Soncept Of Appearance: The Picture Of Dorian Gray By Oscar Wilde And The Hunchback Of Notre Dame By Victor Hugo

This essay sets out to critique the concept of appearance and the link with an individual's disposition through the lens of two nineteenth-century novels; The Picture of Dorian Gray authored by Oscar Wilde and The Hunchback of Notre Dame by Victor Hugo.

Both of these stories were written in the nineteenth century; however, The Hunchback of Notre Dame was set in the fifteenth century and Dorian Gray in the nineteenth. Interestingly, Victor Hugo made reference within the novel to historical events much later than the fifteenth century, indicating the narrator tells the story from the perspective of the present day (nineteenth century). An example of this is the reference to guillotines and The Bastille. Both stories are classed as gothic literature, The Hunchback of Notre Dame sets a tone of more gothic, romantic tragedy while the former (Dorian Gray) is more gothic (supernatural), sardonic. At times both stories arguably have a comedic element within the storytelling; offering a satirical view of tragic circumstances that surround the protagonists. Oscar Wilde was famously known for his often comedic view of Victorian society, mocking London's social hierarchy and the masks worn by the upper classes. Even though Victor Hugo wrote his novel almost sixty years before Wilde he still had a comedic tone to his writing and demonstrated his social conscience, which later became more evident in his role as a human rights activist. The setting for both stories is a European capital city, Victor Hugo's novel in Paris, and Oscar Wildes, London.

Both stories have a silent protagonist that provides the central focus for the storytelling; the magnificent Parisian cathedral of Notre Dame in Victor Hugo's novel and the painting, which is the portrait of Dorian Gray within Oscar Wilde's story. These silent characters set the gothic and mysterious tone to the stories, illuminating the storytelling. However, it is the human protagonists that will provide the material for the discussion and analysis to offer an understanding of the duality of appearance.

The central characters of Victor Hugo's novel are Quasimodo, described as an ugly hunchback deafened by the Cathedral bells. He was an orphan taken in as a child and raised within the confines of the cathedral by the Archdeacon of Notre Dame, Claude Frollo. The other character is the beautiful and young Esmeralda, a gypsy street entertainer and a popular focus of the citizen's attention. The protagonist within Oscar Wilde's novel is Dorian Gray the archetype of male youth and beauty, capturing the imagination of the painter Basil Hallward.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame is set in Paris, centered on the lives of individuals and more importantly, on their emotional responses. This contributes to the tone of romanticism within the novel. Romanticism is the creation of art where the emphasis is an emotion, the individual, and the natural beauty. In contrast to Victor Hugo's Hunchback, Oscar Wilde also centered his novel on individuals with an emphasis on emotional responses, but more significantly on a lack of responses from the protagonist, Dorian Gray. Dorian follows the lifestyle of new hedonism and excessive self-love, which later proves to be detrimental to the emotional aspects of his life because he does not believe in following social order or morals. Wilde was a part The Aesthetic

Movement which began in France in the 1830s (Yang 2018), this movement believed in ‘art for art sake’, meaning that that art should be judged purely by its beauty and form rather than by any underlying moral message (Buzwell 2014). Oscar Wilde accentuated that real happiness should come from human’s untiring pursuit of beauty (Yang 2018).

During the 19th century, a lifestyle of pleasure, indulgence, and decadence would be deeply rejected by many social classes, however, there were a number of authors creating literature that explored the darkest recesses of Victorian society and the often disturbing private desires that lurked behind acceptable public faces (Buzwell 2014). This view amplifies Dorian’s fasade, as he hides behind his immaculate looks, whilst indulging in immoral behavior. Throughout the novel, Dorian’s vanity increases, whilst his sinful behavior also intensifies, “was the face on the canvas viler than before? It seemed to him that it was unchanged, and yet his loathing of it was intensified- it was simply the expression that had altered. That was horrible in its cruelty”. This signifies Dorian’s hatred towards the painting because it undeniably portrays the real him, to which he cannot hide from himself. Whereas, his innocent and charming beauty allows him to conceal his verifiably callous and menacing behavior from those he interacts with, as Dorian is aware of the impact he has on individuals. However, in some aspects, the portrait becomes his weakness in that he cannot control his sinful behavior, as he does not care about the degradation of his soul and only cares about his physical appearance and fears he may lose his beauty. As a result, the degradation of the portrait intensifies his sins.

Both stories define the appearance of their protagonists writing about the link between appearance and humanity, specifically an individual’s character and personality. Victor Hugo described his beautiful protagonist, Esmeralda, as naturally compassionate and kind; depictured in an act of kindness towards Quasimodo by giving him water at his flogging. Oscar Wilde references Dorian’s beauty through the description of the painting by Basil Hallward; a portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty; ‘young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves’. Wilde indicates that beautiful things; ‘youth, physical attractiveness become valuable commodities’. Providing evidence that beauty translates to something valuable and worthy within society. This further indicates the influence physical appearance has on all characters within the novel, even though Dorian believes he sees deeper than just Sibyl Vane’s art and beauty, he loses sight of that once she loses her art of acting. Signifying, his shallow and cruel personality towards those around him, also implying his selfish persona interferes with reality. Both novels focus on the impact and importance of appearances and how they influence choice, decision making, how people respond and treat each other. This results in an unfortunate ending for several characters in both novels.

In consideration of the main characters from both novels, Esmeralda and Dorian Gray, both beautiful and admired, comparisons can be made. Dorian was exceptionally vain and became convinced that his striking characteristics; youth and physical attractiveness were ever diminishing. This leads him to abandon his soul so that he could live without bearing the physical burdens of aging. In contrast, Esmeralda did not seek attention, yet disaster and lustful people followed and destroyed her. She was innocent and her beauty was taken advantage of by others. Her beauty and innocence draw people's attention: the women wish they could be her and the men desire her touch.

On further analysis of the two protagonists, it is clear to see a distinct difference in the response of others to their beauty and charisma. Dorian longs to be as beautiful as the youthful and lovely masterpiece that Basil had painted for him. He resolved to live as a pleasure seeker with no

regard for conventional morality. Dorian's sins grew worse over the years, showing his lack of conscience. People surrounding Dorian contributed to his self-belief and shallow vanity. Lord Henry highlighted to Dorian that, "the company they keep is not whether a man is good at heart but rather whether he is handsome". This implies that Lord Henry wishes to install the idea into Dorian that his exquisite looks are his most valuable trait and that as long as he remains beautiful and absorbed in himself, everyone else around him will value him purely for his flawless appearance. In addition, a note Dorian received from Lady Narborough contributed to his self-indulgent, "you are made to be good- you look so good". This implies that Lady Narborough is comparing personality to physical appearance, indicating that one's perfect appearance represents the quality of their behavior, suggesting one is pure and kind-hearted.

In contrast, Esmeralda who is initially loved by the citizens for her beauty and talent soon becomes hated and castigated as a witch. Claude Frollo the main antagonist becomes obsessed with Esmeralda and believes she is a temptation sent by the devil to test him. He cannot resist her and orders Quasimodo to abduct her for him. It is interesting that novels both written in the same century take a very different perspective of feminine and masculine beauty, arguably a reflection of societal views in relation to female and masculine power in the nineteenth century. It is interesting that Hugo makes reference to Esmeralda being accused of being a 'witch', this is reflecting the medieval practice of witch-hunting. Women and much fewer men who displayed characteristics thought to be deviant were easily condemned for performing 'witchcraft' and as a consequence killed. The burning of 'witches' reached its peak in the fifteenth century in Europe. Hugo uses Esmeralda as a tragic figure to represent the loss of innocence, a message which becomes even more developed as the story continues. Esmeralda is blind to the real world, she cannot even see when she is being exploited (Literature Commentary 2014).

Interestingly, in Oscar Wilde's story, he portrays Dorian's lover, Sibyl Vane, to be a rather innocent and pleasing character, which makes her a magnet for Dorian. However, Sibyl's purity and lack of real-life experience off the stage make her vulnerable and fall into Dorian's 'prince charming' facade. Similarly, Dorian wrongly falls in love with Sibyl Vane's falseness, as he believes she is "lovely to look at" and has art for acting. Oscar Wilde describes her dialogue to be "in a thoroughly artificial manner - the tone of voice was absolutely false", this portrays Sibyl's character to be obviously contrived and displaying a facade to Dorian, to which he fell in love with the falseness. However, Sibyl discards her one true beauty of acting in front of Dorian, which leads to the downfall of their relationship, as Dorian only ever valued her as an aesthetic object. As Sibyl loses her ability to act, Dorian's love for her fades and results in a brutal breakup. This is the beginning of both Sibyl and Dorian's downfall, as they start to engage with real-life, resulting in the tragic death of Sibyl. "Her death has all the pathetic uselessness of martyrdom, all its wasted beauty". This implies that Dorian views her death as a complement to her career and that there is something beautiful about her sacrificing herself for love. Earlier in the novel, Wilde portrays the idea that Dorian is lead to believe that with physical beauty there must be a tragedy, "behind every exquisite thing that existed, there is something tragic". This gives us the impression that beauty is just a facade and being physically appealing simply results in sins and misery. In Dorian Gray's circle of friend's beauty is seen as a vital aspect of life, as Lord Henry installs in Dorian that what is seen on the surface is true to character and defines who they are internal. However, this shallow view is detrimental to many lives throughout the novel, resulting in mental and physical harm. Lord Henry who is aware of Dorian's sinful behavior, refuses to look beneath the surface at what he is truly like because he believes physically beauty wins over any foul personality.

Hugo placed emphasis on the appearance of Quasimodo's grotesque and deformed body as a central aspect to his character. Victor Hugo described Quasimodo as "hideous" and "a creation of the devil", he was born with a severe hunchback and giant wart that covers his left eye. This appearance leads him, in part, to maintain a solitary lifestyle, choosing to spend time with Frollo within the walls of the cathedral. Quasimodo was feared by the townspeople as a 'monster', including Esmeralda to begin with, however, in time she began to recognize his kind heart and became his friend. As a result, Quasimodo watched over her and protected her in life and death.

Again, beauty is seen to be duplicitously depicted in the story of Esmeralda and her love for Phoebus, a minor antagonist in Hugo's novel. He is an attractive man, however, he is already betrothed to the beautiful, but spiteful Fleur-de-lys. Nonetheless, Phoebus is happy to enter into a relationship with Esmeralda, but only wants a night of passion, which ultimately leads to his demise when he is stabbed by Frollo in a jealous rage. This again demonstrates that appearances can be deceiving; Archdeacon Claude Frollo's calm, religious exterior belies his cruel and twisted soul. Obsessed with power, he dabbles in alchemy and other occult practices but when he sees the beautiful dancer Esmeralda for the first time, his manic passions are given a new purpose, to possess.

Both stories reach a tragic climax of death and violence providing a prelude to the end of the story; setting the context for which both protagonists reflect upon their tale of tragedy and misfortune Dorian Gray to feel some remorse that leads him to destroy the painting and Quasimodo dies of starvation while holding the dead body of Esmeralda.

It is not as simple as to suggest beauty corrupts while ugliness and deformity bring kindness and humanity, real-life and human responses are far more complex. Both stories provide evidence that challenges Dorian's quest for eternal youth and beauty, as this certainly did not bring him happiness and nor did beauty bring fortune for the unfortunate Esmeralda. Her appearance made her vulnerable to men who wished to take advantage and mistreat her, which ultimately lead to her untimely death. However, Esmeralda, who through the deep misery of her surroundings kept a soul so pure, full of tender pity for all suffering, and possessed a heart that beats with true love (T.Marzials 1917). Conversely, Quasimodo's evident grotesque ugliness did not necessarily bring him misery or unhappiness, indeed, in his early life, he knew kindness and love in his relationship with Frollo.

Both novels demonstrate the duality in the relationship between appearances and character and when considered alongside emotional connections and subsequent actions it becomes more complex and at times contradictory. These stories arguably demonstrate perverse responses to the perception of appearances; seeing only the external view (beauty or ugliness) and not the essence of a person or their inner beauty or ugliness. In Wilde's literature, it was clear that beauty is only a mask, what lies behind it can vary from person to person. However, Hugo portrayed Esmeralda as having the ability to see beneath the mask of ugliness, seeing kindness and beauty within Quasimodo.

Both stories arguably try to highlight social morality, questioning specific concepts or notions of appearance and the relationship to being good or bad. The stories challenge and place emphasis on the concept that 'looks can be deceiving' promoting the readers to look beneath the surface and beyond the aesthetics to see the truth.