Presentation Of Characters In The Picture Of Dorian Gray And Doctor Faustus: Comparative Essay

“In English literature, protagonists tend to have a tragic flaw which leads to their own downfall”

Compare and contrast the ways in which Oscar Wilde and Christopher Marlowe present characters in The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) and Doctor Faustus (1592) as being the cause of their own destructions.

In Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) and Doctor Faustus (1592), the protagonists are presented from hedonistic and aesthetes points of views, they both ignore the notion of morality and end up violating the laws of human nature through their individual pacts with the devil. I will explore the impact of their ambition and thirst for knowledge through Bentham’s theory of pleasure and the desire which leads to their demise and ultimate downfall.

Both Faustus and Gray want to break free from earthly limitations and are consequently punished for overreaching and exploiting the newly-gained powers. They both experience constant battle between good and evil within their souls but commit to sin in the end. Also, they are pure hedonists and aesthetes, devoted to always experiencing new sensations, but the pleasure is broken up by their fatal endings as they didn’t enjoy the pleasures as long as they wanted.

They both get what they hope for, but the inner fight inside of them occurs. Neither of them expected the sweet pleasures to come at such bitter cost. Unable to see things clearly and deal with conscience, Man’s overlord, they end up tragically. The protagonists indulge themselves without restraint, and consequently experience both joy and pain.

The destruction of Dorian Gray, the embodiment of unrestrained aestheticism, exemplifies 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 advice against aestheticism’s hostility toward morality when uncontrolled. Wilde himself confesses, in a letter to the St. James’s Gazette, that Dorian Gray is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment”. Aestheticism thrives to convict the denial of desires, but it is an unwarranted compliance to these desires that is hazardous. Therefore, in the practice of Wilde’s aestheticism, necessities, yet too often lacking, and without them, one is doomed to suffer the same fate as Dorian Gray. The aim of the morality play was primarily didactic; that is, it sought to teach its audience, and to offer moral and spiritual lessons about how to live a good Christian life. In Doctor Faustus, this didactic element can be seen most clearly in Marlowe's use of a Chorus to present a Prologue and Epilogue that, rather like the Choruses of ancient Greek tragedies, express traditional attitudes and guide the audience's response to the play. (In Greek tragedy the Chorus was a group of people, whereas in Doctor Faustus and Elizabethan drama generally, it is yet morality plays also sought to entertain their audiences; they are full of clowning and knockabout comedy, just as in Doctor Faustus.

Aestheticism can be connected with l’art pour l’art phrase, which was introduced by Victor

Cousin, expressing the view of many artists from 19th century that art's value is in art itself and that it doesn't serve any other end. Oscar Wilde certainly shares the standpoint with this group of authors, even though he lived a century later. In his introduction to The Picture of Dorian Gray he expresses his attitude towards art: "All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (Wilde 2001: 3). This movement emphasizes the significance of art and its value, propagandizing distinct dedication to art. Aestheticism, and Wilde with it, sought to divide art from life "in order to reduce moral implications" (Gustafsson 2011: 2).

Doctor Faustus and The Picture of Dorian Gray teach us another moral lesson, and that is that things are not always what they seem. The theme of appearance versus reality is common in literature and characters who represent real-life people ceaselessly choose what seems right. Faustus thinks that twenty-four years of unrestricted power and knowledge are worth selling his soul for. However, the main separation between what is real and what is unreal is presented in the painting itself. Dorian believes that preserving youth while the picture grows old would bring peace and happiness, but there is an unimaginable reality behind the notion which he doesn't take into the account. The portrait shows what his "eternal youth" tries to conceive: his moral decadence, his sins, conscience, aging, corruption, while his physical part remains young and chaste, or it appears so. While his beauty seems ideal, it shows the truth of being an empty persona.

The protagonist indulges himself in earthly delights and paves his way to damnation. Not only are there opportunities for Faustus to repent, but there is an allegorical figure of an Old Man who advises Faustus to turn to God, but Faustus disregards the chance to save his soul, and arranges Mephistopheles to torture the Old Man. After meticulously describing how Faustus squanders his newly-acquired powers, Marlowe let us watch Faustus' last day of life. In the final scene we see that he is unrepentant until the very end, when the clock strikes twelve, but his soul is quivering. Finally, his destiny is sealed and the devils come to acquire his soul and only then does Faustus repent and reject his knowledge by uttering "I'll burn my books!" (xix, 190). But it is too late for he is forever damned to hell.

One of the most striking aspects of the speech is the way it reverses the dreams of power and glory that Faustus expressed in his first soliloquy. In that speech he declared his desire to be more than human, to be a 'mighty god', but now, as he faces an eternity in hell, he wishes that he were less than human: he longs to be transformed into 'some brutish beast' whose soul would simply dissolve into the elements when it dies (ll. 109– 12), or that his soul might 'be changed into little waterdrops,/ And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found' (ll. 119–20). In his final soliloquy, Faustus's self-assertive spirit collapses into a desire for extinction; his aspiration to divinity into a longing for annihilation as he seeks desperately to escape from 'the heavy wrath of God' (l. 86).

The puritan Thomas Beard charged Marlowe with 'atheism and impiety', with denying 'God and his son Christ' (ibid., p. 41). He also interpreted Marlowe's violent death as God's judgement upon his sins, or as Beard put it rather more colourfully, as the 'hook the Lord put in the nostrils of this barking dog' (ibid., p. 42)

Why should Faustus feel so strongly that he is damned, when at this point in the play there seems to be every reason to believe that repentance will secure God's forgiveness? Some

critics, most notably Alan Sinfield (1983) and John Stachniewski (1991), have argued that Marlowe is exploring the mental and emotional impact of the form of Protestantism that prevailed in England during the late sixteenth century, based on the doctrines of the French-born Protestant reformer Jean Calvin. Calvinist theology developed and changed over time, but at this historical juncture it stressed the sinfulness and depravity of human nature. In contrast to the traditional view of salvation as something that an individual could earn by living a virtuous Christian life, Calvinism argued that salvation is entirely God's gift rather than the result of any human effort. Moreover, according to the doctrine of predestination, God gives that gift only to a fortunate few whom he has chosen; everyone else faces an eternity of hellfire. It is possible to argue that Marlowe's Faustus is a depiction of one of these casualties of Calvinist doctrine, and that this helps to explain not only his opening dismissal of Christianity as obsessed with sin and damnation, but his repeated inability to repent.

Faustus' Icarian pride results in his ruination, the prologue in Act 1 alludes to Icarus when it says "Till swoln with cunning, of a self-conceit, /His waxen wings did mount above his reach". Even with intellect, Faustus is blinded by his hubris, excessive pride, and he is unable to predict the foreseeable future. Icarus did not listen his father's warning and flew too close the sun, this made his wings melt and caused his demise. Similarly, the Chorus informs us that Faustus will "mount above his reach" and endures the same fortune. The power of his id draws him to necromancy and he is unable to control his urge. The good angel and the old man begin to act as his superego and attempt to dissuade him however he doesn't listen to their advice and dismisses them, choosing immorality and becomes entrapped in his pact with the devil.

This metaphor is followed by the lines: 'His waxen wings did mount above his reach,/And melting heavens conspired his overthrow' (ll. 21–2). This is an allusion to the ancient Greek myth of Icarus, who attempted to escape from Crete with a pair of waxen wings, but flew too near the sun and plunged to his death when the sun melted the wax(see figures 2 and 3). He became the symbol of the 'overreacher', of the man who tries to exceed his own limitations and comes to grief as a result. Like Icarus, in the Chorus's view, Faustus tried to 'mount above his reach' and was punished for his presumption: 'heavens conspired his overthrow' (l. 22). This is an intriguing twist on the Icarus myth; for whereas Icarus's pride seems to be self-destructive, Faustus's sparks the intervention of a deity who 'conspires' to destroy him.

These allegorical figures objectify the inner conflict in Faustus and reflect the state of mind of him. Perhaps the good or bad judgment in Faustus' mind symbolises his divided will, part of which wants to do good and part of which is fallen in sin. From this view, Faustus' character and mental state determines his destiny and like Icarus, he falls down from the heavens and is doomed to death.

His words "touched some secret chord that never been touched before" (Wilde 12-13). From their first meeting, Lord Henry starts influencing Dorian with ideas of new hedonism, which is the philosophy that Lord Henry lives by. He says to Dorian " live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing" (Wilde 15-16). New hedonism is a philosophy

that believes pleasure to be the highest value in life. Lord Henry believes in selffulfilment and that a person should never have to deny himself or herself anything, as "self-denial makes the soul sick" (Kohl 157). Dorian is extremely fascinated by these ideas and the character of Lord Henry. He is very tempted by Lord Henry's influence and he cannot resist it. At the same time

Dorian’s friendship with Basil is weakening (Kohl 143).

Lord Henry is metaphorical Devil; his evil ways are made clear from the beginning of the novel. He intentionally influences Dorian and manages to persuade him to live a guilt free hedonistic life. Henry enjoys watching Dorian’s decline without suffering any consequences.

In order to approach and support Bentham’s theory of pleasure and pain in the two stories, we will also have to look things from hedonistic point of view. For hedonists, the starting point and the ultimate goal is pleasure. To begin with Faustus, it is best to quote his own words – he admits that “sweet pleasure conquer’d deep despair” (vi, 25) and in that way he deprived himself of pain. But his agony is to rise when his total domination of the world ends and when he realizes that “[f]or / the vain pleasure of four-and-twenty years hath Faustus / lost eternal joy and felicity” (iii, 64-6). Dorian, on the other hand, lets life choose for him and “life, and his own infinite curiosity about life” choose – “[e]ternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins – he was to have all these things” (Wilde 2001: 85

his view, we need pleasure, with the absence of pain, to achieve happiness. We can associate the word pleasure with Wilde’s aestheticism and “art for art’s sake” principle – enjoy a sensation for the sake of sensation for it provides pleasure. What is more, Marlowe’s Faustus was guided by this principle when he decided to sell his soul to the Devil.

His curiosity to learn and more may be thought of as part of the human behaviour and human nature and isn’t something seen as this isn’t immoral in society as we all have the urge to learn and know more. However, this characteristic also blinds Faustus from a sense of reason and right from wrong which leads him to make an agreement with the devil, which results in Faustus downfall.

There is a higher goal than that of simply trading one’s soul for eternal youth or the complete domination over the world. Dorian and Faustus wanted something more, and the things they got in exchange for their souls are the things which brought them the opportunity to enjoy the unrestricted world of delight.

The real pain and agony come from conscience. “Conscience does makes cowards of us all” says Hamlet (III, 1, 83)12, and conscience entails sufferings in Faustus’ and Dorian’s life. Faustus experiences fits of conscience, but he is somehow always distracted from it. He constantly silences it with the images of pleasures he is about to have. When the final day of his life comes, he curses himself for making the wrong choices (xix, 180-182), and only then is he repentant owing to the fear of the eternal sufferings in hell. Also, at first there is no conscience in Dorian Gray’s mind, not even when he kills Basil, “[h]is night had been untroubled by any images of pleasure or pain” (Wilde 2001: 129). But this could be the moment his moral sense appears for there is no pleasure after Dorian commits murder. Since this is the first time he has done something wicked without experiencing satisfaction, the sudden outburst of morality makes Dorian feel afraid for the first time, “prisoned in thought. Memory, like a horrible malady, was eating his soul away. […] He wanted to be where no one would know who he was. He wanted to escape from himself” (147-9).

Joyce Carol Oates writes that in Dorian Gray the consequences of a Faustian pact with the Devil are “dramatized, but the Devil himself is absent” (424).

“Because you have the most marvellous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having”, says Lord Henry (Wilde 15). This sentence is the sentence that ultimately changes Dorian’s life. This sentence installs the fear of growing older and losing his beauty and causes him to make his wish, not knowing that it would come true

“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! I would give my soul for that!” (Wilde 17-18). Dorian does not know he is entering into a deal with the Devil. There are no signs of the wish being granted until later in the novel, the night he breaks off the engagement to Sybil Vane and he notices changes in the portrait (Wilde 58-59)

Wilde incredibly reveals the danger of Narcissism through Gray’s personality as seen in Chapter 8: “…with his own self and beauty, that he kisses his own lips in a self-portrait.” As the reader unfolds the book’s events, he becomes aware that Dorian Gray bears the appearance of an angel and the soul of a devil. Wilde states in the Preface that 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.

From the beginning, the play identifies its protagonist not as ‘everyman’, the morality play hero who ‘stands for’ all of us, but as the exceptional protagonist of tragic drama. Moreover, it is certainly possible to argue that Faustus brings about his own demise through his catastrophically ill-advised decision to embrace black magic. Perhaps most importantly, we have seen in the course of this course that Faustus is consistently presented to us as an intermediate character, neither wholly good nor wholly bad: both brilliant and arrogant, learned and foolish, consumed with intellectual curiosity and possessed of insatiable appetites for worldly pleasure, a conscience-stricken rebel against divine power. We have seen as well how skilfully Marlowe uses the soliloquy to create a powerful illusion of a complex inner life: from Faustus's first proud rejection of the university curriculum and his exuberant daydreams of unlimited power to his anguished self-questioning and final terrifying confrontation with the divine authority he defied, the play gives us access to the thoughts and feelings of a dramatic character whose fall, whether or not we feel it is deserved, seems to call for a fuller emotional response than the Epilogue's moralising can provide.

Does this final humbling of Faustus encourage a feeling of satisfaction that he has got what he deserved? That seems to be how the Epilogue sees things. As in the Prologue, the Chorus begins by acknowledging Faustus's greatness, but in essence it is issuing a warning to the audience that his terrible fate is what awaits all those ‘forward wits’ who ‘practise more than heavenly power permits’ (ll. 7–8). Yet it is arguable that the final soliloquy's powerful evocation of Faustus's agony, coupled with its stress on the horrors of the never-ending suffering to which he has been sentenced, are designed to make us wonder whether the savage punishment really fits the crime. Feelings of pity and fear might seem a more appropriate response to Faustus's end than the Epilogue's moral, as tidy as its concluding rhyming couplet