Critical Perspective of Humanity in The Picture of Dorian Gray

The Victorian Era was a period of dramatic change that led to the height of English society. Oscar Wilde's romantic gothic novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), presents a critical perspective of humanity by revealing the best and worst aspects of humanity. The story follows the protagonist Dorian Gray as he falls into a hedonistic lifestyle through the influence of those around him. As he falls into a spiral of corruption readers gain a glimpse into the darkest secrets of Victorian society and question content of one's true character. Readers come to see the obsessive views of aesthetics, questions the way men treat women and ultimately exploring the depravity of obsession. It is through the gothic and romantic setting that readers explore the highest and lowest points of humanity.

The novel is focused around three characters Basil Hallward, Lord Henry Wotton, and Dorian Gray. We see how the different characters show their love of beauty and pleasure and how they influence the main character. Basil is obsessed with Dorian Gray's physical beauty and aims to protect his purity. "…from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me… you are made to be worshipped." (page 137), this piece of dialogue said by Basil to Dorian presents the painter's obsession with the beauty of his subject. Although Basil is promoting love and kindness, it acts as a negative effect on Dorian. It amplifies Dorian's narcissistic views by hearing constant flattery and reinforces the belief of vanity. Another character of influence is Lord Henry. Obsessed with Dorian's youth, he aims to mirror his selfish views of the world onto Dorian. "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…You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid." (page 30) This extract from Lord Henry's dialogue presents to the reader of both his hedonistic views on humanity, and the beginning of his influence on Dorian Gray. Lord Henry sees Dorian Gray's initial innocence, but he also sees the concealed inner evil within him. The juxtaposition of two clashing ideologies allows readers to discover that every character, hides an ultimate vice. Oscar Wilde explores a fatalistic perspective of humanity, even those with the purest souls can be tainted by their surroundings.

During the Victorian era, society's values were that of being well dressed, well-mannered and being well perceived by others. Everything revolved around the appearance you presented. The upper class flaunted their luxurious lifestyles to such a degree that it pressured those around them to conform at any cost. The protagonist Dorian Gray was subject to this immense pressure as he was manipulated by Lord Henry to believe that youth and beauty is all that matters. 'And, yet, who knew anything about Life, would surrender the chance of remaining always young, however fantastic that chance might be, or with what fateful consequences it might be fraught?' (page 123). This statement from Dorian presents his transformation as he reflects the true colors of the aristocracy. He does not stop his actions despite being aware of its effects on his internal soul. Dorian has changed and does not repent his immoral actions as his reputation is sheltered by his unchanging purity. Through this, the audience comes to understand the true hedonistic views that society, at the time, valued over moral conduct.

The Picture of Dorian Gray performs and moralistic critique of humanity as it presents the idea that one's fate is a result of one's actions. One way this is done is through the characterization pf the protagonist Dorian as he performs numerous corrupt actions—murder, vanity, sexual promiscuity and drug abuse—leading to his fate at the end of the novel, death. After causing Sybil's death, Dorian progressively mingles with immorality. He frequently visits prostitutes and opium dens, thus creating scandals. However, he does not experience any repercussions as they are all reflected on to the painting that mirrors his withering soul, and in turn, provides him with immortality. "…hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty… Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage." (page 249), this extract from the novel describes the death of Dorian Gray following the destruction of his painting. The years of sins that is depicted in the painting is then transferred to Dorian's body, as they swap souls. Oscar Wilde uses this event to warn against vanity, sexism and selfishness, using his protagonist's downfall to show the dangers of overindulgence and depravity.

Oscar Wilde reinforces society's highest points, while also criticizing its lowest points. Readers explore the archaic views of society at the time and how this prominent belief system is reflected in the characters. The Picture of Dorian Gray represents the author's critical perspective of humanity and how one's depravity of morals will ultimately lead to their downfall. Through the story, readers contemplate topics surrounding an individual's as well as society's moral compass and come to realize their own personal shortcomings, allowing a more engaging and critical novel.