Looking For the Victorian Man: Signs of Femininity in Oscar Wilde’s

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde’s only novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* is commonly considered to describe the lives of three men and the same-sex desire between them, even though homosexuality is not specifically spelled out in the text. This classic fictional work was subjected to heavy criticism, and the author was sentenced to prison for claims of an affair with another man; facts affirmed by Wilde’s son Vyvyan Holland (11, 13). Readers, numerous scholars and critics alike have concluded that Wilde’s narration embraced a homoerotic lifestyle, which Ed Cohen demonstrates (801). However, Wilde himself rightfully defended his characters as his artistic product, and he insisted that the readers misunderstood them (17). These ambiguous perceptions of the narration reflect reigning social and cultural values - such as codes of conduct, dress code and actions - which were important principles in the Victorian period of the British society. As we shall see from this contemporary reading, these values have a decisive impact on why the interpretation of the main character Dorian Gray could distinguish him as a male person with homoerotic desires. The thesis of this study is that by portraying the male character Dorian Gray in the sexual role as a vain and ridiculous man, Wilde made his readers come face to face with a spectacular sign of the destabilizing gender structure in the British society.

How do conduct and actions described through the course of the narrative lead a reader to conclude that the main character Dorian Gray is a male with same-sex desires, and a man with distinct female attributes? Cohen’s observations suggest a provocation of Victorian norms of the middle-class male identity (806). Rita Felski answers this question to some extent when identifying the late 19th century as a period when “the artificiality of the real was a critical
response to the presentation of bourgeois values and beliefs” (1097). This belief of a homoerotic theme is prevalent among Wilde’s readers. However, little is explored about which details of Dorian Gray’s conduct and actions make the reader assume, that the portrayal is that of a feminized man with masculine traits that are less noticeable. It is claimed in this study, that Wilde’s narration is about a feminized man with same-sex desires. This is compliant to many readers’ opinion, who insist that his novel is about men in a homoerotic setting (Cohen 802). Nevertheless, in this gender context it is worth noting that the need to redefine the meaning of femininity and masculinity was an emerging social and cultural challenge in the Victorian society during the two last decades of the 1900s, which Elaine Showalter shows. She claims that this was a period when sexual anarchy developed in Great Britain, partly as a consequence of the public contesting the laws that ruled sexual identity (3).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how the main character Dorian Gray in Wilde’s work of fiction is perceived of in a story in which a gender theme is unfolding, featuring a man who evokes signs of femininity. Employing a semiotic approach as defined by Stuart Hall (37), Victorian norms of femininity and masculinity are put in relation to literal, denoted as well as to mental, connoted meanings of the character Dorian Gray. This involves identifying social and cultural codes that generate the signification of feminine attributes of the main character Dorian Gray. These decoded meanings, in turn, produce signs, which generate an individual interpretation.

The objective with analyzing the text with the help of Roland Barthes’ theory of signs as applied by Hall (39), is to reflect the importance of understanding meanings of signs in our society. Signs communicate messages of our reality, which we the people “read” according to our own general beliefs, and to prevailing social and cultural values in the society we live in.
Signs of social life, signs of culture, and signs that bear meaning of the time to the individual reader emanate from codes.

Codes that signal signs of social and cultural life are interpreted differently by readers. That explains why there are distinctive interpretations of Wilde’s narrative, and that is why there are conflicting opinions whether his story is about a man in a homoerotic context or not. Hence, the following methodical segments present four traditional social and cultural values, which were common norms in the Victorian society in the 1880s and the 1890s. These values are then put in relation to identified codes in the text, which initially have been denoted in the literal representation of the character Dorian Gray. Thereafter, codes have been connoted in the mental conceptualization of him. These two different semiotic perspectives were generated during the course of a contemporary reading of the novel. Together, the literal representation and the mental conceptualization yield a personally perceived signification in a social and cultural context.

2. Analysis

The starting point of this semiotic analysis of Wilde’s fictional, aesthetic world of words and images is in Great Britain in the end of the 19th century. The focus is on a few codes of meaning of the protagonist Dorian Gray’s lifestyle, and how they relate to notions of femininity. They are codes of conduct, dress code and actions in the Victorian culture. The codes produce signs, and the meaning of the signs, signaled from reading the classic narration more than 110 years after it first was published, will sum up the analysis.

2.1. General Codes of Meaning: Femininity and Masculinity

Generally, people who constantly express their love for decoration, fashion and passion are perceived by society as feminine. This seems to be a fact for Victorian England as well, upon assessing research on the two social values and the two cultural values in Great Britain in the last
quarter of the 19th century discussed below. Yet, vanity and attention to appearances are to some extent codes of masculinity as well.

Then again, many people believe that men in their twenties are masculine individuals. Actually, it has been proven that the typical man in the Victorian times was expected to be the decision-maker with financial dominance, mental and physical strength, as well as to possess personal power and control over his family members and other subordinates (Felski 1095, 1098; Cohen 805). In order to assess a few vital factors of the typical lifestyle of women and men in the Victorian times, two traditional Victorian social and two cultural values in the end of the 19th century have been explored. They cover their lives from the female and the male perspectives of body-talk and matrimony as well as of art and talk.

Body-talk is the first social value explored. Sexual roles and gender identities became more familiar concepts towards the end of the 19th century. The gender identity concept is explained in Judith Butler’s gender theory. She maintains that gender is about repeated social performances and acts by an individual, who does – rather than is – a specific gender (Butler 528). Of course there are many other codified types in between the female and the male extremes. A third one is the male homoerotic type. It will be discussed considering the significance it has on the narration, according to Cohen (806). This paper assumes however, considering Butler’s theory and the findings on female gender referred to below, that the reigning Victorian gender system would have had two major contrasting opposites.

Women’s body-talk is for instance, according to Irigaray's remarks, that women’s bodies are objects, like items and things, in a societal structure that shapes and reinforces the male subjects’ rule (84). Another bodily aspect is argued by Butler, who supports Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman (Butler 519)”. Butler takes
this claim one step further in maintaining that to be a woman is more like having to “become a woman” (522). It is easy to agree with her and with Beauvoir’s 1970s argument that a female body adapts to historical restraining within given frames of body language and body acts. As such, individuals perform gendered acts, and gendered identities are constructed within historical frames.

Men’s body-talk in this patriarchal system of Victorian times was acted out by the “manly middle-class male” (Cohen 803). The man was in fact considered as the one expecting the opposite sex to perform acts in order to attract and generate his desire. The man normally acted with mundane matters of facts and reason, which were out of reach for women. A contrasting gender aspect pictures “strength” as masculine compared to feminine “weakness”. Physical power is a masculine ideal in social life (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 48). This category of male principles has also been noted by Remy Saisslin, and she gives street fighters as a good example, “the battle of the streets” (qtd. in Felski 1098). Another aspect of body-talk is the bipolar hard-and-soft attribute between the sexes. Also, in the end of the 19th century, the muscular military man and the virile and vigorous sailor man in the navy met with ruling social expectations (Showalter 10, 24). It was normal that the masculine ego gaze of a young man assumed that his “Chosen Girl” knew she had to make herself pretty (25). However, the gaze could also have a significance of homoerotic body-talk, to which Cohen draws our attention (806). As such, the gaze is a linguistic tool of the eye to communicate “unrepresentability of male same-sex eroticism”.

The homoerotic type of body-talk is seen as produced by a man with same-sex desire; that is an individual who prefers to satisfy emotional and sexual preferences with same-sex partners. In Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary the homoerotic definition reads
“…revealing, or portraying homosexual desire.” Cohen and others have presented compelling arguments, which have to do with the intensities of the same-sex unions, the jealousies and passions they involve, the worship of the male form as the ideal of beauty. For instance, Cohen exposes how homoerotic body-talk in the Wilde text is generated. It is illustrated by the homoerotic awareness between the partners involved. It causes them to cover up their mutual feelings. The same-sex desire body-talk in the narration is displayed by strategically replacing erotic with artistic expressions. In addition, it uses the body as a verbal instrument to convey feelings, which the reigning “public language [that] has no explicit forms to represent their involvements” (Cohen 806). This type of interaction and lifestyle has been discussed by past and present literary critics alike as the theme Wilde shared with his readers (801). After all, it is a general opinion that the Dorian Gray story is about men who are sexually attracted to each other.

Matrimony is the second social value observed which reflects typical female and male positions in the Victorian society. Showalter points to the emancipation issue at the end of the 19th century, which was met with criticism and speculation (38). Nevertheless, accommodating gender demands became a societal problem. One of them was the issue of the “New Woman”, a female who favoured a professional career to a dependent, domestic life. Another issue was the homosexual identity, which emerged parallel to the identities of “housewife” and “New Woman” (Cohen 801, Showalter 169). Furthermore, Showalter explains that the concept “Odd Woman” also surfaced as a family concern. It referred to a daughter for whom her family had difficulties finding a husband, and thus the daughter became a financial burden to her family household (19).

Matrimony between men and women was, as Showalter displays, a social institution, and was the normal family structure in the Victorian era (7). However, Showalter points to the end of the 19th century as a period when it became popular among men to remain bachelors. They
preferred the club life, which offered a more liberal option to the married lifestyle (11). Elizabeth Lorang credibly suggests that the prevailing opinion of marriage as a social institution, which was portrayed in Wilde’s narrative, did not harmonize with what the middle-class readers of *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* considered normative (31). *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* is the magazine which first published Wilde’s novel. In the same issue, there was an article headlined “The Indissolubility of Marriage” (ibid). Lorang maintains that the article was intended for the magazine readers to read parallel with Wilde’s novel, with the message that divorce would be a solution to a marital problem only in extreme cases.

Art is the first of two cultural values explored among Victorian feminine and masculine norms in England in the late 19th century. One cultural art movement is aestheticism that grew popular in Europe in the later part of the 19th century. Showalter subordinates it to decadence (169). This movement influenced trends in fine arts, interior decorating, as well as in dress codes. However, female cultural interests at this time are mostly noted within form, according to Saisselin, and they relate to passivity and passion (qtd. in Felski 1096). As for female-dominated functions, even if it has been established that women during the end of the 19th century did have possibilities to get involved in music and painting, they were restricted to perform these art acts domestically (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 41).

Aestheticism’s originator was Walter Pater. This founder of the movement attracted many young men thanks to his philosophy. It advocated to live life to its fullest at any moment. Rejoice its artistic beauty, instead of pondering over nature’s profound harshness, was also Pater’s appeal (Showalter 170). His doctrine also influenced literature. Wilde’s narration is inspired by aestheticism, and Wilde himself apparently called the Dorian Gray character the “absolute modernity of beauty” (Felski 1096). Cohen demonstrates that aesthetic attention
replaces erotic preference in the text (806), which is a strategy used to conceal the homoerotic relationship. Another artistic circumstance at this point in time was the increase of published books and magazines written by women. Wilde and other male artists found this feminization of literature a threat to their own identity, because it weakened their professions and masculinity to a quasi-gender level. The male aesthetes, like Wilde, and professional women, such as writers and journalists, called the “New Women”, were after all competing counterparts in the cultural and artistic domains (Showalter 77).

Talk is the second cultural value considered. Extensive research into the fields of individuals’ use of language has established that there is a difference between how women and men talk. Talk between same-sex partners as explained by Cohen, can be an exchange of meaning through symbolic means. The reason is the partners’ “double consciousness” of their minority category of persons, which results in a conversation strategy of “unverbalized meanings”(806).

Women’s talk on the other hand, according to research results from the 1970’s, points to distinguishable choices of speech content compared to men’s talk. Furthermore, evidence from female language observations indicates a more frequent tendency to specify color in detailed range of shades, as well as appreciative exclamations such as “lovely”. It has also been shown that these facts of female and male talk make women appear powerless and trivial. Though these differences have been observed during the 20th century, a similar pattern has been traced back to the 19th century. Women preferred to talk about farming their land in terms of “gardening” and “nurturing”, while men referred to more “rustic” chores (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1, 158, 159, 218). In addition, frequency in conversation issues also differs. When extracting relevant findings from study results published in the 1970s, it is clear that women talked with close same-sex friends most frequently about family problems, followed by doubts and fears (123). It has
also been proven that women tend to talk to friends without doing other activities simultaneously (124).

Men’s talk, on the contrary, has been identified as an activity that is done simultaneously with other actions (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 124). Furthermore, the 1970s research results indicate that the male is the dominant conversation partner (1, 158, 159). Moreover, they point to men’s talk with close same-sex friends most often are about sports and family problems. Intimate relations and personal problems are topics that they speak about the least often (123). Also, empirical facts point to a speech pattern of expressing a compliment. Normally, both men and women compliment a female, but not a male (150).

2.2. Codes in the Literal Representation and in the Mental Conceptualization

How is the character Dorian Gray represented in the narrative? For instance, this contemporary reading of the novel notices Dorian Gray’s codes of conduct, dress code and actions. The literal representation becomes obvious upon semiotically denoting his character, meaning to describe him with detailed words and phrases emanating from the text. Thus, a number of signifiers derived from the factual words were explored within the so-called denotation level of existence. They were selected from four codes of specific meaning related to his conduct, which were compared to two social and two cultural issues dominant in the British society in the end of the 19th century. First, the two codes related to social issues are Dorian Gray’s body-talk and his marital status. By comparing his lifestyle with the social and cultural norms of masculinity discussed above on pages 5 - 11, certain central traits of this man emerge. These traits, denoted in the literal elements of his image, together form a description of him with references made to daily experiences from his conduct and actions.
How is the character Dorian Gray interpreted by Cohen? He is perceived as a privileged man fortunate enough to express a preferred lifestyle that is made possible only by his cultural and social standing. Cohen’s eye-opening decoded explanation of Dorian Gray’s revelation of his homoerotic desires is credible. Due to the public opinion at the time of publishing, these sexual preferences are chiselled in the text between the visible and verbal presences of his friends Basil and Lord Henry. Further, the picture of Dorian Gray is an artistic “symbol” of the actual erotic situation (806).

How is the character Dorian Gray interpreted by the writer of this essay in 2012? Compared to the literal representation, the corresponding mental conceptualization links this reader to the suggested, inferred symbolic meaning. Connoting the mental concepts of the protagonist Dorian Gray involves an awareness of semiotic “signifieds”. These signifieds generate imagined concepts of him on the connotation “level of myth”. For example, “the portrait” (Wilde 18) is a signifier, while “finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair” (27) are signifieds. Combined, this single signifier and these three signifieds produce a sign from which this reader associates a meaning to the contemporary social reality. In this very specific, given example, the produced significance is a Victorian woman called Dorian Gray.

In order to explore the signifieds, a number of them were thus observed from four semiotic codes on the connotation “level of myth”. The signifieds correlated to the decoded meaning of the factual, described words in the denotation “level of existence” in the novel. That explicit literal description is a result of the decoding of the text (see page 10). Normally, such a narration would not cause conflicting opinions per se. On the other hand, personal interpretations of the imagined, mental meaning of the main character Dorian Gray and his life do generate different views depending on who the readers are. The claims in the following segments, in
which the mental concepts of the character Dorian Gray comprehended by Cohen as well as by the writer of this essay are compared to the ones denoted from reading the literal representation, convey deviating images of him.

The first of two social codes of conduct relates to Dorian Gray’s actions of body-talk. The literal signification describes him as a remarkably handsome man (Wilde 87). He plays the piano, he takes walks in parks, he dines and socializes at tables with dignitaries or alone at home, but mostly in the company of his friend Lord Wotton. He enjoys the popular male club-life and he pays many nightly pleasure visits to the poor harbour areas (100, 102, 140). He socializes with friends of both sexes of the upper-class. In addition, he passively sits and watches many performances during visits at theatres (Wilde 48, 65, 79).

Cohen comprehends the actions of Dorian Gray and his close friends as homoerotic body-talk. Cohen emphasizes the emergence of the homosexual as one of the new identified types of male persons. At the end of the 19th century the British society initiated the classification of its citizens according to certain sexual and behavioural criteria. That is also when the reigning male and female sexual structures started to become a more debated societal issue. Dorian Gray is the absolute opposite of what was considered as the solid “true” bourgeois male, according to Cohen (801). He also points to the painter Basil’s "adoring gaze" of the young man as a sign of sexual desire (807).

Compared to the literal narration, body-talk as mentally conceptualized by this contemporary reader relates Dorian Gray’s actions to a homoerotic person. It is evident that he is a masculine man. For instance, as noted previously, he does enjoy the club life, which is a Victorian male popular interest. On the other hand, endless social dinners, mingling, and socializing at private gatherings, at parties, and at theatres picture a lavish lifestyle more of a
Victorian woman (Wilde 53, 65, 158). It seems like class and privilege are essentials that allow a man to behave along feminine codes. Dorian Gray’s actions associate to a passive and vain woman with a passion for fashion, which Felman describes as a Victorian femininity norm (8). Lorang underlines that an article run in the issue of the *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* in 1890, in which the Wilde literal work was published, offered an introduction to hand-reading. It is suggested that this was intended to lead the readers to the story of Dorian Gray and the portrait of him (25). Lorang indicates a great number of hand descriptions of the characters, which would signify passivity and a passion for fashion (26). Body-talk from top to toe is omnipresent in the story (Wilde 18, 19, 22, 23, 157). There is a myriad of details, objects and paraphernalia more identified as a woman’s accessories for corporal decoration, with which the main protagonist surrounds himself. There is not much of industrious and thrift masculinity in Dorian Gray here, considering Felski’s portrayal of a typical Victorian male (1095). Rather, Dorian Gray seems genuinely womanlike. Felski actually establishes that consumption signifies something feminine, compared to production, which is the more masculine contrasting concept (1095). Furthermore, Schor’s suggestion that femininity equals a passive woman with a pathetic passion for fashion and superficial nonsense certainly is pertinent in this body-talk context (qtd. in Felski 1096). This first of two social codes points in the direction to the definition of a homoerotic man, considering the association between a male person and female concepts.

The second social code of conduct of Dorian Gray associates to the meaning of the marriage institution in its literal signification. The signifiers describe Dorian Gray’s marital status as that of a bachelor. He dates a younger girl called Sybil Vane, and he has a short, intense relationship with her. She is an actress who commits suicide at the age of seventeen. The signifiers also indicate at a first glance that the relationships Dorian Gray has with his girlfriend
and his three friends are normal. The civil status of his first friend, the portrait painter Basil Hallward, is not revealed. However, it seems likely that he is a single man since there is no mention of a wife. The second friend, Lord Henry Wotton, is a married man. Dorian’s third previously close friend Alan Campbell never marries, and he commits suicide after being blackmailed by Dorian Gray to remove the body of the murdered Basil Hallward (Wilde 167).

As already concluded, the marital relations in the denoted and described text point to normal family relations. However, mentally, this second social code associates more to conducts of a less normative standard. When it comes to the marital relations, Cohen dissects Wilde’s literal work, and skilfully suggests that the true story be found in what the author did not write. According to his mental picture it is supposedly about a same-sex relationship that was not possible to spell out for reasons of Victorian sexual ideology and legal views: it is “mute”. This should be the reason why Wilde avoided naming the “unsayable” (Cohen 805). Furthermore, Cohen’s opinion on Sybil’s participation in the story is just a dramatic band-aid, an illusive pretext for what really is going on behind the “closet doors” (809).

This mental picture is apparent. Dorian Gray actually dates the actress Sybil Vane only for a couple of weeks before she takes her life (Wilde 144). Dorian’s first friend, Basil Hallward, seems to be unmarried, an artist always on the constant run from his own lifestyle. His statement about being dominated by Dorian Gray’s personality strengthens this claim of secrecy and a life in hiding (Wilde 1, 20, 25, 115). The second friend’s, Lord Henry Wotton’s, comment on his matrimonial relation with his wife gives a picture of a non-existent or an unhappy situation in marriage (20). Dorian Gray’s relation with a third male friend, Alan Campbell, is narrated as a romance, “For eighteen months their intimacy lasted.” (128). Actually, Lorang points to the “divining of character” in her reading (26). Similarly, Cohen points to the dreamlike attraction
Dorian Gray becomes for his two male friends (807). Barthes’ theory of the myth, i.e., the dominant ideology in the reader’s society, is relevant in this mental interpretation of Dorian Gray, because this contemporary personal reading relates a romance to a relationship between a female and a male. Therefore, the mental picture of Dorian Gray is that of a feminized, single man who romantically is involved with other men.

Art is the first of the two codes of culture investigated in order to show how the character Dorian Gray is literally represented. He obviously is influenced by Pater’s philosophy of aestheticism. His dress code reveals an avid interest in design (Wilde 107). The signifiers, such as five-hundred-and-sixty pearls, denote the characteristics of an individual with a profound passion for decoration and detail, as well as for costumes and colors. His interest in literature is presented repeatedly; specifically described is a work of literature received from Lord Henry (102). Apart from reading books and admiring designs, playing music is Dorian Gray’s cultural action (106).

In this cultural context, Cohen’s mental perception is that the artistic object, the portrait of Dorian Gray, is a “magical mirror” which supposedly reflects the soul story of the character Dorian Gray (808, 810). This story is presumed to silently relate to his homoerotic preference. Furthermore, the painted portrait is said to intentionally be included in the story with an “absent presence”. According to Cohen this should be read as an encoding for the same-sex male desire between Dorian Gray, Lord Wotton and Basil Hallway (806).

Cohen’s mental conceptualization of the character Dorian Gray clearly deviates from the literal representation. This reading supports Cohen’s findings. The narration - when it comes to this first code of culture - is discerned from Dorian Gray’s cultural actions in art (Wilde 23, 146, 147, 150). The mental image outlines the characteristics of a feminized individual with a
profound passion to dress and to decorate in detail, to wear costumes of different cuts and colors. There are many scenes where the actions and characters are meticulously described with shades of colors and numerous materials. Observing Dorian Gray’s cultural actions evokes the behaviour of a male person with a strong appetite for fashion, interior decoration, ornamented objects, flowers and literature. For instance, Dorian Gray’s fierce interest in a publication, a present from Lord Henry, is mentioned more as an act of fashion than an act of form. It describes how “[h]e procured from Paris no less than nine large paper copies of the first edition and had them bound in different colours” (102). Once again, these actions add an emphasized and exaggerated Victorian female dimension to the imaginary meaning, since the typical Victorian male conduct is entirely absent, like a vacuum of masculine acts. There is not much which reminds of what Felski calls the Victorian “masculine rationality, utility and progress” (1099). One example to illustrate this is the many detailed enumerations of delicate objects such as embroidery, pearls, scarf-pins and rings in the narration (Wilde 25, 107, 110, 125). They correspond, on the contrary, well with the vain Victorian woman who likes to decorate according to Felski’s description (1096).

The second code of culture, talk, described in the literal text actually concerns many of Dorian Gray’s expressions about the portrait painted of him. His talk topics concern his fear of him growing old, while the portrait would remain young (Wilde 34, 77, 87, 97, 119). He engages in many conversations, in which compliments are generously shared between the male speakers (27, 131, 147, 163). There are also conversations about Sybil, his girlfriend and wife to be (57). When dining out he enjoys listening to others conversing about acquaintances.

Cohen’s opinion on Dorian Gray’s verbal production of conversation topics about his fear of growing old, and about his short experience with female attraction are related to homoerotism.
Cohen argues that both point to Dorian Gray’s awareness of his male partners, which is said to be so obvious to himself but so invisible to others (810). Just as important is Cohen’s claim that the portrait of Dorian Gray substitutes a vocabulary for same-sex desire, which simply did not exist in public language (807).

Looking at the second cultural code, talk, and the mental conceptualization of Dorian Gray, makes him appear to be a woman. For instance, this becomes obvious when comparing his conversation topics with relevant observations from empirical results. The explanation is, as evidence from a 1970s study shows that women speak to close same-sex friends most about family problems, followed by doubts and fears (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 123). This is exactly what Dorian Gray does, whose utmost fear is that somebody would reveal his secrets by unveiling the portrait of him that the artist Basil has painted (Wilde 100, 111). This finding resonates with Cohen’s observation of a homoerotic male who conceals his attraction towards other men. Furthermore, the 1970’s research results show that the least frequent conversation topic among men is intimate relations. Upon reading the narrated conversations, it appears that Dorian Gray often does engage in discussions with his close male friends, or is talked about like a woman, in contexts of intimacy with men. Cohen’s homoerotic theory certainly is evident in this conversation context. The reason is that an abundance of similar topics that illustrates this type of male intimate talk is found in the text (10, 24, 143). One of these examples is “You treated me as no man has ever treated me before”, addressed by Lord Wotton to Dorian Gray (131). This talk pattern is interpreted as that of a homoerotic Dorian Gray.

One more aspect on talk is that there is a female tendency to specify color in detailed range of shades, which results from previous research have shown (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 240). However, this is a male dominant tendency, and not a female one, featured in Wilde’s text.
One typical example is when Lord Henry is described as “looking up at the little clouds that, like ravelled skeins of glossy white silk, were drifting across the hollowed turquoise of the summer sky” (Wilde 23). Similar descriptions are found throughout the narration (1, 146, 147, 150).

These kinds of discussions very much resemble women’s passionate talk, not men talking about fear and intimacy, which men do not frequently do, judging from the research results (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 123). The same is true for Dorian Gray’s passivity during conversations, which has been established as a typical female speech style (124). Another observed pattern in the story is the repetitive complementing given and received among the main male characters, which normally is addressed to a woman and not to a man (150). One of many of these male exclamations addressed by a male friend to Dorian Gray is “You have never looked more charming than you do tonight.” (Wilde 162). In this essay this type of talk is comprehended as a man complimenting and addressing a woman. The same-sex desire expressed verbally, which Cohen describes, is relevant in this talk context (806). Thus, the style of a man’s homoerotic verbal behaviour is obvious in this second cultural code of talk.

The above is the literal representation of the character Dorian Gray, shaped on the denotation level of existence, as decoded by the writer of this essay. The representation derived from the denoted text through the so-called semiotic signifiers. The signifiers conveyed a meaning of existing words and images, which were understood as certain codes of conduct, dress code and actions as follows. The obvious, explicit meaning of the actual narrative is the story of the lives of a blond and blue-eyed man in his twenties and the people he socializes with, mostly featuring two other men. The location is primarily London in the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. In sum, Dorian Gray is profiled as an aristocratic, handsome bachelor. His life is described as that of a fortunate young Londoner. He is a follower of fashion, he enjoys an active night and club life,
and he is interested in art. He commits suicide on his thirty-eighth birthday. The conclusion from the literal representation is therefore that the character Dorian Gray is a masculine individual.

Cohen’s reading presents a different picture of Dorian. It is a picture of a man who tries to come to terms with his sexual passion for men. Cohen’s mental concepts of this character reflect a homoerotic-oriented male identity with a same-sex preference. Besides, Cohen finds that this person leads a lifestyle that contradicts the common aristocratic views of a man (805).

Once again, contrary to the actual narrative, the mental conceptualization of the character Dorian Gray made this contemporary reading sometimes associate him to the character of a Victorian woman and equally often as a homoerotic male. The above perceptions derived from the connoted level of mental concepts and they were generated from the so-called semiotic signifieds. This deeper allegorical story, shaped on the connotation level of myth, is that of the lives of a feminized man and people with whom he socializes. Dorian Gray constantly expresses his love for decoration, fashion and passion. Therefore it is argued that his character is a homoerotic man with evident feminine attributes.

3. Conclusion

To summarize, the aim of this study was to semiotically analyze how the use of language in Wilde’s literal text generated a portrayal of the main character Dorian Gray. It was demonstrated from highlighting a few of his daily practices featured in the story, that he was perceived as a feminized young male individual who devotes intense attention to vanity, decoration and accessorizing. This semiotic analysis identified four codes of conduct that are signs of the character Dorian Gray’s social, cultural and temporal life.

First, the code of body-talk literally presents a socializing unmarried young man in action, while mentally generating the characterization of a passive and vain woman as well as a
homoerotic man. The matrimony code describes in words a bachelor’s lifestyle, while the mental image discloses a feminized, single man romantically involved with other men. The literal code of art is about acts of form, featuring a design-oriented follower-of-fashion with a deep interest in literature and music. The literal code of talk narrates a man’s conversations about a painted portrait, about his fear of growing old, as well as his talks sprinkled with courteous compliments, and his conversations about women. The mental code of talk perceives a man with a homoerotic talk pattern. It is discerned for instance, from his discussion topics such as romantic intimacy with men, his expressive and excessive verbal use of shades of colors, in addition to him receiving compliments, and him sitting idly by listening to others conversing. From a personal imagination this reader assumed a meaning of Dorian Gray upon combining the above-mentioned literal words and images with the mental concepts of him.

Secondly, this assumed meaning of the four explored codes communicated signs of the main character. Dorian Gray develops as a privileged Londoner with a social and cultural position that does not restrict him from acting as he does. For instance, this is where the similarity is found to Cohen’s claim that Dorian Gray is “an image – a space” for the passion for other men (806). It is obvious from this reading about Dorian Gray’s social lifestyle that he is a sign of an unmarried feminized person fantasizing about romance and love. The sign of Dorian Gray’s cultural lifestyle personifies Pater’s philosophy of aestheticism. Cohen points to the symbolic displacement of the erotic onto the aesthetic in order to cover up Dorian Gray’s same-sex attraction (806). It is obvious that he loves decoration, and the impressive flow of described items tends to shape a literary work of parody, rather than that of a regular novel. For instance,
his interest in piano music, literature and fashion takes a turn towards exaggeration, almost myth-like. The temporal sign that bears meaning of the Victorian period is passion. This study has identified Dorian Gray as being talked about in numerous passionate conversations between other males (Wilde 10, 24, 143). Therefore, it is claimed that, considering these imaginary feminine traits of decoration, fashion and passion, Dorian Gray is not linked with social actions that demand masculinity. The central traits of his identity deviate from those normally defined as dominant masculine characteristics in the Victorian times.

On basis of these analytical findings, it was established that the literal representation in the narrative is about an aristocratic male, while the mental interpretation is that of an opposite to that of a “true male identity”, as Cohen puts it (806). The signs of Dorian Gray’s social, cultural and temporal life generate a meaning that detects a feminized man in a woman-like reality. Since it has been determined that feminized people would be interested in actions that demand femininity, it is clear that the character Dorian Gray is a homoerotic male. He is a sign of a phenomenal destabilizing gender structure in the Victorian British society, which in the Wilde narration means that the sexual role is that of a male person who is attracted to other men.

This study supports Felski’s claim, that Wilde’s novel was an aesthetic contribution to the debate about bourgeois values (1096), which Wilde insisted it was. By featuring someone who actually was not real, but rather someone who was like a divine dream, Wilde used the title character as a mocking icon. Looking for this portrayed man called Dorian Gray in a framed mirror is not looking in vain. However, it was women who were the mirror images of men (Irigaray qtd. in Ryan 68), implying that the female symbolizes the vanity and the parody. Femininity was the opposite of all that signified the strong and the steadfast male. That is the reason why that his mirrored image thus reflects a woman with finely scarlet lips, frank blue
eyes, and crisp gold hair in cosmetics and accessories, a product of the Victorian aesthetic consumption and commodity advertisements.

An additional mirrored view discussed in this study is the one from Cohen’s perspective called the “magical mirror”. It refers to the painted portrait of Dorian Gray as mirroring his soul story (810). To support his claim, Cohen presents coded messages which Wilde wrote “without words and not in script”. Cohen convincingly suggests that Wilde is the author of a “novel about homosexuality and no body came” (805). Cohen calls the homoerotic theme “not naming the unsayable”, which he maintains is Wilde’s “mute” method to convey in writing the same-sex desire between the three males (825). This study considers this novel to be a story not solely about the soul of the enigmatic Dorian Gray but certainly about women as well. There is an ambiguity about him that points to a blurred sexual role in social and cultural contexts.

This study supports Cohen’s claim when it comes to homoerotism and that the “absent presence” of the portrait symbolizes male same-sex desire. Cohen maintains that Dorian Gray is a sign of male same-sex desire (806). However, the absence of the portrait is not only a sign of homoerotic desire. Besides, it is a female trait, which Felman has identified as the female opposite to male presence (7, 8). The code of conduct, the dress code, as well as the actions of Dorian Gray signal signs of feminized behaviour, dress and speech, as identified by Felski (1096) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (15, 158). Further, men that are not masculine, like the character Dorian Gray, are men that some people would find feminized. The conclusion is that therefore, he is a feminized male individual with strong female attributes. This study of the Dorian Gray character is an example of Victorian men in their early twenties, that shows that not all of them were men as masculine as history would have us believe.
This analysis supports Barthes’ semiotic theory as explained by Hall, that one sign symbolizes something related to prevailing ideology in society, and that there are different ways to interpret a sign of social life (Hall 39). By portraying Dorian Gray as a homoerotic male, it is easy as a reader to interpret Wilde’s character as a sign of the Victorian destabilizing gender structure in the British society.
Works Cited

Primary Source


Secondary Sources


