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A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS FOR STYLISTIC
DEVICES AND EXPRESSIVE MEANS:

‘THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY’
BY OSCAR WILDE.

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OVERVIEW

By examining the evidence for the application of a variety of stylistic devices (SD) and expressive means (EM), the aim of this textual analysis is to study a brief extract of the target narrative and identify specific examples where the author's individual style demonstrably deviates from the underlying functional style and thereby identify the author's election of specific stylistic choices in order to convey meaning to the reader.

INTRODUCTION

'The Picture of Dorian Gray' by Oscar Wilde [1] belongs to the literary fiction and novel genre of text in which the following sub-genres are conspicuous:

- **Psychological thriller [2]:** the author's unfolding plot and character development leads the initially innocent protagonist to display behaviour that is increasingly pathological, paranoid, and ultimately murderous.
- **Gothic fiction [3] combined with the theme of Fin de Siècle [4]:** the protagonist, haunted by their connection with several deaths (both indirectly and directly), subsequently immerses themselves in decadent and socially degenerative behaviour (in the historical context of the impending end of the nineteenth century), and is the focus of a supernatural juxtaposition that manifests itself in the burgeoning contrast between their ever-youthful appearance in real-life and their ever-deteriorating appearance in 'the picture'.
- **Dark romanticism [5]:** the author's exploration of the slow but incessant decay and corruption of the protagonist's morals and integrity which eventually culminates in their grotesque disfiguration, the climactic physical representation to match their rotten morality, at the juncture of their own demise when their real-life appearance and that reflected in the canvas are reversed, and arguably justifiably so.

The prevalent themes are those of: Fin de siècle, narcissism, hedonism, decadence, social degeneration, and premature death; and in contrast: human fallibility, personal torment (guilt), and self-destruction.

Because it is fiction, it naturally belongs to I. R. Galperin's [2] broader definition of Belles-Lettres [3] categorisation of functional style.

SUMMARY

Imagine, if you will, London at the fin de siècle, at the end of the nineteenth century: a smoky sprawling metropolis of stark contrasts between opulence and poverty; between elegance and ugliness; between illuminated arcs of light from gas lamps and the adjacent opaqueness of sinister shadows. Now imagine all these conflicting urban characteristics poured into a young man's undefiled soul. What moral dilemmas might tear at his heart and cause him to commit unexpected and unimaginable acts when under the influence of so many powerful and opposing forces?

Oscar Wilde's only novel depicts the cause and effect of events surrounding three high-society acquaintances: Lord Henry Wotton, Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray. The first is an aristocrat, a disciple of decadence and a manipulator of other people's lives; the second is a humble artist, an admirer of beauty and a painter of life; and the third is the youthful and unbeknown focus of the other two's excessive, polarised, and opposed attentions. In their own ways, all three of these men are obsessed with beauty and as the plot unfolds, Dorian's character gradually succumbs to Wotton's dominant immoral and seductive influence, and he descends into a life of decadence and wretched excess.

Dorian's corrupted character first reveals itself when he angrily reacts to his actor fiancée's stage performance ("the girl whom [he was] going to give all of [his] life") with bitter criticism followed by cold-hearted disdain. This deeply unpleasant incident makes for extremely uncomfortable reading and shatters the reader's illusion of Dorian's virtue, which seemed so assured only a brief time earlier. The unpleasantness of this shocking episode is further exacerbated in the reader's mind by the subsequent speed at which Dorian's grief over his fiancée's suicide (brought about by Dorian's rejection) subsides.

Now, the twist in Wilde's narrative is the existence of two Dorian Grays; the second being Hallward's lovingly crafted portrait which perversely mimics the real Dorian's increasingly depraved behaviour after Dorian wished to retain his eternal youth and for his physical aging to be reflected only in the painting. As the years pass, the disparity between the ever-youthful Dorian and his increasingly hideous portrait grows alarmingly wider and it is Hallward's insistence to see his beloved artwork that reveals Dorian's second and most alarming character malformation: his ability to commit murder.

STYLISTIC DEVICES & EXPRESSIVE MEANS

PHONO-GRAPHICAL

GRAMMATICAL

MORPHEMIC

GRAPHICAL

LEXICAL

PHRASEOLOGICAL

SYNTACTICAL

PHONO-GRAPHICAL

SD – Onomatopoeia: It is an interesting decision of the author to associate an auditory adjective (... *the shrill intrusive light.*) with their description of light, unless that is the source used to create the light is a mechanism that also generates an audible noise. Perhaps it could be the hissing sound from a gas lamp or the hum of an electrically illuminated bulb; an analysis of the historical setting would be necessary to establish if either example could indeed be true.

SD – Alliteration: In this very brief extract, there is a disproportionately high frequency of this SD (... *false-jewelled fingers ...*, ... *money matter?*, ... *the waves of worldly cunning.*, *Quick breath parted the petals of her lips.*, *She had sent her soul to search for him ...*, *A rose shook in her blood, and shadowed her cheeks.*, *I love him because he is like what Love himself should be), which may strongly allude to the author's particular enjoyment of it. Additionally, in one of these examples, the author has cleverly infused instances of **consonance**, **euphony**, and **metaphor**.*

Although not strictly an example of this SD (...*parrot-phrase flung in answer.*) the progression of phonemes *p*, to *ph*, to *f* is, in my opinion, is a rather subtle but clever phonetic construct from the author.

SD – Consonance, SD – Euphony: A delightful and pleasantly sounding statement (*Quick breath parted the petals of her lips.*) which in the context of the narrative, not only discretely yet powerfully declares the depth of Sybil's affection for Dorian with romantic imagery, but also favourably contrasts Sybil's lips with those of her mother which the author describes as thin (repeatedly) and dry.

SD – Rhythm: Much of the dialogue between daughter and mother is comprised of a succession of monosyllabic words to create spondee (*I am only happy, Sibyl, when I see you act. You must not think of anything but your acting.*, *Mr. Isaacs has been very good to us, and we owe him money.)*

There are also examples of trochee to be found (*Mother, mother, I am so happy!*) but these are much less common, and it concurs that the lexicon within this mother-daughter dialogue is mostly linguistically straightforward (i.e., the characters have polarised positions) and neither rich nor complex (i.e., if the characters were open to exploration, negotiation and compromise).

SD – Rhyme: The author applies a singular instance of rhyme to highlight the degree of affection from Sybil to Dorian (*I love him because he is like what Love himself should be.*) and then applies contrast and introduces doubt into Sybil's mind as to whether there is an equivalent feeling from Dorian to herself (*But what does he see in me?*). The effect of this is to continue to dispel the progression towards a romantic climax more rapidly than it was built up.

No instances of other typical phono-graphical stylistic devices (i.e., ***paronomasia***, ***assonance***, and ***cacophony***) or expressive means (i.e., the violation of pitch, pauses, and logical stress normal rules) are to be found in this extract.

GRAMMATICAL

SD – Nouns: Perhaps not a true application, but as with the previous conjecture regarding the *shrill* light source, the singular instance of a noun as an SD, *sitting-room*, is most probably an example of a past lexicon that has now been deprecated in preference to the more modern terms: *lounge* and *living-room*.

SD – Verbs: Using the gerund form and preceded by the definite article, the author attempts to dehumanise Sybil's mother, Mrs. Vane, by her action (*The waving of crooked, false-jewelled fingers ...*) and the subsequent description (...*gave grotesqueness to the words.*) where the reader may be tricked into associating *grotesqueness* with Mrs. Vane herself and not only with her words.

To vary each character's expression of direct speech and avoid the overuse of *said*, the author selects a broad range of speech synonyms: *whispered, echoed, pouted, answered, laughed, flung in answer*; the last example of which reappropriates a verb not typically associated with dialogue and achieves the desired tone of Mrs. Vane's emotionless delivery.

SD – Adjectives: In my opinion, a most interesting adjective is that again which at the time was likely a common expression, but which now gives a clue as to the age of the novel: from the historical lexicon for cosmetics (*bismuth-whitened*).

Similarly, as with *flung, faded* is also reappropriated by the author to describe and dehumanise Mrs. Vane, as if she were an object, and not a person.

SD – Pronouns: To conclude the debasement of Sybil's mother, the terms *Mrs. Vane* and *she* are eventually substituted by a disparaging reference to her physical appearance (*Thin-lipped ...*) and when combined with a reference to her intellect (...*wisdom*) also incites a hint of oxymoron and a rhetorical question in the reader's mind: could this unpleasant woman truly possess wisdom? A suggestion of sarcasm from the author perhaps?

The cause and effect of pairing male and female pronouns (*His kiss burned again upon her mouth. Her eyelids were warm with his breath.*) underlines the strongly romantic theme.

SD – Repetition: There are many instances of this SD within the dialogue between Sybil and her mother. Some occur adjacently and contrast how the characters refer to each other (*Mother, mother* versus *foolish child*) whereas others are simple lexicon used to reinforce the opposing primary motives of each character (*happy, love* versus *money*)

No instances of other typical grammatical stylistic devices (i.e., *articles*) or expressive means (i.e., grammatical forms which are expressive standalone and without the supporting context of the narrative) are to be found in this extract.

MORPHEMIC

No instances of typical morphemic stylistic devices (i.e., *occasionalisms*) or expressive means (i.e., diminutive suffixes) are to be found in this extract.

GRAPHICAL

SD – Punctuation: The author's use of punctuation appears to be unsurprising and readily appropriate for the underlying functional style, with one exception (*Mother, mother, I am so happy!* "whispered the girl, ...). The association of an exclamation mark with *whispered* appears at first sight to be another oxymoron. However, here the reader must remind themselves that an exclamation mark is also commonly used as an expression of emotion, and they must step into the mind of Sibyl to truly understand the strength of emotion with which she expresses herself in this sentence.

SD – Capitalisation: Sybil's personification of love is reinforced by its capitalisation in her dialogue (... *what Love himself* ...). Similarly, her mother's attribute (*Then Wisdom altered* ...) is also capitalised – although I strongly suspect the latter to be in the context of the author's deliberate hint at sarcasm.

No instances of other typical graphical stylistic devices (i.e., ***italicisation, bold, word splitting, spaced letters, or grapheme violation***) are to be found in this extract.

LEXICAL

SD – Aptonym: Sometimes the clues are hiding in plain sight and with the name attributed to Sybil's mother (*Mrs. Vane*) it is highly likely that the author has deliberately appropriated the adjective *vain* to consistently foreground to the reader this substantial and unpleasant aspect of her character.

SD – Antonomasia: Sybil's repeated reference to Dorian with a common, romantically elevated *epithet* (*Prince Charming*) is also a deliberate *cliché* injected by the author into Sybil's dialogue to underline her simplistic, romantic, and arguably naïve, lexicon.

SD – Hyperbole: The strength of the adulation, empowerment, and control Sybil extends to Dorian is made very clear in her proud boast (*Prince Charming rules life for us now*) from which the reader is left unequivocally clear that Sybil's life is now very much, and very willingly, in the hands of her new suiter.

SD – Metaphor: Towards the end of this brief extract, the contrasting format and vocabulary chosen by the author for the dialogue and the supporting narrative between Mrs. Vane and her daughter is evident: brief, condescending, and cold for the former versus emotive, colourful, and *frequently-revealed-in-metaphors* for the latter (*A rose shook in her blood, and shadowed her cheeks. Quick breath parted the petals of her lips., Her eyes caught the melody, and echoed it in radiance, ... to hide their secret, ...the mist of a dream had passed across them. Against the shell of her ear broke the waves of worldly cunning. The arrows of craft shot by her.)*

SD – Metonymy: Refer to *Pronouns* (*Thin-lipped wisdom spoke ... , ... thin lips moving ...*).

SD – Oxymoron: To understand the author's intention for this SD example (*The wordy silence troubled her*) the reader must understand the progression of the dialogue up to this point, where it has in effect broken-down into a sequence of polarised and uncompromising statements expressed by each character without the other's attention, consideration, or empathy. There is no actual silence, but Sybil and her mother are both effectively speaking into a void, possibly both at the same time, and choosing not to hear each other's replies.

SD – Periphrasis: Possibly not a strict example of this SD, but instead of this wordy phrase (...*parrot-phrase flung in answer.*), the author could have obviously chosen a much simpler and more concise expression: for example, *asserted* or *proclaimed*.

SD – Personification: As with their liberal application of metaphors, the author clearly delights in applying colourful language and personifying typically romantically-associated objects (*Some southern wind of passion swept over her, and stirred the dainty folds of her dress. She had sent her soul to search for him, and it had brought him back. His kiss burned again upon her mouth., Then Wisdom altered its method and spoke of espial and discovery., ... he is like what Love himself should be., ... on Memory to remake him).*

Expressive Means: The author has used this SD sparingly in this brief text extract: it contains only two regular examples of intensifiers (...*most considerate, ...terribly proud*).

No instances of other typical lexical stylistic devices (i.e., *pleonasm*, *litotes*, *neologism*, *simile*, *understatement*, and *zeugma*) are to be found in this extract.

PHRASEOLOGICAL

SD – Cliché: Sybil has her *Prince Charming* and Mrs. Vane has her *Mr. Isaacs*, her moneylender (... *[who] has been very good to us, ...*) and in the latter case, the reader can easily assume that the remainder of the sentence will be concerned with the need to repay Mr. Isaac's kindness in some way.

SD – Paradox: Brief, but poignant statements underline Sybil's current circumstances and the juxtaposition of the freedom she feels endowed upon due to her passion contrasted against her physical actuality (*The joy of a caged bird was in her voice. She was free in her prison of passion.*) Whether these could also be construed as common clichés and even tired tropes may in fact be governed by the novel's considerable age and whether such constructs were common, or even existed, at the time of its writing.

No instances of other typical phraseological stylistic devices (i.e., *idiom*, *epigram*, and *aphorism*) are to be found in this extract.

SYNTACTICAL

SD – Sentence length variation: In this brief text extract, the maximum sentence length is forty words, but the author typically applies much shorter sentences of approximately ten words so as to conform to the more traditional narrative mode for the literary fiction and novel genre (as opposed to, for example, the *stream of consciousness* narrative mode in which the average sentence length will be considerably higher and more complex in content).

SD – Clause variation: Again, it is of no surprise from the preceding analysis that the author chooses to write mostly simple sentences with independent clauses rather than complex sentences with both independent and dependent clauses.

SD – Stylistic inversion: To deliberately slow the pace of the narrative and cause the reader to pause to consider the change in direction from Dorian – the unwelcome suiter, to Dorian – the very welcome benefactor, the author pens a sentence containing both *inversion* (using a fronted adverbial clause) and *alliteration* (*Against the shell of her ear broke the waves of worldly cunning.*) – an unexpected speed-bump for the reader to slowly negotiate.

SD – Anticlimax: Although there is no discernible actual climax, only evidence of progression towards a possible romantic climax, the author deliberately dispels this possibility – via Sybil’s mother – with a sudden and blunt change in direction (*Her eyelids were warm with his breath. Then Wisdom altered its method and spoke of espial and discovery.*) which has the immediate effect of metaphorically bursting Sybil’s romantic bubble.

SD – Asyndeton: By omitting the expected conjunctions and instead only listing consecutive actions (*Thin-lipped wisdom spoke at her from the worn chair, hinted at prudence, quoted from that book of cowardice whose author apes the name of common sense.*) the author adds a degree of routine and familiarity to this aspect of the narrative, as if Mrs. Vane is well-practised in exercising these same steps on a regular basis as a tried and tested method for controlling her daughter and all of her non-acting specific desires.

No instances of other typical syntactical stylistic devices (i.e., *synonym repetition, climax, antithesis, rhetorical question, compositional patterns of syntactic arrangement, syntactic repetition, and lexico-syntactic repetition*) are to be found in this extract.

'THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY' BY OSCAR WILDE [1]: CHAPTER V

"Mother, mother, I am so happy!" whispered the girl, burying her face in the lap of the faded, tired-looking woman who, with back turned to the shrill intrusive light, was sitting in the one arm-chair that their dingy sitting-room contained. "I am so happy!" she repeated, "and you must be happy too!"

Mrs. Vane winced, and put her thin bismuth-whitened hands on her daughter's head. "Happy!" she echoed, "I am only happy, Sibyl, when I see you act. You must not think of anything but your acting. Mr. Isaacs has been very good to us, and we owe him money."

The girl looked up and pouted. "Money, mother?" she cried, "what does money matter? Love is more than money."

"Mr. Isaacs has advanced us fifty pounds to pay off our debts, and to get a proper outfit for James. You must not forget that, Sibyl. Fifty pounds is a very large sum. Mr. Isaacs has been most considerate."

"He is not a gentleman, mother, and I hate the way he talks to me," said the girl, rising to her feet, and going over to the window.

"I don't know how we could manage without him," answered the elder woman, querulously.

Sibyl Vane tossed her head and laughed. "We don't want him anymore, mother. Prince Charming rules life for us now." Then she paused. A rose shook in her blood, and shadowed her cheeks. Quick breath parted the petals of her lips. They trembled. Some southern wind of passion swept over her, and stirred the dainty folds of her dress. "I love him," she said, simply.

"Foolish child! foolish child!" was the parrot-phrase flung in answer. The waving of crooked, false-jewelled fingers gave grotesqueness to the words.

The girl laughed again. The joy of a caged bird was in her voice. Her eyes caught the melody, and echoed it in radiance: then closed for a moment, as though to hide their secret. When they opened, the mist of a dream had passed across them.

Thin-lipped wisdom spoke at her from the worn chair, hinted at prudence, quoted from that book of cowardice whose author apes the name of common sense. She did not listen. She was free in her prison of passion. Her prince, Prince Charming, was with her. She had called on Memory to remake him. She had sent her soul to search for him, and it had brought him back. His kiss burned again upon her mouth. Her eyelids were warm with his breath.

Then Wisdom altered its method and spoke of espial and discovery. This young man might be rich.

If so, marriage should be thought of. Against the shell of her ear broke the waves of worldly cunning. The arrows of craft shot by her. She saw the thin lips moving, and smiled.

Suddenly she felt the need to speak. The wordy silence troubled her. “Mother, mother,” she cried, “why does he love me so much? I know why I love him. I love him because he is like what Love himself should be. But what does he see in me? I am not worthy of him. And yet—why, I cannot tell—though I feel so much beneath him, I don’t feel humble. I feel proud, terribly proud. Mother, did you love my father as I love Prince Charming?”

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