

**2015**

RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT  
NIJMEGEN - Faculteit  
Letteren  
Engelse Taal & Cultuur

**BA-THESIS**  
English Literature

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# **Duality of Human Nature during the Fin de Siècle**

## Abstract

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The Victorian period can be marked as an era of historical, economic and social change. Due to industrialization, colonisation and urbanization, society changed, and there was the feeling of a loss of identity. New scientific and psychological theories led to an increasing interest in the human mind among Victorians. Ideas about the human mind advanced, and they became a more prominent topic in society. The prominence of the supernatural and psychology in Victorian culture is crucial for the development of the literary Gothic genre, which flourished during the period. Two important Gothic authors of the late nineteenth century, who were concerned with the anxieties of Victorian society, are Robert Louis Stevenson and Oscar Wilde. An element which features heavily in Gothic literature at the end of the nineteenth century is the element of duality within human nature and is often represented by the creating of a double.

This thesis aims to examine the representation of the Gothic element of duality in two late-Victorian Gothic novels - *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* - and find out what it was that made the human psyche, and especially the duality of mankind, such an increasingly popular literary element during the *fin de siècle*. Henry Jekyll and Dorian Gray both suppress part of their inner nature to keep up their respectable public reputation, thus creating a feeling of duality within their own minds. This dual feeling can only be solved by separating the two identities and giving a double the freedom to express their concealed desires.

## Keywords

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Victorian, Gothic, Double, Psychology, Duality, Identity, Dr Jekyll, Mr Hyde, Dorian Gray

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## Introduction

The Victorian period can be marked as an era of historical, economic and social change. In her *Overview of the Victorian Era*, Anne Shepherd describes it as follows: “The Victorian Age was characterised by rapid change and developments in nearly every sphere ... Over time, this rapid transformation deeply affected the country's mood: an age that began with a confidence and optimism leading to economic boom and prosperity eventually gave way to uncertainty and doubt regarding Britain's place in the world” (Shepherd). Literary themes are directly connected to the society in which the author is immersed, therefore, these changes can also be found in the literature of the time. As the Victorian era developed, interest in the spiritual world increased. The growing interest in spirituality and the supernatural resulted in an increase in the interest in mental science.

The psychological theories in the late Victorian era can be seen as the ground work for the development of the ideologies which would eventually lead to modern psychology. These theories led to an increasing interest in the human mind among Victorians. As ideas about the human mind advanced, they also became a more prominent topic in society as can be concluded from the following excerpt from *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880* by Rick Rylance:

“The high- Victorian psychology of the years 1850-80 was a more open discourse, more spaciouly framed in its address to common issues, and with an audience crossing wide disciplinary interest. Economists, imaginative writers, philosophers, clerics, literary critics, policy-makers, as well as biomedical scientist contributed to its formation” (Rylance 7).

The prominence of the supernatural and psychology in Victorian culture is crucial for the development of the literary Gothic genre, which flourished during the period.

Two important Gothic authors of the late nineteenth century, who were concerned with the anxieties of Victorian society, are Robert Louis Stevenson and Oscar Wilde. One important element which features heavily in Gothic literature at the end of the nineteenth century is the element of duality. James Sully, a Victorian psychologist, gives a contemporary description of duality:

“Psychology has of late occupied itself much with the curious phenomenon of double or alternating personality. By this is meant the recurrent interruption of the normal state by the intrusion of a secondary state, in which the thought, feelings, and the whole personality become other than they were. This occasional substitution of a new for the old self is sometimes spontaneous, the result of brain trouble; sometimes it is artificially brought about in specially susceptible persons by hypnotizing them.” (Block 451)

I want to further research the Victorian idea of duality in human nature by examining Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The prominence of duality as a literary device is important as it was a way for writers to explore many subjects and cultural concerns, such as repression, transgression, the unpredictability of human nature, morality and urban division that were often regarded as taboo subjects in Victorian England. The purpose of this thesis is to find out why the duality of human nature played such an important role in the late Victorian period. I will compare and contrast the following two novels, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert L. Stevenson, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, and explore the idea of duality. I will also research the cultural and historical context of the late- Victorian period. This will ultimately lead me to answer the following question: “What was it that made the human

psyche, and especially the duality of mankind, such an increasingly popular literary element during the *fin de siècle*?”

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides the theoretical background essential for the following analysis. Firstly, it briefly explores the origins and development of the Gothic novel in British literature with the emphasis on the *fin de siècle*. Secondly, it deals with the psychological and cultural context of the second half of the nineteenth century because the late-Victorian period strongly influenced the setting of the two selected works.

The following two chapters will give an in-depth analysis of the elements of duality *Dorian Gray* and *Jekyll and Hyde*. As duality became the most frequent and typical element of Gothic fiction in the *fin de siècle*, attention is paid mainly to themes of double lives and split personality. Finally, the main points are summarized and the paper will be concluded.

## 1. Late Victorian Gothic Fiction and Psychology

“There is a place in men’s lives where pictures do in fact bleed, ghost gibber and shriek, maidens run forever through mysterious landscapes from nameless foes; that place is, of course, the world of dreams and of the repressed guilts and fears that motives them. This world dogmatic optimism and shallow psychology of the Age of Reason had denied; and yet this world it is the final, perhaps the essential, purpose of the Gothic romance to assert.” (Massé 2)

In *Psychoanalysis and the Gothic* Michelle Massé states that the Gothic genre is “one that is important to psychoanalytic critical inquiry, not solely for its on-going popularity and easily recognizable motifs, but for the affinities between its central concerns and those of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis examines how and why our most strongly held beliefs and perceptions are sometimes at odds with empirical evidence” (Massé 2). Gothic novels, just like psychoanalysis, explore the allegedly irrational. David Stevens gives the following description of the psychological basis of the appeal of the gothic in *The Gothic Tradition*, “a deep-seated need in the individual psyche to experience something greater than normal, everyday consciousness- greater, in fact, than itself” (Stevens 51). However, these psychological elements in Gothic fiction only start to occur in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

The origins of Gothic fiction can be derived from the Romantic Movement in the late eighteenth century (Stevens 24) and started with the novel *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole (Stevens 9). The name of the movement is derived from the type of architecture which the stories frequently used as setting, namely old ruins of castles and abbeys. U.A. Fanthorpe states in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* “...most Renaissance thinkers,

preferred classical to medieval architecture, and popularised the term ‘Gothic’ for non-Roman and Greek buildings of the twelfth to the sixteenth century, characterised by the pointed arch.” (Fanthorpe). The genre also made use of dark and fantastic imagery and appealed to the emotions of the reader, trying to create a sense of terror within the reader. The aim of the Gothic novel was to satisfy the craving for mystery, awe and fear and thus replace the rationalism and certainties of the eighteenth century. The interest in fear of the mysterious and supernatural and the way of exploiting this subject matter without aesthetic and moral scruples were the reasons why anxiety, horror and terror became inseparable from literature.

As the genre gained popularity it also gained more criticism. People were worried about the possible malicious impact of reading on inexperienced readers. Gothic extreme and perverse themes arousing the imagination could potentially corrupt the morals of Gothic fiction readers. Maggie Kilgour states in *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*:

“The spread of literacy, the growth of a largely female and middle-class readership and of the power of the press, increased fears that literature could be a socially subversive influence. Prose fiction was particularly suspect: romances, for giving readers unrealistic expectations of an idealised life, novels for exposing them to the sordidness of an unidealised reality. As a hybrid between the novel and romance, the Gothic was accused on both accounts.”

(Kilgour 6)

The idea that Gothic fiction could have a negative effect on the vulnerable minds of its readers might have contributed to the decline of the Gothic novel after 1820.

Despite the decline of the Gothic novel during the mid-nineteenth century, Gothic elements can be found in a number of literary works published in this period. Gothic fiction survived because of the impact the genre had on other literary genres - namely sensation fiction and detective fiction which both originated from Gothic fiction -, and the fact that

Gothic fiction has the tendency to become popular during periods of social and political turmoil, which was the case during the turbulent Victorian era, in which the loss of religious beliefs, fear about the effects of urbanisation, and worries about the scientific development were increasing.

Although Gothic fiction survived, it underwent a variety of transformations during the second half of the nineteenth century. These changes were made to reflect the different anxieties of the time. The objects of terror changed from medieval backgrounds, wild landscapes and sentimental heroines to industrial, urban environments and deviant individuals. British society and its sense of identity changed drastically due to the processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and colonisation, and because of the problem of identity, whether it was social, psychological, religious or moral, the issue of duality became a typical theme for the Gothic novel during the *fin du siècle*. Stevenson and Wilde both “draw their power from the fears and anxieties attendant upon degeneration, and the horror they explore is the horror prompted by the repeated spectacle of dissolution – the dissolution of the nation, of society, of the human subject itself” (Byron 2).

‘Degeneration’, which Byron mentions here, was a cultural movement which flourished during the late nineteenth century. Edwin Lankester defines degeneration as “a gradual change of the structure in which the organism becomes adapted to *less* varied and *less* complex conditions of life” (Lankester 314) . In 1859, Charles Darwin published his theories on evolution in which he stated that the human existence was a result of very long biological process of evolution. By publishing his theory Darwin created a conflict between religion and science, because before the evolution theory Victorian society believed that the creation of mankind was the work of God. People had difficulties in accepting that all animals and human beings had gradually developed from much more primitive creatures. The fact that humans

were inseparably connected to animals caused a fear of deterioration to a simpler and more primitive state of being.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the interest in science and psychology increased, and the human mind became a fascinating subject to scientists as well as novelists. The development of, what William James calls, the Gothic architecture of mental science at the end of the century coincides with the revival of Gothic literature. Gothic studies of the mind and Gothic literature were not just overlapping, however, but were also in negotiation with one another, informing and inspiring each other. Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* had been influenced by F.W.H. Myers's theories on subliminal consciousness. Myers expressed his admiration of the novel in a letter in which he also gave Stevenson some advice about how he could make 'medical and psychological improvements'. Mental scientists and Gothic novelists were also negotiating their shared anxieties about the stability of identity (Grimes 14). In his commemoration lecture on F.W.H. Myers, researcher in mental science William James maintains that the mind had long been studied in a factual way.

"The human mind was largely and abstraction. Its normal adult traits were recognized. A sort of sunlit terrace was exhibited on which it took exercise. But where that terrace stopped, the mind stopped. ... But of late years the terrace has been overrun by romantic improvers, and to pass to their work is like going from classic to Gothic architecture, where few outlines are pure and where uncouth forms lurk in the shadows. A mass of mental phenomena are now seen in the shrubbery beyond the parapet. Fantastic, ignoble, hardly human, or frankly non-human are some of the new candidates for psychological description. The menagerie and the madhouse, the nursery, the prison and the hospital, have been made to deliver up their material. The world of mind is shown as something infinitely more complex than suspected; and

whatever beauties it may still possess, it has lost at any rate of academic neatness.” (Grimes 15)

By the 1880s and 1890s the understanding of the unconscious had radically changed from its perception in the mid- Victorian period (Grimes 20). The unconscious in the mid-nineteenth century was based on the ‘model of the ‘logical unconscious’, which ‘sees the conscious and unconscious minds as broadly alike in their activities, suggesting that the unconscious is, to some degree at least, knowable and predictable’ (Grimes 20). This perception of the unconscious differs from the earlier perception in which the conscious and unconscious are two separate states within the mind. The two are not connected and therefore cannot influence one another. Grimes states ‘the notion of knowing, predicting and controlling aspects of the mind were the dominant modes of discussing the unconscious’ during the mid- Victorian period. ‘It was not just the fears about inherited disease and degeneration that marked understandings of the late-nineteenth-century unconscious, however, but also fears that the mind could no longer be managed. The earlier theories that the mind was neatly doubled or split between conscious and unconscious had given way to the notion that the mind had many selves within’ (Grimes 20).

In an extract from *Chapters on Mental Physiology*, Henry Holland gives a description of what has been termed ‘double consciousness’;

“Where the mind passes by alternation from one state to another, each having the perception of external impressions and appropriate trains of thought, but not linked together by the ordinary gradations, or by mutual memory.”

(Holland 129)

According to historian Ian Hacking the term multiple personality was first used when a patient, Louis Vivet, was diagnosed with at least eight separate personalities (Grimes 21).

Vivet's case was presented as an unusual case of double-consciousness. From that moment on many scientists began to address multiple personalities in their writings on the mind, and the split personality also starts to feature in the literature of that period.

Even though traditional ghost stories were still extremely popular with contemporary writers and readers, some novelists decided to change their stories into 'psychological ghost fiction' (Moran 92). The major characters of Gothic novels were no longer terrorized by ghostly figures, but what haunted them now was their second self, or alter ego. Motifs and themes such as split personalities and physical transformations are characteristic features of dual identity. The possibilities provided by the discovery of the human psyche during the late Victorian period gave rise to a new Gothic archetype, namely the double.

The Gothic double, or *Doppelgänger* - a term coined by the German writer Jean Paul - constitutes a recurrent motif in late Victorian Gothic fiction, derived from the anthropological belief in an innate duality in man (González 264). Heidi Strengell gives a clear description of the Gothic double, "the term *Gothic double* refers to the essential duality within a single character on the further presumption that duality centers on the polarity of good and evil." She further argues that "the conflict between good and evil is the conflict between, in Freudian terms, the id and the superego and refers also to...the conflict between mortification and gratification" (Strengell 2). So, the Gothic double is a term which coincides with psychoanalytical principles like the inner conflict between good and evil.

The Gothic double features in Stevensons's *Jekyll and Hyde* and Wilde's *Dorian Gray*. Glennis Byron cites Judith Halberstam, who suggests that in both these novels the fear is not simple a "fear of the other, but ...a paranoid terror of involution or the unravelling of a multiformed ego", and according to Byron "it is not just a simple question of the conflict between inner and outer; the "fortress of identity" is shaken by the notion of a multiplicity of unstable selves" (Byron 5).

At the end of the nineteenth century the double, or doppelgänger, changed from a manifestation of good or evil to an expression of duality within a person. The nineteenth century double can also be seen as an expression of the contradiction that was caused by a man's need to maintain a respectable reputation in society, while at the same time having to suppress other feelings that were seen as inappropriate. If a Victorian gentleman wanted to be respected by society he had to live according to the moral guidelines and rules of the upper classes, and possible imperfections had to be carefully concealed from the public.

In *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* Robert Rogers defines different forms of doubles, among which are the tempting devil or guardian angel, the dark shadow or mirror self, and the creating of a dual personality. According to Rogers, the creation of an external character to represent internal, instinctual drives is a way of "dramatizing the mental conflict within a single mind" (Rogers 29); by creating a double it is possible for the character to discard any responsibility for these desires. In the article "The Double as the 'Unseen' of 'Culture'", Živkovi states the following:

"Over the course of the nineteenth century, narratives structured around dualism... reveal the internal origin of the double. The demonic is not supernatural, but is an aspect of personal and interpersonal life, a manifestation of unconscious desire. The text is now structured between self and self as other, articulating the subject's relation to cultural laws and established rules" (Živkovi 125).

The double has become a part of the character's inner self, instead of a supernatural feature beyond the control of the character. The creation of the double in late Victorian literature has become an intentional act, a choice of the character who wants to remove his own feeling of duality. The two personalities which are portrayed are on the one hand the respectable or conventional personality, and on the other hand the free immoral, often criminal self.

The analysis of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Dorian Gray* will show that both novels are rather similar in their representation of the double as an expression of suppressed desires. Dr Jekyll and Dorian Gray are two gentlemen who feel the urge to repress a part of their character to keep up their reputation in society. By doing so, they create a feeling of duality that can only be resolved by splitting themselves into two and giving the double the freedom to express their hidden desires.

## 2. Duality in Robert Stevenson's

### *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

“Man is not truly one but two” (Stevenson 43)

*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is set in nineteenth century London and deals with the respectable Dr Henry Jekyll, who leads a secret double life. By means of a chemical experiment Jekyll discovers a potion which is able to separate the soul into two. On the one hand the doctor remains his own self, but after drinking the potion he becomes his other self. The other self, embodied by Mr Hyde, allows Dr Jekyll to satisfy his inappropriate desires free from any moral restrictions.

This chapter will give a clear analysis of Stevenson's novel with the emphasis on its representation of the elements of duality. In Stevenson's essay *Chapter on Dreams*, he states that because of his own struggle with duality he wanted to express his feeling on paper: “I had long been trying to write a story on this subject, to find a body, a vehicle, for that strong sense of man's double being which must at times come in upon and overwhelm the mind of every thinking creature.” (Stevenson, "Chapter on Dreams") As can be concluded from this excerpt, the subject of duality played an important role within the minds of Victorian society. However, the question is why this concept was so important. This chapter will touch upon several topics, like Victorian values and reputation, psychological issues with regards to dual identity, the importance of science and deformity and degeneration of the human body and mind.

Henry Jekyll is a wealthy, respected Victorian gentleman, who upholds high social standards and has, according to himself, “every guarantee of honourable and distinguished future” (Stevenson 42). However, this polite and well-mannered doctor, who is admired by

society for his generosity, hides a dark secret. Because of his high social position he is unable to live out his secret desires, which he therefore has tried to suppress his entire life. Jekyll is afraid that if society found out about his deepest most darkest desires, it would ruin his fine reputation, so he had to hide this immoral side of his character “with a morbid sense of shame” (Stevenson 42). A good reputation was very important in Victorian society; the importance of a good reputation is derived from being respectable, which meant highly valuing the ideas of “sobriety, thrift, cleanliness of person ... honesty ... and chastity” (Althick 177). The novel underlines this several times. For example in the following excerpt in which Mr Enfield talks about his encounter with Hyde; killing a man’s good name was almost the same as the actual fact of killing him:

“I saw that Sawbones turn sick and white with desire to kill him. I knew that was in his mind, just as he knew what was in mine; and killing being out of the question, we did the next best. We told the man we could and would make such a scandal out of this, as should make his name stink from one end of London to the other. If he had any friends or any credit we undertook that he should lose them.” (Stevenson 3)

On the basis of his own two-faced nature, Jekyll concludes that every human being has two sides, namely “good and ill” (Stevenson 42), and he states, “I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two” (Stevenson 43). Jekyll turns to science and comes up with an experiment which could split the “two natures that contended in the field of his consciousness” (Stevenson 43), so they could exist separately from each other:

“If each, ... could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk

steadfastly and securely on his upward path, doing good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil.” (Stevenson 43)

He succeeds in creating a potion which splits his personality into two separate people, without the potion Jekyll is his normal self, the respectable doctor. However, by drinking the potion he creates his double, who is a completely different person and by doing so he releases his immoral identity that has been suppressed for many years. Mr Hyde is the complete opposite of Dr Jekyll, not only do the two differ in character; they also differ in outer appearance.

Stevenson describes Hyde in the following excerpt:

“Mr Hyde was pale and dwarfish; he gave an impression of deformity without any namable malformation, he had a displeasing smile, he had borne himself to the lawyer with a sort of murderous mixture of timidity and boldness, and he spoke with a husky and whispering and somewhat broken voice, - all these were points against him; but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which Mr Utterson regarded him.”

(Stevenson 10)

Mr Utterson’s loathing and fear which Stevenson mentions are common feelings which Hyde seems to evoke in people. They despise him because he is the personification of everything that Victorian society considered wrong and immoral. The Victorian gentleman is a polite and decent man who devotes his life to hard work, family, Christianity and charity. Hyde is quite the opposite of Victorian values. He is egocentric, cruel and heartless, and he does not have any moral scruples or respect for traditional values. Hyde’s immoral conduct threatens the respectability of Victorian society and this makes him a public enemy. So it seems as if Jekyll’s experiment had been a successful split between the conscious and the unconscious part of the mind, which coincides with Holland’s description of the double consciousness.

However, Jekyll was well aware of his dual identity when he consciously chose to split the two; his own reason for the separation is: “of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both” (Stevenson 43). Dr Jekyll’s first impression of his other self is the only positive reaction to the character of Hyde. He is not disgusted by Hyde, but he rather likes his new self.

“I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself. It seemed natural and human. In my eyes it bore a livelier image of the spirit, it seemed more express and single, than the imperfect and divided countenance I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine.” (Stevenson 45)

Dr Jekyll is so excited by the process of his transformation that he does not notice Hyde’s malicious nature. Jekyll only cares about his own personal interests and does not realize how dangerous Hyde might be to society.

The other characters in the novel do not seem to grasp why such a respectable man as Dr Jekyll has close relations with such a monstrous creature as Hyde. They are often unable to describe Mr Hyde, because he in fact does not physically exist. He embodies only a part of Jekyll’s identity and therefore he is not an actual person. The deformity of Hyde’s body shows that he is not a real human being, but that he is a result of an unsuccessful effort to alter the laws of nature. In *Demons of the Body and Mind*, Ruth Bienstock Anolik states that: “The social and psychological empathy that links people through a sense of shared humanity, disappears in the face of a deviation that seems to remove the sufferer completely from the human” (Anolik 3), thus, physical deformity could be seen as a distinguishing feature of immoral non-human behaviour. So, Hyde’s deformed outer appearance resembles his degenerate personality. Taking into account Darwin’s evolution theory, Hyde could be

considered a result of Jekyll's reversion to the primitive origins of the human species. The novel therefore touches upon the conflict between culture and nature.

Jekyll feels that the two identities are essential parts of him, and although he intended to split them, he knows that the two are deeply connected to each other. He considers Mr Hyde to be part of himself; he says "this, too, was myself". The only time Jekyll sees Hyde as a separate human being is when he is describing Hyde's indiscretions: "The pleasures which I made haste to seek in my disguise were, as I have said, undignified; I would scarce use harder term. But in the hands of Edward Hyde, they soon began to turn towards the monstrous" (Stevenson 46). Jekyll further states that he "stood at times aghast before the acts of Edward Hyde" (Stevenson 46) But to convince himself that he is not responsible for Hyde's actions he claims that "it was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty" (Stevenson 46).

So, Jekyll changes his opinion about Hyde and he no longer considers Hyde to part of himself, he even tries to distance himself from him. Towards the end of the novel Jekyll is completely convinced that Hyde is no longer part of him when he says: "He, I say – I cannot say, I. That child of Hell had nothing human; nothing lived in him but fear and hatred" (Stevenson 52). One of the advantages of the use of the double in literature is the ability of distancing one's self from a darker side, as is shown in the following excerpt from *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* by Elizabeth MacAndrew:

"The double figure showed that it was the nature of every man that the good in him must struggle in unending battle against the directions of evil. It did so in a way that would make the reader accept the terrible certainty that this was true of himself, for it not only prevented him from rejecting the central character as evil, but, to the extent that he sympathized with that character, the double became a potential mirror image of himself as well." (MacAndrew 50-51)

Jekyll loses control of his other self, Mr Hyde. At the start of the experiment Jekyll needs the potion to become Hyde, but while the experiment progresses, he no longer needs the potion to turn into Hyde, but he needs the potion to remain Jekyll. His experiment has failed and his dark side has taken over complete control of his life. His initial attempt to create two identities, completely independent of each other has backfired and instead of having one good identity and one evil identity, Jekyll demolished all the goodness in him and has created only evil. He eventually runs out of ingredients to create the potion and can no longer return to his original self. In his last moments of clarity as Jekyll, he decides to put an end to the madness, and takes his own, and - because inextricably connected - Hyde's life by committing suicide. "Here, then, as I lay down the pen, and proceed to seal up my confession I bring the life of that unhappy Henry Jekyll to an end" (Stevenson 54).

### 3. Duality in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is rather similar to Stevenson's novel. Just like Stevenson's novel, Wilde's novel is also set in late Victorian London, and touches upon a lot of anxieties of that period, one of them being dual identity. Wilde's interest in the duality of human nature might have been derived from his own dual identity, and the fact that he was leading a double life himself. On the one hand he was a loving husband and father, on the other he was exploring his homosexuality by having sex with other men. In an article of the *Socialist Review* Colin Wilson states:

“...this duplicity reflects Wilde's own life. On the one hand, he was a respectable man, married with two children--on the other, he was paying off blackmailers and having sex with rent boys. Wilde's double life is reflected in his portrayal of homosexuality as sensuous and attractive, but also sinful, something to hide” (Wilson).

The analysis of Wilde's novel will, just like the previous chapter, focus on how duality is represented in the novel, taking in to account the same topics as mentioned before, Victorian values and reputation, psychological issues with regards to dual identity, the importance of science and deformity and degeneration of the human body and mind.

The novel tells the story of the life of a young man with a “simple and beautiful nature” (Wilde 15), Dorian Gray, who has had his portrait painted. He is so overwhelmed by his own beauty in the painting, and the fear that he will lose it through time, that he expresses the desire that the painting should grow old instead of him, and that he should remain as beautiful and young as in the painting:

“... But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June... 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 ... I would give everything! ... I would give my soul for that!" (Wilde 24)

However, at that moment Dorian cannot even suspect that his wish will become reality. Dorian separates his identity unconsciously, even though he is serious when he makes his wish, he does not actually want to place a part of his soul into the painting. As the story continues, Dorian's outer beauty remains the same as it was the day the picture was made, and the picture grows older and deteriorates. Although Dorian's appearance does not change his inner beauty changes for the worse, which is shown in the picture. So, Wilde unlike Stevenson does not create a character that degenerates, but it is an object that represents the soul of a character that is showing signs of degeneration.

The Gothic double which Wilde creates, is not a separate character, like Mr Hyde, but it is a painting which represents the soul of Dorian Gray. Although there is no completely separate character that can fulfil Dorian's deepest desires, through the double in the painting it is possible for Dorian to break with society's restraints, as can be concluded from the following excerpt:

"even those who had heard the most evil things against him, ... could not believe anything to his dishonour when they saw him... Men who talked grossly became silent when Dorian entered the room. There was something in the purity of his face that rebuked them." (Wilde 102)

Dorian's innocent looks almost have the same result as the actual physical double, like Mr Hyde. The innocent appearance prevents people to think wrongly of him, and provide him with some sort of an alibi for his wrongdoings. This effect can best be described by Dorian's friend Basil Hallward who claims that "sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed" (Wilde 119).

Although Dorian unconsciously creates a dual identity, one could compare his feelings of happiness induced by the painting; to the joy Dr Jekyll feels when he first sees his double Hyde:

“For there would be a real pleasure in watching it. He would be able to follow his mind into its secret places. This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul” (Wilde 86).

At first Dorian is shocked when he thinks that the painting has altered, and he wonders if there was “some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him. Could it be that what the soul thought, they realized?” (Wilde 77) But when he hears the news about the death of his former love Sibyl, it has no emotional effect on him, and he is not surprised that the painting already knew the terrible faith of Sibyl.

Dorian is very self-centred and only cares about his own satisfaction. He is aware of the fact that the painting represents a part of his soul, but he does not feel guilty about the pain he has caused the people around him.

“It was better not to think of the past. Nothing could alter that. It was of himself, and of his own future, that he had to think. ... It was the portrait that had done everything. ... It was nothing to him.” (Wilde 175)

This excerpt shows that Dorian does not take responsibility for his actions and he blames them all on the painting, “it was the portrait that had done everything”. He is not sorry for the people he murdered, he even feels relieve because they cannot reveal his secret anymore. Dorian is only concerned about his own safety and well-being. He has changed in such a way that he can no longer see the difference between good and evil, and he turns into a callous man. Basil rightfully suggests “ but surely if one lives merely for oneself, ... one pays a

terrible price for doing so” (Wilde 64) and he wonders what kind of consequences Dorian’s self-obsession and vanity will have later on.

Dorian Gray is a respected member of society and cares about his reputation. Once he realises that his indiscretions do not harm him, but his double – the portrait – he is able to live beyond the boundaries of the rules of society, without blemishing his reputation. A respectable reputation, as mentioned before, was very important in Victorian society, so after Sibyl’s suicide Lord Henry warns Dorian that “there will have to be an inquest, of course, and you must not be mixed up in it. Things like that make a man fashionable in Paris. But in London people are so prejudiced. Here, one should never make one’s *début* with a scandal” (Wilde 79). Just like Jekyll, Dorian is afraid that anyone finds out about his secret and true identity, that he hides the painting from the public eye. Not only Lord Henry is afraid for Dorian’s good name, Basil also confronts him about his reputation, “I want you to lead such a life as will make the world respect you. I want you to have a clean name and a fair record. I want you to get rid of the dreadful people you associate with” (Wilde 120).

Although Henry expresses his fears for Dorian’s reputation, he was the one who makes Dorian indulge in his corrupt and criminal activities in the first place by describing his ideal way of living:

“I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream ... But the bravest man amongst us is afraid of himself. The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us.” (Wilde 18)

When these impulses Henry mentions are suppressed, a feeling of duality can be created. In this excerpt Henry shows the benefits of submitting to these impulses. Even though Dorian is

influenced by Henry, the novel states that Dorian “was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself” (Wilde 19), so he acknowledges that his dual identity was always present within. Though, Dorian does not consciously create an actual double, he is very much aware when he makes the choice to embrace his dual identity. He has no intention to lose his double and when he gets the possibility to undo his wish he, again, makes a choice to hold on to his double, instead of letting go:

“... who ... would surrender the chance of remaining always young, however fantastic that chance might be, or with what fateful consequences it might be fraught?” (Wilde 85-86)

Because Dorian does not take any action to reverse the situation he has accepted his double. He takes pleasure in his own duality instead of being astounded by it. He often sits in front of the painting “something loathing himself” but he sometimes also is “filled ... with that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin, and smiling, with pleasure, at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own” (Wilde 112). While scientifically observing the painting his vanity increases and his interest in his immoral soul grows stronger. Dorian has the ability to see his double, the soul in the painting, as a separate part of his body. Like Jekyll’s feelings about Hyde, Dorian’s approach to the painting also changes. In the beginning of the novel, when the painting is just finished, he regards the painting as part of himself: “I am in love with it, Basil. It is part of myself. I feel that” (Wilde 25).

Towards the end of the novel, Dorian’s immoral behaviour is getting worse. He wants to distance himself from his double, and start a new life. He has lost his pleasure in watching the painting and the process of his soul being corrupted. He comes up with the idea to destroy the picture. He believes that ruining the painting “would kill the past, and when that was dead

he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace” (Wilde 177), not realising that he is murdering his soul, and therefore killing himself as well.

## Conclusion

The Victorian period was an era marked by the many changes that occurred during the complete length of the period. Victorian society was based on traditional values and strict moral rules, which originated from the Christian faith. Due to the increasing interest in science there were many new discoveries in all fields. Especially the discoveries made in the biological field were in conflict with the beliefs of Christianity. Charles Darwin's new theories on evolution were a shock to the religious faith of many Victorians. Darwin claimed that the human being was not created by God, but descended, just as other animals, from much more primitive creatures. This theory caused people to doubt their identity, and it increased the fear of degeneration of human kind. Because, if it was possible for humans to evolve from primitive creatures, it might also be possible that mankind would change back to that primitive form.

Interest in psychology and mental science grew as well, which resulted in more research of the human mind. A new mental illness was diagnosed: dual personality. The human mind was able to house more than one personality, a theory which of course, also caused great turmoil among the Victorian people and made them, again, fear and doubt their identity. If the mind could be split into two identities, one identity would then represent everything good within a person, and one would represent all that was evil. The evil part was seen as the less evolved, degenerated part of the human mind. The issue of identity created feelings of fear and horror. The ideologies and anxieties which emerged during the Victorian period influenced the literature of the period as well, and can especially be found in the Gothic genre.

The tumultuous Victorian age revived the in popularity decreasing Gothic genre. All the anxieties and changes of the period were perfect subjects for the Gothic novel. So, the genre changed from old medieval ghost stories, to situations that were more realistic and dealt

with fears and horrors which Victorian people could relate to. The human nature and mind were topics of interest, because the new developments within science brought a feeling of terror upon the people. The genre explored the subject of duality of human nature in many different ways. The Gothic double was an important literary element that could represent dual identity, and the conflict of good and evil within the human mind. The two selected novels both use the feature of the double to depict the feeling of duality within a person. Both authors were struggling with feelings of duality in their personal lives, and used these anxieties as basis for their novels. They both touch upon themes that were not uncommon in Gothic fiction.

*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, both give a representation of Victorian society and its values and moral restrictions, and the emphasis on the people's need to break free from these restrictions. Dr Jekyll has repressed his immoral desires almost his entire life, but is able to finally give in to them when he becomes his other self by means of a potion that he scientifically designed to split the mind. Dorian Gray has also lived a respectable life up until the moment he unconsciously transferred his soul to the painting. His own body does not reflect his sinful life, but it is shown in the painting which he hides from the public. Because of the painting he is, like Jekyll, able to lead a double life, full of sin and immorality. As mentioned before, a man's reputation was very important in the late nineteenth century. The double, in both novels, is unable to do any harm to the reputation of Dr Jekyll or Dorian Gray, because no one is aware that the protagonist has created a double.

Dr Jekyll transforms into Mr Hyde, who has a deformed, dwarfish and ugly appearance. Dorian does not transform into another person, but his soul gets transferred into the painting and reflects all Dorian's immoral behaviour. The doubles in both stories are depicted as the evil, more primitive side of the human being, whereas the original self

represents goodness. Abnormal appearances were less human and more bestial and could be seen as the deterioration of the human body, back to a more primitive creature. The way the degeneration of human nature is depicted, reflects the anxieties due to Darwin's Evolution Theory. Mr Hyde does not look human, and has a deformity, so his appearance reflects his unjust behaviour. Dorian's beauty does not alter; however, the painting is changing and displays Dorian's sin in outer appearance, so evil is portrayed by the soul in the painting.

Stevenson and Wilde also show that creating a double is an intentional act the character chooses to do. It is Jekyll's own curious mind that succeeds in making the potion that creates his double. He is aware of his double nature and wants to split his identity. Dorian seems to transfer his soul unintentionally into the painting, but when he makes his wish he is serious about his feelings, and he does not want to reverse the situation when he gets the chance to do so. So, both protagonists consciously create a double, and are unable to reverse the situation. They are aware of their double and they accept them as a part of themselves, up until the point that there is a loss of control of the double identity. From that moment on, the main characters try to distance themselves from their double, and discard any responsibility. When they are unable to distance themselves, they try to destroy the double, which ultimately means that they destroy themselves. Both novelists are moving back and forth from conscious to unconscious and they apply the new ideas about science and human nature to their novel.

The aim of this thesis has been to examine the representation of the Gothic element of duality in two late-Victorian Gothic novels - *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* - and find out what it was that made the human psyche, and especially the duality of mankind, such an increasingly popular literary element during the *fin de siècle*. Henry Jekyll and Dorian Gray both suppress part of their inner nature to keep up their respectable public reputation, thus creating a feeling of duality within their own minds. This dual feeling can only be solved by separating the two

identities and giving a double the freedom to express their concealed desires. Keeping in mind the concept of the gentleman and the prominence society had in the Victorian age, it is arguable that it were the moral restrictions of the period that gave the double and therefore dual identity, a boost in literature. In *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880*, Rick Rylance gives another possible reason for the popularity of dual identity in literature; he quotes Jenny Bourne Taylor's essay 'Obscure Recesses: Locating the Victorian Unconscious':

“... the disorder endemic of the nineteenth-century psychological visions of the self as they came under increasing pressure on different theoretical and administrative fronts. The new conception of the self was inherently more complicated and unstable. It embodies, ‘an implicit dialogue between en different layers... of the mind.’ It was ... ‘in the clashes and correspondence within a fissured, multiple consciousness that the self becomes a social being’ in the period, and it was this that made the self so amenable for literary exploration for an emergent generation of novelists preoccupied with questions of identity.” (Rylance 114)

Thus, the idea of the self changed due to scientific development. The self became more complex and unstable, and even becomes a ‘social being’ in the minds of people who struggle with dual identity. Therefore, it might not be surprising that dual identity was an increasingly popular literary element. The two novels show that once the double is created the original self is losing control, and the double, represented in a separate body or object, becomes the more dominant part of the self. The original self cannot regain control and eventually destroys both parts of the self. The double is rejected for its deceitful nature, and the protagonist is considered to be a victim of the restrictions of Victorian society.

To conclude, and give an answer to the research question, it was a combination of several factors that made the human psyche, and especially the duality of mankind, such an increasingly popular literary element during the *fin de siècle*. Literature is often a representation of events and anxieties of the particular era in which it is written. The developments in science and psychology, new theories on evolution, and moral social constraints resulted in many anxieties and fears.

So, why focus on duality? Well, duality of human nature was a direct result of all these combined factors. First, the developments in science and psychology gave rise to an interest in the human mind, and mental science. Double personality was first diagnosed as a mental disease, which made even more people question their identity. Second, the theories on the origin of human kind and other species by Darwin caused doubt about religion and a fear of the degeneration of the human being, which also made people unsure about their identity. Last, Victorian society's severe moral restrictions made people want to disobey the rules and gave rise to the leading double lives, which also caused doubt about identity.

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(2001): 121-128.

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