering a groan that came from [his] inmost soul” (92). This allusion to the Bible indicates that Victor is unrighteous and evil because, in scripture, Jesus speaks of unrighteous people and says that in the final days “there will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth” (Luke 13.28). Thus, Victor’s response to Justine’s death reveals his dismal moral and spiritual state of being. Elizabeth is a stereotypical “Angel in the House” figure who prefigures
the first use of that term. An Angel in the House is a beautiful, innocent, and chaste Victorian woman who demonstrates “sound household management and sweetness of temperament” (Peterson 677). Indeed, as a child, Elizabeth’s “hair was the brightest living gold…Her brow was clear and ample, her blue eyes cloudless, and her lips and the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness that none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features” (33). Elizabeth, like the other characters who die in *Frankenstein*, is distinctively pure, virtuous, and chaste. Thus, her characterization as “heaven-sent” and her later tragic death indicate that Victor’s creative actions have severe moral consequences.

Additionally, throughout the novel, Henry Clerval is a kind, helpful, admirable friend to Victor; his tragic death at the hands of the monster therefore serves as a strong indicator that Victor’s creative choices are to blame. Henry’s spirit is “noble” (37); he is of “unexampled worth” (169), and “doing good [is] the end and aim of his soaring ambition” (37). Thus, Clerval’s character contrasts with Frankenstein’s; he lacks dangerous ambitions and simply wishes to do good. Of course, by the end of the novel, the monster brutally slays Henry Clerval. Upon seeing Henry’s body, Victor throws himself on the ground, saying, “Have my murderous machinations deprived you also, my dearest Henry, of life? Two I have already destroyed; other victims await their destiny; but you, Clerval, my friend, my benefactor” (191). Victor’s own words even establish his guilt in the matter of Henry’s death. The well-meaning and upright Henry Clerval dies at the hands of Victor’s monster, and his death is a condemnation of Victor’s creative actions, which clearly have moral consequences.

When *Frankenstein* retells the story of his creation of the monster to Captain Robert Walton, he reveals both his fault in and his regrets for the havoc perpetrated by the creature
while also exposing his excessive ambition and subsequent moral failings. For example, Victor warns the ship’s captain about the dangers of aspiring to knowledge: “Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow” (53). Here, Frankenstein begins to speak of a desirable alternative to the ambition and pride that he has exhibited throughout the story. He argues that men who lead simpler lives—never reaching too far above themselves—are the happiest men alive. Then, near the end of his life, Frankenstein reveals how much he regrets his pride and ambition, recalling that his “sentiment of the worth of [his] nature supported [him] when others would have been oppressed, for [he] deemed it criminal to throw away in useless grief those talents that might be useful to [his] fellow creatures” (229), then stating, “I trod heaven in my thoughts, now exulting in my powers, now burning with the idea of their effects. From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition; but how am I sunk!” (229). Clearly, Frankenstein regrets his undying thirst for knowledge, which only led him to be forever dissatisfied, searching for more and more, rather than allowing him to be content with his family and his hometown. John Dussinger agrees that Shelley’s novel is a critique of such personal ambition, writing that “Mary Shelley's story casts a fatalistic gloom over the whole enterprise of individualistic striving for power and glory, and seems to urge the humbler values of one's moral responsibility to the family” (38). Victor’s lamentations about this trait of excessive ambition indicate that Shelley is coupling creativity and morality together; his ambition to create life has moral consequences because it takes him away from the simpler family and home life that Shelley so clearly supports.
Much like Frankenstein, Robert Walton is ambitious for new knowledge, and Shelley critiques this ambition throughout the book as well. Just as Frankenstein is interested in the “secret” and “hidden laws of nature” (35), Walton wishes to pursue the “dangerous mysteries of the ocean” (17). Walton demonstrates this thirst for new knowledge when he talks about his ambitious expedition into the north: “I feel my heart glow with an enthusiasm which elevates me to heaven, for nothing contributes so much to tranquillize the mind as a steady purpose—a point on which the soul may fix its intellectual eye” (11). Walton then reiterates this desire for new knowledge, which parallels Frankenstein’s own desires, when he says, “One man’s life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought, for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race” (25). Walton seeks “dominion” over the restrictive material conditions of his physical body (25), just as Frankenstein possesses “lofty ambition[s]” (229). Thus, Frankenstein is quite familiar with this unquenchable desire for the “acquirement of knowledge” (25). He immediately rebukes Walton’s dangerous ambitions, recognizing his own combination of Romantic imagination and endless ambition in Walton. After hearing about Walton’s desires, Frankenstein calls him an “unhappy man” and exclaims, “Do you share my madness? Have you drunk also of the intoxicating draught? Hear me; let me reveal my tale, and you will dash the cup from your lips” (25). Evidently, it is Walton’s desire for new knowledge (at whatever cost) that so upsets Frankenstein. Here, at the end of his life, he is aware of the penalty for excessive ambitions, and he does everything he can to prevent Walton from following in his footsteps and playing the role of God.

Ultimately, Victor’s creative choices throughout Frankenstein have clear moral repercussions; his decision to create the monster leads many to misery and death. His words and
Deeds have consequences, and right and wrong are unambiguous. Victor should never have created the monster or attempted to play the role of God. Such actions are foolish and prideful, and the deaths of Victor’s loved ones are evidence of his mistakes and transgressions.
CHAPTER 3
CREATIVITY AND MORALITY IN THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

The form of creativity that Wilde highlights in The Picture of Dorian Gray is quite different from Shelley’s version of creativity in Frankenstein. Though Frankenstein’s fascination with the human frame indicates that he is a kind of artist, his act of creation is still concretely physical and thus rather scientific in nature. On the other hand, Wilde’s form of creativity is a solely artistic one, and he uses more than one creator in his novel—effectively dissevering the binary creator-creation relationship that Shelley promulgates in Frankenstein in a manner that anticipates the other ways in which he complicates and convolutes the nature of a creation story.

Wilde’s preface to his 1890 novel focuses on the Aesthetic Movement’s interpretation of creativity and the nature of art. John Paul Riquelme writes about this preface, saying, “Wilde begins his novel by evoking Pater’s aestheticism through a series of statements about beauty and through allusions to the best-known passages of Pater’s writing” (617). Indeed, the first line of Wilde’s preface to the novel reads, “The artist is the creator of beautiful things” (Wilde vii). Even this very first line creates a contrast with Shelley’s story, one in which the artist, Victor, is the creator of an obviously hideous being who is detested by even the kindest of cottagers (145).

Wilde proceeds, in his preface, to introduce other ideas that contrast with early Romantic perceptions of books like Frankenstein. He writes, “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (vii), and he also asserts that “vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art” (vii). And last, Wilde concludes his
preface with the notable and somewhat confusing statement: “All art is useless” (viii). Wilde’s preface alone reveals both the connections between *Frankenstein* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in that both novels focus on creativity and the disconnections conspicuous in Wilde’s convolution of the theme.

Though the aim of this thesis is to explore Wilde’s choice to detach art from the moral consequences that are so evident in novels like *Frankenstein*, one may note in passing how the Aesthetic Movement surely influenced it. Waldrep explains the aesthete’s view of life, saying, “One’s life—life itself—is what must be rendered beautiful” (2). Patrick Duggan claims that in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “Wilde encapsulates the complete principles of the Aesthetic Movement popular in Victorian England. That is to say, real art takes no part in molding the social or moral identities of society, nor should it” (1). Indeed, Lord Henry advocates for an aesthetic lifestyle, telling Dorian, “We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us . . . Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself” (13). These lines reveal the aesthete’s frustrations with Victorian society’s constraints and barriers. Lord Henry discourages Dorian from believing in the kinds of moral repercussions that Mary Shelley so fervently maintains in *Frankenstein* and thus encourages Dorian to take on the act of creation without fear of the consequences. Throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde demonstrates the tenets of the Aesthetic Movement by associating art and creativity with the beauty of life—even if its beauty is tragic.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor creates a physical being whom he can touch; in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Basil creates a painting—an image. Though Basil’s creation is reflective of himself, just like Frankenstein’s, his creation is a piece of art, an artwork, which contrasts with
Victor’s abhorrently real and physical monster. Thus, one of the most obvious creators in Wilde’s novel is, of course, the painter himself—Basil Hallward. Basil paints his infamous picture of Dorian Gray in an attempt to cement Dorian’s beautiful features forever, protecting Dorian from the evils of the world. Much like Victor Frankenstein, Basil Hallward sees his own reflection in his creation, saying, “I really can’t exhibit it. I have put too much of myself in it” (2), and “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter . . . It is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself” (4). Thus, Basil Hallward’s act of creating Dorian’s portrait is a self-centered and self-expressive act. He sees himself in every stroke of the paintbrush. However, Lord Henry tells Basil not to insert himself into his art, saying, “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” (8). He encourages Basil to make an impersonal form of art or to detach his creative acts from his own life. However, Basil’s act of creating Dorian remains both an artistic one and a self-expressive one. His portrait of Dorian is just as much about himself as it is about Dorian.

Basil and Dorian’s relationship is speckled with homoerotic tensions, and this tension (on Basil’s part) is a factor in what makes the painting self-expressive; thus, the self-expression in this creator-creation relationship is vastly different from the self-expression evident in Victor Frankenstein’s relationship with his monster. Basil is afraid that something in the painting’s aspect will perhaps reveal his attraction to Dorian: “The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul” (4). Basil’s obsession with Dorian outdoes all of his artistic abilities and ambitions. Basil says, “He is all my art to me now” (7). Eventually, Lord Henry encourages Dorian to ask Basil about the secret he hides in the
portrait, and later on, Basil asks Dorian if he has noticed anything curious about the painting—wondering if Dorian is aware of Basil’s adoration for him. Dorian immediately assumes that the curiosity Basil is speaking of is the evil sneer that has slowly developed on his painted face. However, Basil is seeing and speaking only of himself and his interior life once again. To him, the painting reveals his passionate love for Dorian and that alone. Basil states, “I was dominated, soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you. I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself” (83). However, to Dorian, the painting is a revelation of his inner life and very soul. He fears that Basil will see his secret in it. For each person, the painting is a vulnerable self-revelation.

Unlike Victor Frankenstein’s more straightforward creative acts in Frankenstein, Lord Henry’s creativity is playfully malicious and manipulative. While Victor forms a very physical, inhuman creature out of his excessive ambition, Lord Henry’s destructive creativity involves forever altering the life of an already living, breathing human being. Thus, there is more than one creator-creation relationship in Oscar Wilde’s novel; Lord Henry, a witty nobleman, sculpts Dorian’s personality and morals—and therefore, his portrait—throughout the novel as well. In using multiple creators, Wilde spreads out the blame that belongs to Victor alone in Frankenstein, diffusing the moral responsibility and further decoupling creativity and morality. In large part, Lord Henry’s choice to manipulate Dorian’s character and encroach upon his thoughts causes the alterations in Dorian’s portrait; thus, Lord Henry assists in creating Dorian’s new persona. Critic Nils Clausson supports the idea that Wilde’s novel illustrates an act of creation when he writes about Lord Henry as a gothic scientist of sorts, who is conducting an experiment on Dorian’s mind (352). Thus, while Frankenstein is a scientist who bears a
resemblance to an artist, Lord Henry is a man who is interested in artwork but who performs experiments like a scientist. They are both creator figures. However, unlike Victor Frankenstein, who employs scientific innovations and material means to create a physical monster, Lord Henry uses mental manipulation to create his monster—a psychological monster. His monster is a very real human being who appears beautiful but who creeps throughout London’s underworld, corrupts other people, and commits unimaginable crimes (93). Lord Henry speaks without a care in the world about his influence on Dorian; he almost playfully corrupts him. In fact, he ruminates on the idea of playing with Dorian’s mind, saying that his devious words have “merely shot an arrow into the air. Had it hit the mark? How fascinating the lad was!” (14). Later, he takes pride in playing with Dorian’s very soul and manipulating him like he would an inanimate object. He muses that “talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow . . . there was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence” (26). Lord Henry also tells Dorian, “You are a wonderful creation,” and he teaches him to be vain (15). His kind of artwork is made of ideas. Lord Henry “played with [an] idea, and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox” (30). His creativity involves the creation and arrangement of ideas, not material objects or scientific experiments. And Lord Henry even admits the strong impact of such an influence, saying, “To influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of some one else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him” (13). Though Lord Henry’s form of creation may at first seem harmless, his psychological experiments do indeed create a monster, just like Victor’s material means do.
Dorian Gray, the creation, is *himself* one of the creators in the novel, a fact that further twists and complicates the book’s relation to traditional morality stories. Dorian is both creator and creation, and this dynamic convolutes the moral trajectory of the novel. By participating in the actions that effectively change or “paint” the painting, Dorian Gray adds to the artwork.

Early in the novel, Dorian eagerly states that he would give up his own soul for the ability to stay forever young: “If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!” (19). In this moment, Dorian really does give up his soul, and the painting really does magically become the bearer of all of Dorian’s future blemishes, failures, and transgressions. Of course, Lord Henry responds to Dorian’s horrifying (and horrifyingly vain) statement with a playful, careless joke, saying, “You could hardly care for such an arrangement, Basil . . . It would be rather hard lines on your work” (19). In this critical moment, Dorian becomes one of his own creators. He takes part in the artistic work of adding to, editing, and aligning Basil’s portrait with his true self over time. His own actions will literally paint a picture of his soul. Riquelme notes that when Dorian says, “‘It was his own picture’ . . . it suggests both that the painting is one he has produced and that it portrays him” (613). The painting portrays Basil’s version of Dorian, but it is simultaneously being created, in a way, by Dorian himself.

From the second that Victor Frankenstein’s creation comes to life, he abhors it; Dorian, on the other hand, *adores* his self-portrait from the start. He states, “I am in love with it, Basil. It is part of myself” (20). In other words, he openly admits that he is infatuated with himself. Riquelme calls Dorian “an avatar of Narcissus” (610). His self-obsession becomes more and more evident throughout the novel: “The sense of [Dorian’s] own beauty came on him like a
revelation” (18). And Dorian later goes so far as to pity his own painting (67). Indeed, Dorian is similar to Narcissus: “In boyish mockery of Narcissus, [Dorian] had kissed, or feigned to kiss, those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him” (77). In “creating” Dorian, Basil includes in his painting his homosexual desire for, as well as his obsession with, Dorian. Lord Henry influences him in such a way that he gives Dorian his own soul (13). And Dorian, in his own self-obsessed way, adores his painting as well.

All three creators in this novel are at fault for Dorian’s evil actions. Near the end of the story, Basil attempts to blame Dorian’s immorality on Lord Henry, saying, “It is all Harry’s influence. I see that” (79). Dorian rushes to Lord Henry’s defense, saying that Basil was the one who truly taught him how “to be vain” (79). In reality, all three creators—Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian himself—take part in Dorian’s downfall, even if Dorian is unwilling to admit his own part in the destruction that has taken place at the end.

At the end of the novel, by stabbing the infamous painting, Dorian further contributes to the artwork, cementing himself as a creator figure by using a common painter’s tool to alter the painting. Palette knives are tools that painters use to swipe layers of color onto their paintings, and such knives are mentioned a few times throughout the novel. In Chapter 2, Basil Hallward grows to hate the painting enough to pick up “the long palette-knife, with its thin blade of lithe steel” (20) and try to “rip up the canvas” (20). Dorian admonishes him, saying, “Don’t, Basil, don’t . . . It would be murder!” (20). Dorian’s own existence, and the true state of his soul, is wrapped up in the existence of the painting. Basil does not rip up the canvas in this scene, but he does choose a palette knife as his weapon of choice. In tearing up the canvas with such a knife, Basil would merely contribute to the artwork he had created, smearing the lines of color as any artist might do. Later, Wilde mentions that Lady Henry is touching a paper knife when she is
speaking with Dorian. He writes that “her fingers began to play with a long tortoise-shell paper-knife” after she laughed nervously (33). This inclusion of another and similar knife can hardly be a coincidence. Thus, Dorian’s weapon, which he uses to slaughter Basil Hallward toward the end of the novel, is unsurprisingly also a knife. Seeing it glimmering “on the top of the painted chest that faced him,” he seizes it, and he proceeds to stab Basil in the neck with it (115).

After committing the brutal murder, Dorian continues to blame Basil for all of his own misdeeds: “The friend who had painted the fatal portrait to which all his misery had been due, had gone out of his life. That was enough” (116). Here Dorian fails to recognize that not just Basil but Lord Henry and even he himself are the creators and molders of the portrait and of Dorian’s own soul. If Basil is truly the only person at fault for Dorian’s misery, Dorian’s situation would certainly improve after Basil’s life ends. However, Dorian’s problems only continue. The only change is that after he murders Basil, Dorian’s hand, in the dreadful portrait, is stained with blood (163). As he nears death, Dorian shifts his blame onto the portrait. He still refuses to blame himself for his actions and states that although “Basil had said things to him that were unbearable,” “it was the portrait that had done everything” (162). In a moment of desperation, Dorian picks up the same knife that he had used to murder Basil, and he attempts to destroy the portrait forever. However, his actions only add to the artwork, just as Basil’s use of a palette-knife would have done. The portrait changes once again into “a splendid portrait of [Dorian]”, and Dorian’s physical body finally transitions into its rightful state—“withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage” (165). Wilde’s monster truly inherits his rightful physical state only upon death, unlike Shelley’s monster, whose appearance is odious and visible for all to see from the beginning. Artistic creations like Dorian’s portrait and Victor’s monster take on a
life of their own, and attempts to destroy them may alter their nature but cannot completely
eliminate it; once a work of art exists, the consequences of its existence are difficult to suppress.

Like Shelley’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* focuses on themes of both creativity
and morality. Wilde’s novel is concerned with questions of right and wrong, good and evil.
However, there is a stark contrast between Shelley’s morally urgent book and Wilde’s absolute
unwillingness to moralize. In every twist and turn of the story, Wilde avoids sententious
preaching of any moral other than the one that Lord Henry preaches—the aesthetic idea that one
should free oneself from the categorical bounds of morality. Instead of moralizing like many
authors of his time, Wilde explores the idea of a world in which creative acts can be separated
from their corresponding moral consequences.

Unlike Lord Henry, Basil Hallward expects moral consequences for all of his actions;
thus, he represents more traditional Victorian anxieties about the repercussions of one’s actions,
including one’s creative acts. For instance, early in the novel, Basil says, “My art, whatever it
may be worth . . . we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly” (3). Basil
later urges Dorian not to become depraved, exclaiming, “Don’t tell me that you are bad, and
corrupt, and shameful” (112), and indicating that Dorian’s words are corrupt, saying, “This is
blasphemy, Dorian . . . you must not say things like that. They are horrible, and they don’t mean
anything” (112). Basil is one of the few characters who shows remorse or appears to worry about
the immorality of his own actions, and he does indeed suffer because of his artwork. Dorian Gray
murders the poor artist because he can do so without marring himself or experiencing any
immediate consequences. If Basil had not created the dreadful portrait, his death would likely
have never happened.
Lord Henry, on the other hand, habitually dismisses people’s fears of moral repercussions and encourages others to accept, not suppress, temptations. He contributes to Dorian’s violent actions with his own philosophies about morality, which pervade the novel. For instance, early on in the novel, he tells Basil that “conscience and cowardice are really the same things, Basil. Conscience is the trade-name of the firm. That is all” (5). Such statements encourage malleable characters like Dorian to avoid all demands of conscience. In the same scene, Dorian’s facial expression changes (as if he is becoming aware of both good and evil, as in the Garden of Eden) when Lord Henry says, “The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion—these are the two things that govern us” (13). Rather than basing morals on biblical principles, Lord Henry blames the existence of morals on humanity’s fear of consequences. Similarly, Lord Henry says, “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful” (14). His words encourage Dorian to conduct himself in a way that would traditionally be seen as immoral. In fact, Lord Henry seems to believe that sin adds color and beauty to life. He says that “sin is the only real colour-element left in modern life” (21) and “beautiful sins, like beautiful things, are the privilege of the rich” (57). Such statements, which Lord Henry utters again and again through The Picture of Dorian Gray, have a massive influence on Dorian’s lifestyle. Victorian England’s culture was marked by its moralistic disapproval of many actions that were considered sinful and shameful; however, Lord Henry shockingly opposes its moral code again and again. He states matter-of-factly, “I never approve, or disapprove, of anything now” (54). Clearly, then, Lord Henry’s immoral (or amoral) character reveals a stark contrast between Shelley’s 1818 novel and Wilde’s 1890 one.
Lord Henry uses his philosophies and his words to mold Dorian into his own creation, and his influence on Dorian becomes even more pervasive when he gives Dorian a riveting book. To Dorian, the book is strange, exotic, and intoxicating. While reading it, Dorian feels as if “the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed” (91). This mysterious “novel without a plot, and . . . psychological study of a certain young Parisian” sounds very much like a twentieth-century modernist novel (91). Just like Lord Henry himself, the novel condemns virtue as “mere artificiality” and calls sins “natural rebellions” (91). In the very next chapter, after Dorian has feverishly read Lord Henry’s book, Wilde begins to describe Dorian’s secret liaisons in London. He writes, “For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book” (92). Dorian becomes notorious for his subsequent evil actions. Wilde adds, “Strange rumours about his mode of life crept through London and became the chatter of the clubs” (93). Clearly, the book that Lord Henry gave Dorian led directly to these surreptitious behaviors. This indicates that Lord Henry’s philosophies play a large part in leading to Dorian’s immoral behaviors.

Ultimately, Wilde’s foundational philosophy was aestheticism, and aesthetic ideals have a massive impact on one’s perception of morality. Patrick Duggan writes about the tenets of aestheticism, saying, “To the aesthete, there is no distinction between moral and immoral acts, only between those that increase or decrease one’s happiness” (61-62). The Picture of Dorian Gray presents a picture of morality that is strikingly lacking in admonition or reproach, especially in comparison with other nineteenth-century novels, which display an overwhelming preoccupation with the consequences of immoral actions.
Scholars disagree in their theories about the conclusion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and their theories help situate this thesis in the midst of previous scholarship. Nils Clausson argues that Wilde’s story attempts to bridge the gap between two genres—that of Gothic degeneration and that of individual liberation. Clausson argues that by the end of the novel the popular theme of Gothic degeneration supersedes and undercuts the idea of individual liberation or self-development, which Lord Henry’s dialogue has been supporting throughout the novel (342). The meaningful conclusion turns the novel into a kind of parable or moral tale, which shows how vanity leads to a tragic end. Additionally, Joyce Carol Oates’s article about Wilde’s novel implies that it contains a moral lesson as well. This perspective on the conclusion does not mesh with Wilde’s original scheme, as explicated in his preface, of writing a work that is, in the end, a useless one. In my thesis, I diverge from some of Clausson’s and Oates’s points, given my idea that Wilde does indeed successfully decouple creativity and morality. The conclusion is one final artistic and creative act. According to Wilde, nothing truly matters, and nothing is moral or immoral. By allowing Dorian to die, Wilde simply continues to play with his creation in the same way that Lord Henry has carelessly manipulated Dorian’s mind throughout the story. The painting of Dorian remains “splendid” in its “exquisite youth and beauty” (165). The artwork is removed from the moral consequences of Dorian’s actions, indicating that Wilde has dissociated creativity and morality. While Clausson and Oates promote the idea that Wilde’s conclusion is a moral one, this thesis indicates that Wilde at least somewhat deviates from the moral lessons that Shelley promulgates in *Frankenstein*. Clausson suggests that Wilde wrote a moral fable because he had been influenced by his society and the popular whims of his time and had lost hold of his original desire to focus on a plot of self-liberation; however, I argue that Wilde chose to write the novel in the form that he desired and that the conclusion does not have to be read as a moral
lesson. Wilde likely had to walk the line between writing a provocative story and appeasing his Victorian readership. However, as the creator of the story, Wilde exercised full control over his creation and was perfectly capable of avoiding moralism; this contrasts with Victor Frankenstein, Basil Hallward, and Lord Henry, who all try but fail to control their creations. Wilde’s preface, in particular, reveals that he aimed to reject the moral fables of his time, so his novel should not be counted among them. Additionally, Sibyl Vane’s death shows that the conclusion may not actually constitute a moral lesson, as some tend to think.

The death of Sibyl Vane is one episode in the novel that further reveals how Wilde decouples creativity and morality in a way that forms a stark contrast with *Frankenstein*. Sibyl is the woman Dorian loves, and she is an astonishing actress who impresses the smitten Dorian with her artistic ability on the stage. However, after he has confessed his love for her, her acting ability loses its spark, and she “plays Juliet like a wooden doll” (62). She believes that Dorian’s love is all that she needs; no tragic fictional romances are necessary for her anymore. However, when Sibyl’s acting ability wanes, Dorian falls promptly out of love with her. Commenting on her performance, he crushes her heart, saying, “It was dreadful,” and “You make yourself ridiculous” (62). Shortly after, Sibyl kills herself, and Dorian actually admits his fault in the matter, saying that he murdered her (72). However, soon enough he comes to feel no remorse about her death, instead choosing to see it as a great tragedy—a work of art. As he tells the story, “It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a part, but by which I have not been wounded” (73). Unlike Victor Frankenstein, Dorian rejects his guilty conscience entirely and resolves to view Sibyl’s life as an artistic tragedy, nothing less and nothing more. Rather than valuing her enough to grieve her death, Dorian dehumanizes Sibyl by seeing her as merely a
work of art. By viewing Sibyl’s death as a beautifully tragic conclusion to her life, Dorian dissevers the connections between morality and art. To him, all of life, even the most intimate of experiences or brutal of deaths, is merely a piece of artwork—lacking all the emotions, guilt, or blame so common in Victorian society. Thus, Dorian’s death, also, is comparably tragic, beautiful, and artistic. The tragedy of his death at the novel’s close serves as a dramatic crescendo—a final work of creativity and artistic beauty. In this way, Wilde continues to propagate Lord Henry’s aesthetic principles; he depicts nothing as either moral or immoral, even life and death. Just seventy years prior, a similarly self-centered character—Victor Frankenstein—grieved his wife Elizabeth’s death and laid the blame on himself because of his choice to create a monster. However, Dorian’s tragic death, after becoming a monster himself, is a work of art. Thus, monster stories like Frankenstein and The Picture of Dorian Gray embody and reflect the radical changes in people’s values across the span of the nineteenth century.
Critics’ opinions about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and its moral lesson, or lack thereof, have been various and sundry. Many have argued that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is indeed a moral fable since Dorian’s brutal death, at the novel’s conclusion, seems to be a punishment for his many transgressions. For instance, Patrick Duggan claims that “many have read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a novelized sponsor for just this sort of aesthetic lifestyle. However, this story of the rise and fall of Dorian Gray might instead represent an allegory about morality meant to critique, rather than endorse, the obeying of one’s impulses as thoughtlessly and dutifully as aestheticism dictates” (61). He argues that Wilde’s novel “is a cautionary tale in which Wilde illustrates the dangers of the aesthetic philosophy when not practiced with prudence” (62), and he says, “The ruination of Dorian Gray, the embodiment of unbridled aestheticism, illustrates the immorality of such a lifestyle and gravely demonstrates its consequences. Wilde uses Dorian Gray not as an advertisement for aestheticism, but rather, he uses Dorian’s life to warn against aestheticism’s hostility toward morality when uncontrolled” (67). Similarly, Waldrep writes that there is “a contradiction between [Wilde’s] desire . . . to absolve artists of the responsibility to moralize and his own tendency to construct much of his prose fiction and poetry as moralizing fables” (3). Of course, the ruination of Dorian Gray might at first appear to be “a moralizing fable” or a condemnation of aestheticism. Such an argument might lead readers to think that books like *Frankenstein* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are not so dissimilar after all. However,
Wilde was quite clearly an aesthete. Carolyn Burdett writes about Wilde’s position in the movement:

Aesthetes played with traditional oppositions or even hierarchies between art and life. Wilde teased his readers with the claim that life imitates art rather than the other way round. His point was a serious one: we notice London fogs, he argued, because art and literature has taught us to do so. Wilde, among others, ‘performed’ these maxims. He presented himself as the impeccably dressed and mannered dandy figure whose life was a work of art.

Wilde’s very lifestyle demonstrated the Aesthetic Movement’s principles, and this complicates and contradicts Duggan’s argument. It is possible that Wilde was some kind of combination of a moralist and an aesthete. Perhaps he subscribed to the tenets of aestheticism while simultaneously being willing to interrogate them in his writings. However, critics like Duggan neglect to examine the idea that if Sibyl Vane’s death could be a work art, Dorian’s death could certainly function in the same way. Additionally, Wilde’s preface to his novel reveals his undeniable ascription to aesthetic philosophies at the time he wrote his novel. In it, Wilde says that “vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art” (vii). Both Wilde himself and the creators in The Picture of Dorian Gray—Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian—use vice and virtue as tools for their art. The contents of Wilde’s preface indicate that he did not aim to write a moral fable, as critics suggest; therefore, his work should be examined in this light. Just as Sibyl Vane and her death are works of art in Dorian’s mind, Dorian’s death is a work of art—something admirable and beautiful but lacking in emotional or moral meaning. Wilde’s novel reveals the possibility of seeing life and death in that manner—in the way that an aesthete would. Thus, The Picture of Dorian Gray may not be the moral fable that Patrick Duggan wants us to read. It is utterly different from other nineteenth-century novels like Frankenstein, which include similar themes of creativity and morality but which present entirely different connections between those two key themes. Wilde decouples creativity and morality, revealing his proto-modernist
tendencies. Even the mere possibility that an 1890 novel *could* be interpreted in this way indicates an enormous shift in attitudes across the nineteenth century.

A shift in people’s perceptions of physical characteristics is evident in a comparison of *Frankenstein* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and this shift creates more contrast between the two novels. Physiognomy, the study of the relation between facial features and personality, and phrenology, the study of the shape of the skull and its relation to character, were two popular fields of study in the early 1800s. T. M. Parssinen states that in the 1820s and 1830s, phrenological societies, books, and pamphlets were growing immensely popular (1). Phrenologists believed that “an individual’s character can be discovered from a careful examination of the head” (2). However, Parssinen states that “by 1866, it was phrenology which had become ‘a subject for the historians of things that have ceased to be’” (1). In a relatively short period of time, the incredibly popular field of phrenology came to be known as an unreliable pseudoscience. Shelley’s and Wilde’s novels reveal this cultural shift in understanding about phrenology. Victor Frankenstein’s monster is marked from the beginning by his “shrivelled complexion and straight black lips” (58). His horrific features send Victor running out into the street, seeing feverish visions of his dead mother (59). Whenever people look at Victor’s monster, they notice that something is dreadfully wrong with his appearance. Victor states that “no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch” (59). Indeed, the seemingly kind and politically progressive young cottager named Felix is so horrified by the monster’s appearance that “in a transport of fury, he dashed [the monster] to the ground and struck [him] violently with a stick” (145). Thus, as mentioned before, the monster’s outer physical features match the inner
state of his soul. Anyone monstrous enough to murder kind-hearted people like Henry and Elizabeth must present a horrifying physical appearance to the world.

However, the monster of Wilde’s novel does not present the world with an ugly face. Rather, his physical features defy all of the conclusions of the phrenologists of Shelley’s day. Much like Victor Frankenstein, Dorian wears the veil of beautiful features, which make his true nature abstruse. He combines the creator figure of Victor, whose countenance is “lighted up” (22), with the creation figure of the monster. He wears an opaque veil of beauty, concealing his true nature, until the very end of the novel. From the beginning of the novel until its conclusion, Dorian is fabulously attractive. Lord Henry ponders Dorian’s good looks, thinking, “Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair . . . all the candor of youth was there” (11). Like the monster in Shelley’s novel, Dorian commits murder as well. He debauches the morals of others, he murders Basil, and he causes the suicides of both Sibyl Vane and Alan Campbell (163). However, his monstrous physical features are only ever displayed on the face in the painting—up until the last few sentences of the novel. Thus, the physical features of the monsters in Frankenstein and The Picture of Dorian Gray are vastly different, and these differences are revelatory of society’s shifting perceptions of phrenology and physiognomy at the time. By 1890, most scientists denied that physical features were indicative of character flaws.

This changing perception of physical features aligns well with a shift in literary themes that occurred across the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. Many modernist novels, published between 1900 and 1940, deal extensively with the concept of the self and the interior world of the individual. The idea of a hidden life—an inner world that only the individual could experience—became prevalent because of novels by authors like Virginia
Woolf, James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, and William Faulkner. Woolf’s novels focus on the inner worlds of her characters—which are sometimes vastly different from her characters’ outer appearances. Characters like Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* are never fully understood by those around them—even those in their families. Married people never learn to know the depths of their spouses. Similarly, Faulkner’s novels, like *As I Lay Dying*, present the vastly different experiences and perceptions of various characters—all of whom have inner worlds that are misunderstood or unseen by others. This focus on characters’ interior lives is evident in many twentieth-century stories, and it reveals a general sense of alienation from others, a sense that one can never really know another person. Whereas the monstrosity of Victor’s creation is palpable and clear for all to see, Dorian Gray’s version of monstrosity is hidden away. His inner world is unseen, and even readers never fully understand the depths of his perversity. There are only hints of his moral failings: mentions of his secret life and vague allusions to his visits to opium dens. Thus, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* differs from Romantic novels in ways that indicate that it is a precursor to modernist novels of the twentieth century. Wilde’s focus on the hidden inner worlds of his characters leads him to change the nature of traditional connections between creativity and morality; his proto-modernist story decouples the two themes.

Both Frankenstein’s monster and Dorian Gray reveal their own self-perceptions in their respective novels. Frankenstein’s monster despises his physical form. In Chapter 12, he gazes into a pool and is shocked and horrified by his own appearance. He states, “At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification” (121). Dorian, on the other hand, is in love with his own physical appearance, despite his soul’s wicked state. Dorian admires both his outer
appearance and his inner state of being, acting as if these parts of him are works of art. Dorian “grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth” (93). While Frankenstein’s monster is disgusted by his ugliness, Dorian is both in love with his beauty and fascinated by his portrait’s ugliness—the manifestation of his soul’s malevolence.

Themes of creativity and morality were long seen in black-and-white, but by 1890, people’s perspectives were indeed gray, as Dorian’s surname suggests. Wilde’s novel is one of the early stories that reveals cultural changes in people’s perceptions of morality. While early nineteenth-century novels like Frankenstein focused on many similar themes, by 1890, at least one author, Oscar Wilde, was realizing those themes in new and drastically different ways. Wilde’s use of the Aesthetic Movement’s principles, his introduction of ideas about tragedy as art, and his use of a new kind of creation—a creation of the mind and morals by three distinct creators—all serve to reveal a shift towards modernist thought, which breaks with old forms and traditions and experiments with ideas that reject traditional conceptions of morality. Frankenstein’s creative act is condemnable because art and morality were tied together in Shelley’s time. By the time Wilde wrote his novel, even one’s death—caused by one’s own moral decay—could be regarded as an art form. Ultimately, the two novels are both about the making of a monster; however, Wilde’s 1890 monster is not just an immoral being. He is a work of art. This astonishing change in the gothic genre across the course of a century reveals the underlying cultural and societal forces that would someday coax the world into modern and then postmodern ideologies.
WORKS CITED


