

D.R. Piso 3949435  
BA Thesis English Language  
and Culture  
Utrecht University  
10 February 2016  
Supervisor: Dr. Barnita Bagchi  
Second Reader: Dr. Roselinde  
Supheert  
7641 words (incl. quotations)

Victorian  
Representations of  
Crime and  
Masculinity:

Arthur Conan Doyle's  
*The Sign of the Four* and  
Oscar Wilde's *The  
Picture of Dorian Gray*

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Context .....	4
Chapter I: Crime and Victorian Morality in <i>The Sign of the Four</i> .....	8
Chapter II: Sherlock Holmes as the Victorian Male?.....	13
Chapter III: Aestheticism and Morality in <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> .....	17
Chapter IV: The Victorian Dandy: Masculinities in <i>Dorian Gray</i> .....	22
Conclusion.....	26
Bibliography.....	28

## Introduction

In August 1889, two prominent writers attended a dinner party at the Langham Hotel in London, together with Joseph M. Stoddart, the editor of the American periodical *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. It was the first time Arthur Conan Doyle and Oscar Wilde met, and the two men – surprisingly, given their differences – got along well.<sup>1</sup> Both writers agreed to submit a work for publication in *Lippincott's*: Doyle wrote his second Sherlock Holmes story, *The Sign of the Four*,<sup>2</sup> and Wilde published the first version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Both works were important for the careers of their writers, as Doyle became famous for his stories about the unconventional sleuth, whereas *The Picture of Dorian Gray* became representative of the Aesthetic movement but was also highly controversial for its immoral passages.

The two works have many similarities but also can be contrasted to each other. Both are set in Victorian London, and have male protagonists: in fact, they are almost exclusively inhabited by male characters, with the biggest exceptions being Miss Morstan in *The Sign of the Four* and Sibyl Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – who propel both stories forward in ways that are quite similar on close inspection. Whereas Sherlock Holmes is the solver of crime, Dorian Gray gradually becomes a criminal; both characters hold a unique position in society. This thesis will analyse the representation of crime and masculinities in both works to see how they interrelate with one another, and how they are exemplary of late nineteenth-century Britain. Each novel will be discussed in two chapters: the first chapters – respectively chapters I and III – focus on the themes of crime and morality, as these are important for the narrative of either novel. The second chapter for each novel – chapters II and IV – will

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Doyle's memoirs, Wilde had read some of his work and made him feel at ease. "He had delicacy of feeling and tact, for the monologue man, however clever, can never be a gentleman at heart" (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: *Memories and Adventures: an Autobiography* 66).

<sup>2</sup> More commonly a four-worded title (*The Sign of Four*) is used, but since the original publication was titled *The Sign of the Four*, this will be the title used in the rest of this paper.

revolve around representations of masculinity and will focus more on the relations between characters.

## Context

### The Study of Masculinities

The study of masculinities seems to be a logical follow-up to the feminist studies of literature focusing on the role and representation of women that emerged in the late twentieth century. Gender studies revolve around the theory that history and language are subject to culturally devised notions of gender. Initially, feminist theory sought to analyse gender inequality by focusing on the position of women in history and literature. From this theoretic field emerged the study of LGBTQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer studies – and masculinity studies. To redefine the position of women is to redefine that of men as well, especially since “men’s outlooks and culturally defined characteristics were formerly the unexamined norm for science, citizenship, and religion” (Kimmel, Hearn and Connell 1). Gender theory that centres women as its sole subject, with men as the opposing, oppressive object, leaves out the notion that the claim of male superiority

has been a *claim* only, hiding a more complex dynamic by which such assertions are always contested, both externally and internally. While the male body has often served as a paradigm and metaphor for male-dominated culture and society, it has also served as a site for struggle. Constructions of differing political, regional, national, and more recently, sexual identities among men have always worked to undermine any sense of a unified phallic front. (Hall 6)

In this sense, even the patriarchal society that was originally constructed with men at its centre still is exactly that: a construct, consisting of both male and female paradigms, a set of ideal masculinities as well as femininities. These often unconscious but dominant masculine ideals have a huge influence on the perception of types of femininity, morality and race.

Judith Butler, who states that “gender is always a doing” (Butler 33), suggests a struggle to

conform to the male gender role even among heterosexual males although it is obscured by the seemingly favoured position of masculinity in patriarchy. The study of masculinities, however, cannot be seen as a study of minorities; rather, it is the study of how a majority is still compliant with self-imposed imagery of its position as the masculine power.

### **Victorian Masculinities**

Nineteenth-century Britain saw an institutionalisation of gender through education – in the form of boarding schools, separate for boys and girls, but also later in life through the gentleman’s club and the household, which was a woman’s terrain in particular.<sup>3</sup> Despite this clear division between genders, Victorians struggled to retain a uniform definition of gender identity, as even gender ideals often conflicted with each other. Also, the way in which British patriarchy was constructed resulted in a strong emphasis on homosocial relationships, described by Eve Sedgwick as “social bonds between persons of the same sex [...] obviously meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual’” (696). Because of this distinction, homosociality is often paired with homophobia: consequently, changes in the perception of gender and sexuality are problematic in a patriarchal society such as Victorian Britain. Amidst this conflict emerged philosophies in which gender was perceived as rather more fluid, such as the Aesthetic movement that Oscar Wilde, among others, was part of. The Aesthetes emphasised the importance of artificiality and beauty above moral and political values. During the fin de siècle, the Aesthetes were closely associated with dandyism: the dandy is characterised by his preference for flamboyant, expensive clothing and an exclusive taste in art. Most of all, the dandy is an *act* that only succeeds when it receives attention. As defined by Rhonda K. Garelick,

---

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed insight into the gendered Victorian society, see Sonya O. Rose’s *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England*.

Dandyism is itself a performance, the performance of a highly stylized, painstakingly constructed self, a solipsistic social icon. Both the early social dandyism of England and the later, more philosophical French incarnations of the movement announced and glorified a self-created, carefully controlled man whose goal was to create an effect, bring about an event, or provoke reaction in others through the suppression of the ‘natural’. (3)

As Garelick’s quotation marks already suggest, that what is seen as “natural” is in this context a socially accepted type of masculinity, one that is influenced by societal changes, and not a rigid concept. Dandyism was met with varying reactions: while the dandy was preaching beauty, others were preoccupied with the idea of sensible *manliness*. Arthur Conan Doyle was among the writers who believed in the virtue of male character as the backbone of the British Empire: “The themes of character, manliness and empire within the ideology of imperialism were thus organized around two equations: declining character = world run amok; character maintained or restored = world righted” (Wilson 24). These opposing visions of the Victorian male were consequences of the rapid expansion of the British Empire: with growing urbanisation and imperialism, British society underwent drastic changes throughout and towards the end of the nineteenth century. The British Empire was vast and provided a steady flow of trade and migration. Produce from the colonies was imported and textiles, ceramics, spices and herbs made their appearance in the British market. The middle class threatened to overtake the aristocracy in terms of political and economic influence as capitalism created opportunities for wealth, but meanwhile the lower classes struggled with the workload in an increasingly industrialising nation. Amidst the tumult of nineteenth-century Britain, it became an issue of importance to re-establish a set of true British values to compete with the growing ambiguity of Britishness. Sometimes more symptomatic than intentional, but nonetheless always present below the surface, were the roles ascribed to both masculinity and femininity.

In this patriarchy, the ideal of 'manliness' became an important driving force behind the politics of colonialism and was, as stated, believed to ensure the stability of the British Empire. As Elisa Glick discusses in *Dialectics of Dandyism*, the dandy is as much a performance of aesthetics as it is a political rebellion against the rigid, manly, ideal (131).



## Chapter I: Crime and Victorian Morality in *The Sign of the Four*

‘That is why I have chosen my own particular profession, or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world.’

‘The only unofficial detective?’ I said, raising my eyebrows.

‘The only unofficial consulting detective,’ he answered. ‘I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection. When Gregson or Lestrade or Athelney Jones are out of their depths – which, by the way, is their normal state – the matter is laid before me. [...] The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward.’ (4)

As becomes clear early on in *The Sign of the Four*, Sherlock Holmes is no ordinary detective. He solves crime, and is essential for keeping down crime rates in Victorian London. His position is unique: in his own words, Holmes *created* his profession, and with it a space for himself to function in, but at the same time outside of, Victorian society. As an intellectual, Holmes is unrivalled by the officers of the Scotland Yard police force. The flaw in others, like Athelney Jones, is not that they are incapable of deducing facts but that they lack the imagination to think like the criminal himself (Jann 689). Holmes is often annoyed by the way the police force operates, causing him to work mostly by himself, with the help of John Watson and the Baker Street Irregulars: a gang of young street urchins Holmes employs to spy for him. Holmes’ methods are unconventional and often controversial, and his personality is a difficult one even for Watson, who witnesses him taking doses of cocaine when his mind is desperate for a challenge (3) and who often trails behind him without being fully informed of Holmes’ plans. However, Holmes’ methods are incredibly successful: the fact that he functions outside of the Victorian institutions paradoxically makes him the one person to reinforce this very construct.

When Holmes and Watson receive a visit from Miss Mary Morstan, Holmes is intrigued by the mystery surrounding her father's disappearance and the pearls she is sent anonymously each year. It is his fascination with the mystery, and not necessarily his sense of justice, that makes him want to pursue the case. It is Watson, not Holmes, who is noticeably empathetic with Miss Morstan's situation. Following the instructions in an unsigned letter the party travels to one of the lesser regions of London. They arrive at Mr Thaddeus Sholto's residence, in his own words an "oasis of art in the howling desert of London" (19). The word "oasis" is well-suited, as Sholto's house is decorated in Oriental fashion with "[t]he richest and glossiest of curtains and tapestries", an "amber and black" carpet, "[t]wo great tiger-skins", "a huge hookah" and a great many other expensive and Oriental artefacts (19). Watson's description of Sholto is not very flattering: he is small, bald, "and his features were in a perpetual jerk – now smiling, now scowling, but never for an instant in repose. Nature had given him a pendulous lip, and a too visible line of yellow and irregular teeth" (19). With his housing in the East End and his remarkable taste and appearance, it is clear that Sholto does not fit into conventional Victorian society. For wholly different reasons than Holmes, he too, is an outsider. Sholto relates the story of his father, who served in the British Indian Army. On his deathbed, Major Sholto confessed his knowledge of Arthur Morstan's death and the way he disposed of his body, shortly before being scared to his own death by the face of a man pressed against the window. Both Major Sholto and his son Bartholomew refused to inform Miss Morstan of her father's death because of the prospect of an Indian treasure which they want to get hold of, hidden in Pondicherry Lodge. Arthur Morstan's body was hidden with the help of Major Sholto's Indian servant Lal Chowdar, who seemed to have no moral issues with the disposal of a corpse. In numerous ways, the Orient is linked with a moral degeneration of the characters that are associated with it.

This connection is most clearly seen in the portrayal of Jonathan Small and Tonga, the

villains of the novel. When Small narrates the story of his enrolment in the British Army and his placement in India, he simultaneously explains how he turned from an ordinary Englishman into a criminal. At first, Small describes the ordered society he lived in as a plantation owner: “What I had to do was to ride over the plantation, to keep an eye on the men as they worked, and to report the idlers” (82). As a westerner, Small initially fits into the order of Indian society that was imposed by the British. Then, “without a note of warning”, the Indian Mutiny breaks out and Small is forced to flee. He justifies his involvement with the three Sikhs and the murder of the merchant by saying “I should like to know how many fellows in my shoes would have refused a share of this loot when they knew that they would have their throats cut for their pains” (90). The moral indifference that was first ascribed to the Sikhs has now been passed on to Small: by ignoring his orders at fort Agra he has turned his back on the British Empire, thereby losing his place in it.

Tonga, Small’s companion, does not have a history as an Englishman. He is indigenous to the Andaman Islands and represents the purest form of evil in the novel: an animalistic, uncontrollable savage. Tonga is described by Watson as follows:

Never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty. His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre light, and his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with half animal fury. (73)

Tonga embodies everything the Victorians feared in the colonies. His deformed features were linked to his savage nature and indicated he was seen as a lower type of man, and he is treated like one. In his essay on racial and criminal types in Victorian literature, John McBratney argues that “Doyle’s narrative ascribes the Islander’s violence not to any legitimate resentment of British invasions of the archipelago but to his race’s innate proclivity for monstrous aggression” (156): neither of the characters seem to show him any sympathy, as in their perception he is incapable of receiving it. Small sees him as his pet, loyal though “as

venomous as a young snake” (97) and “a little bloodthirsty imp” (99). He is a curiosity, being displayed by Small “at fairs and other such places as the black cannibal” (98), but when he kills Bartholomew Sholto with a poison dart it is clear that he cannot be controlled by Small. Both in his looks and his lack of morality, Tonga is the complete opposite of the ideal of the British Empire. The rebels opposing the British during the Indian Mutiny of 1857 are portrayed in a similar way. They are described as “two hundred thousand black devils let loose” (82), “black fiends” (83), “drunk with opium and with bang” (85). The Indians are portrayed as inherently different from westerners in *The Sign of the Four*, but the ways in which Small, the Sholto’s and Arthur Morstan associate with them has made them morally degenerate. Small, who has been in India the longest and whose closest companion is Tonga, has therefore also become the most criminal. He is no longer able to become truly ‘British’. Watson himself passes this judgement in the name of the Victorian reader:

I had now conceived the utmost horror of the man, not only for this cold-blooded business in which he had been concerned, but even more for the somewhat flippant and careless way in which he narrated it. Whatever punishment was in store for him, I felt that he might expect no sympathy from me. (90)

Although Sherlock Holmes is a solver of crime, his unconventional ways and his unique occupation in society make him an Other within Victorian society. In this context, the capitalised *Other* is used to describe any notion or person that deviates from the set societal norm, in this case, that of the British Empire. Holmes differs from the ideal of manliness and holds different moral standards, which makes him stand out within Victorian society. However, he opposes an Other *outside* society, which is seen as an external threat to the British Empire: the colonial Other is a product of the constructed, polarised conception of the West versus the East that makes “the Oriental [...] more Oriental, the Westerner more Western” (Said 46). In *The Sign of the Four* this Other is embodied by Tonga, the Indian

rebels and Jonathan Small. The Oriental *curse* of immorality that taints these characters but also the treasure of Agra itself is antagonistic to Holmes' Otherness, which exists of a highly rational and scientific mind. Both can be interpreted as symptoms of British Imperialism: it is exemplary that Holmes does not only cause Tonga's body to disappear altogether, but that even the cursed treasure of Agra ends up on the bottom of the Thames – as only a vague reminder of the colonial threats to the British Empire.

## Chapter II: Sherlock Holmes as the Victorian Male?

‘Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun-coloured houses. What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? What is the use of having powers, doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them? Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth.’ (9)

Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes is an incredibly paradoxical character: he combines a methodical, rational mind with an unusual sense of justice, an infallible, almost mythical method of deduction with a flawed and addictive personality, and an assortment of highly specialised knowledge with a profound lack of basic education in politics or astronomy. Although he is anything but a conventional character in any age, let alone the Victorian, Sherlock Holmes can be seen as a product of his times. It is important to keep in mind, on the one hand, the nature of the Sherlock Holmes novels as detective stories and thus adventure fiction, a genre which became increasingly popular throughout the nineteenth century; on the other, the social context of the Victorian age that was marked by rapid changes due to British imperialism and urbanisation. The adventure story was chiefly aimed at young boys and men, and served as an example for the typical Victorian male. An increase in the popularity of female writers and the feminisation of the household resulted in a reactive movement by writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson and also Arthur Conan Doyle to recapture and redefine that notion of “manliness”, which was the common word for masculinity and, strikingly, only existed in the singular form, implying not a varied range of personal masculinities, but one dominant set of values (Tosh 2). The Victorian era saw a divide in education and family life, positioning the male as the authorial figure occupied with “practical education, sharing with – especially male

– children their thoughts on business or politics” whereas the female was concerned with emotional, religious and moral education (Francis 639). However, Victorian manliness was not so much about distinguishing men from women, but rather “a set of values by which men judged other men, and it is a mistake to suppose that those values were exclusively – or even mainly – to do with maintaining control over women” (Tosh 5). Since the detective story was aimed at a male audience, it served mainly to instruct them in the Victorian ideal of manliness. As stated before, control over the self was perhaps the most important characteristic for the Victorian gentleman – though the lower classes were believed to be less capable of such a thing – besides independence, courage, assertiveness, and intelligence. Thus, “the detective story, unlike most kinds of popular literature, prizes intellectual gifts above all others”(Grella 36).

Although not in a typical sense, Sherlock Holmes shows signs of manliness as well: he is rational, educated, self-disciplined and never lets his emotions control him. His self-discipline is ironically apparent in his use of drugs, which serve as a means to control his mind when it is not otherwise occupied, but when unnecessary Holmes does not seem to have a problem quitting them. However, Sherlock Holmes is not, like the ideal Victorian male, a family man, as he is unmarried, has no children, and his relationship with his brother Mycroft is devoid of affection. He lacks prowess in business and politics and expresses a distinct disinterest in it. Moreover, Holmes is a gifted intellectual, but has no use for it unless he can demonstrate his skill. He is rather arrogant, as Watson remarks when Holmes comments on the way he documented their previous case, “A Study in Scarlet”: “I was annoyed at this criticism of a work which had been specially designed to please him. I confess, too, that I was irritated by the egotism which seemed to demand that every line of my pamphlet should be devoted to his own special doings” (5). Holmes is an elitist in his minute interest in unconventional subjects such as the distinction between types of tobacco ash (6). He loves to

disguise himself as someone else and does this so well that even Watson does not recognise him: he is a lover of artifice and of things that are not what they appear to be. He considers crime and his own profession as a consulting detective, art: he “finds a sort of poetry in crime. Newspaper reporters and the police see only the vulgarity of crime, as Holmes remarks, because they fail to be selective in their analysis of the facts; such selectivity depends on aesthetic sensibility” (Barolsky 440). Morality, to Holmes, is subordinate to aesthetics: in his own way, he is very much a dandy.

It is Doctor John Watson who represents Holmes’ moral conscience. Although not fully, he conforms more to the Victorian ideal of manliness, as he is intelligent, loyal and possesses a strong sense of morality. He is, however, a bachelor who shares an apartment with Holmes instead of being a family man: that is, until Miss Mary Morstan calls at 221B Baker Street. As Mary Alcaro argues in “My Dear Holmes: Examining Sedgwick’s Theory of Homosociality in *The Sign of Four*”, the homosocial relationship between Watson and Holmes, combined with a degree of homophobia that is inherent to such a relationship, causes Watson to project his desire for Holmes onto a woman. In this way, Watson’s pursuit of and eventual engagement to Mary Morstan can be seen as a way to channel his homosexual desire while maintaining his ‘manliness’. Holmes, on the other hand, is more actively and openly denying the norms of masculinity by assuming the role of the *intellectual* dandy. When Watson declares his love for Mary at the end of the novel, Holmes states that according to him “love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason which I place above all things. I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgement” (100). Love and marriage do not conform to the masculine type Holmes designs for himself: that of a rational thinker who is wholly occupied with solving crime. Both men, in Judith Butler’s terms, are *performing*.

Just like in his profession and his sense of morality, Sherlock Holmes distinguishes



himself from the norm in the expression of his masculinity. He is, for all his eccentricities, an outcast, but his greatest talent lies in his thorough understanding of social codes. He is a performer who is only capable of functioning when he can display his talents, and he has numerous unconventional interests that discern him from the typical Victorian male. Despite his intelligence and his rational manner, Holmes does not conform to the ideal of manliness: he is more concerned with the aesthetics of crime than with morality. This makes his relationship with Watson an interesting one, as the latter is the almost complete opposite to Holmes. Watson is empathetic, pragmatic, and moral: he does not naturally conform to the ideals of manliness – hence, perhaps, his attraction to Holmes – but he adjusts to the Victorian expectations of manliness by courting Miss Morstan. Both Holmes and Watson perform different types of masculinity.

### Chapter III: Aestheticism and Morality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even. (DG 126-127)

The first edition of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared in Lippincott's in 1890. However, Wilde published a second, revised edition a year later: this version contained a preface and several passages were changed, added or removed: Wilde wrote some seven additional chapters in his second edition. The changes were made after the first edition of *Dorian Gray* was criticised for its indecency. Even after Wilde's revisions, it remained a highly controversial novel, which is perhaps unsurprising in a society where self-discipline was one of the higher virtues and art was supposed to have a moral function above all else. Although Wilde stated his novel should be considered for its aesthetic value and not for its morality, – "All art is quite useless" (4) – *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a story of conflict between aestheticism and morality of its own right. While Basil Hallward captures Dorian's beauty in a painting, his friend Henry Wotton discusses his view on art and morality:

The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for. [...] The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion – these are the two things that govern us. And yet – [...] Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. (19)

From then on, through Lord Henry's influence, Dorian starts to indulge in the pleasures of life, seemingly without suffering the consequences. Due to this lack of restraint, he becomes involved in scandal and crime without feeling remorse. His painting, however, starts to show

the corruption of his soul and Dorian hides it away. His face, on the other hand, shows nothing of the way he mistreats both his body and soul. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is an aesthetic novel, but it also problematizes the aesthetic ideal through the character of Dorian Gray.

Aestheticism aimed not only to view art as something “quite useless” (4), without any moral or political function, but also to make life into a work of art. As Lord Henry explains to Dorian, even “the bravest man among us is afraid of himself” (19) because every man has sinful desires he refuses to acknowledge. The solution, he states, is to admit to these desires and engage in the sinful pleasures of life: only then can one fully appreciate his identity. The result of this philosophy is that all things are judged by their aesthetic rather than their moral value, and that sin is merely the consequence of the acknowledgement of the self. Although Oscar Wilde was a supporter of the Aesthetic movement, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not merely a celebration of aestheticism. Rather, it shows the conflict between aesthetic value and morality, as Dorian’s pursuit of beauty results in the uglification of his soul as seen in his portrait.

When Dorian falls in love with Sibyl Vane, the actress in a second-rate theatre in East London, he is not interested in her background, but enchanted by the roles she plays: “‘Tonight she is Imogen,’ [...] ‘and to-morrow night she will be Juliet.’ ‘When is she Sibyl Vane?’ ‘Never’” (48). Sibyl Vane is aptly named, as she is an object of Dorian’s vanity and because her engagement to him is quite literally in vain: she fails to live up to Dorian’s expectations when she loses her ability to act because of her love for Dorian. After an awful acting performance she exclaims: “‘You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection’” (75). This line echoes the Preface of the novel, which summarises the aesthete ideal: “‘It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors’” (3). Sibyl Vane’s remark clearly shows that her view on art is different from Dorian’s, who believes that art is

not a reflection of life, but of self-identity. When he rejects her, she poisons herself. Dorian reads about her unfortunate death in the newspaper: “He frowned, and, tearing the paper in two went across the room and flung the pieces away. How ugly it all was! And how horribly real ugliness made things!” (106) Dorian is not grieved by Sibyl’s death, but is affected by the “ugliness” of it: he judges the situation by its aesthetic value rather than its moral one: it is the ugliness of the situation, however, that makes things so “horribly real”: ugliness reminds Dorian of his painting, and of his own moral decline. Instead of feeling guilty about Sybil’s death, Dorian comes to see it as “a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took part, but by which I have not been wounded” (86). Through her death, Sibyl Vane has once again become an aesthetic figure and Dorian sees her death as a tragic but beautiful event. However, the circumstances surrounding her death show the conflict between aestheticism and morality: Dorian’s pursuit of personal pleasure makes him ruthless in his treatment of Sibyl.

Dorian’s looks remain unblemished by the sins he commits: the people around him are shocked by his reputation but do not believe the rumours when they meet him. Physical beauty seems to be closely linked to virtue, but this is proved to be false. The book that Dorian receives from Lord Henry and that infatuates him tells of a young man who lives the life of an aesthete, “loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin” (107). Dorian’s looks represent his artificial virtue, whereas his painting shows the natural state of his soul. Once again, Dorian is playing a part: he is pure virtue to those around him, and the protagonist in his own play of wealth, luxury, flowers, perfumes and adoring youths. As Christopher Craft argues, the two images Dorian sees in his looking glass and in his portrait invoke a fascination with the self and with Dorian’s aesthetic self-development (109). In a

Gothic retelling of the Greek tale of Narcissus, Dorian becomes strangely enchanted by the portrait as it becomes increasingly deformed:

He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs. (109)

In a moral sense, the painting should be a shock to Dorian, as it shows his degeneration. However, it merely fascinates him: Dorian has lost his sense of morality, so he no longer cares about the state of his soul. As Dorian's fascination with his own image grows, so does his fatal influence over others: the young men he associates himself with become tarnished, and Sibyl Vane is not the last to commit suicide after Dorian's involvement (127). As Nils Clausson argues in his essay "Paterian Self-Development versus Gothic Degeneration", Dorian is a paradox of beauty and repulsiveness and deteriorates into an animal state, just like the face of his portrait is growing "bestial". Clausson remarks that the lower classes in the novel are described in a similar animalistic way: the Victorian association of lower classes with criminality manifests itself here. (358) As Dorian becomes increasingly corrupted, he starts to resemble the lower forms of humanity, described as "monstrous apes" (76) and "grotesque children" (77).

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be read as an exploration of the aesthetic ideals and the consequences of a purely aesthetic lifestyle. On the one hand, the novel represents the aesthetic ideal through the wit of Lord Henry, but it also shows the negative effect of a ruthless pursuit of personal pleasure. It is clear that Dorian Gray is corrupted by the influence

of Lord Henry which causes him to morally degenerate. Dorian's insistence on viewing life as the ultimate work of art results in his abandonment of morality and increases his corrupting influence upon others. His portrait, the only visible sign of the deterioration of his soul, is hidden away, symbolising Dorian's increasing detachment from his moral consciousness. The portrait becomes ugly and animalistic as a representation of Dorian's criminality, which was commonly associated with the lower species of man. However, it is important to note the apparent homosexual tendencies throughout the novel – implied more than once as sinful desires, which were commonly condemned in the Victorian age. It is useful to keep in mind the close relation between immorality, crime and homosexuality in the Victorian age: the duality of Dorian Gray and his portrait and the conflict between outward appearances and inner desires is closely related to Victorian types of masculinity. The following chapter will therefore analyse *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from a gendered perspective.

## Chapter IV: The Victorian Dandy: Masculinities in *Dorian Gray*

[Dorian] used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. (121)

While aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is closely associated with morality, it is also unequivocally related to sexuality, and more specifically, the secret homosexuality of its characters. True beauty, according to Dorian Gray and Lord Henry, is at once the full realisation of one's nature (19) and a constant element of artifice: after all, it is art that life should imitate, not the other way around. This paradox between reality and imitation, essence and appearance, is apparent throughout the novel: it is Dorian's picture, not his physical appearance but his likeness on canvas, which comes to show his true nature. However, his pursuit of self-realisation leads him to indulge in a decadent lifestyle that is guided by short-term pleasure but nevertheless still results in an inescapable form of self-denial: Dorian hides his portrait in his attic and becomes increasingly paranoid in his secrecy. This secrecy is representative of Dorian's struggle to acknowledge his homosexual identity in a society that does not recognise it, but rather condemns its open manifestation.

In her essay "The Dialectics of Dandyism", Elisa Glick argues that the Victorian dandy combines a preoccupation with outward appearance with "an intellectual and antibourgeois pose" (131), which is a reaction to modern capitalism. As Philip Mallett states in *The Victorian Novel and Masculinity*, "Male identity is not an ahistorical given, but the outcome of shifting cultural contest and debate, inflected by class, race, religion, and sexual orientation" (vi). While Glick argues that capitalism enhances secrecy because it is based on

“illusions” and a “distinctly queer split between appearance and essence” (136), for the Victorian dandy this split was further enhanced by the cultural impact of imperialism. British imperialism caused a need to reclaim the notion of the British identity against the colonised Other and, following this redefinition of the Victorian identity, the Other within the self. The Orient came to represent that part of man which is hidden, exotic and primitive: in terms of Victorian masculinity, it was closely related to the unnamed vices of homosexual desire. The dandy embodied, beside his predilection towards aesthetics, an evidently exotic taste. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the Orient is constantly present: in the first chapter, when Lord Henry Wotton is introduced, he is depicted lying on a “divan of Persian saddlebags”, in Basil Hallward’s studio while the curtains were

producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion. [...] The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ. (5)

Immediately after Lord Henry’s exotic reverie, the portrait of Dorian Gray is described, and its Oriental Otherness is established. Just like the British colonies, this Otherness in Dorian – and in the aspirations of the dandy in general – is two-sided: on the one hand, his beauty and exotic taste make him an incredibly interesting subject in the London society, but on the other he is boundless in his pursuit of pleasure, and in that sense primitive and immoral. As the story progresses, the references to the Orient become darker and more secretive. One particular passage relates to “a small Chinese box of black and gold-dust lacquer, elaborately wrought, the sides patterned with curved waves, and the silken cords hung with round crystals and tasselled in plaited metal threads” (154). The box is hidden in an ornately decorated cabinet and contains opium. Dorian reveals it just after he has burned Basil Hallward’s clothes, the last evidence of his murder. He also frequents the poor East End of London,



which is for a large part occupied by Orientals who ran opium dens. Dorian comes to identify with the status of primitive and criminal that was ascribed to these classes: “The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense actuality of impression, than all the gracious shapes of Art, the dreamy shadows of Song” (156-157). Dorian, having recognised the sin of his existence – the murder of Basil Hallward serves as the turning point – acknowledges the Oriental Other in himself and concludes that he as well should be an outcast.

The male figures of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry, and Basil Hallward seem to represent different types of masculinity. The latter is arguably the most representative of the ideal of manliness that was pursued by writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle: he is temperate, controlled, and possesses a strong sense of morality. Although he struggles with his – potentially homosexual – feelings for Dorian, he never acts upon them: he is reluctant to exhibit Dorian’s portrait because he believes “I have put too much of myself into it” (6). The three men have a homosocial bond that was common in the institutionalised Victorian society, but they experience homophobia as “a *necessary* consequence of such patriarchal institutions as heterosexual marriage” (Sedgwick 698). Where Dorian and Lord Henry try to solve the problem of their homosocial desire by denying their identity – both have a love for theatre, roleplaying and fancy dress, and in Dorian’s case the portrait, which he locks away – Basil Hallward denies himself the realisation of his desires but is perhaps the most aware of their existence. After all, the portrait reveals not just Dorian’s sins: it shows Basil’s love for Dorian, still slightly visible to Basil when he is shown the painting in its altered state. Eventually, Dorian’s aesthetic lifestyle has made everything ugly instead of beautiful: “Ugliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason” (156). In this sense, the novel is itself in constant conflict over the virtue of aestheticism, much as it is unable to reach a moral conclusion regarding

homosexuality. Basil, who loves Dorian in an abstinent way, is portrayed as honest but fatally trusting in Dorian's virtue, whereas Dorian brings discredit upon all of the young men he befriends.

Dorian's homosexuality is awakened when he first views his portrait, "as if he had recognized himself for the first time. [...] The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation" (24). Throughout the novel, it is the strongest in the form of vanity, which increases as the portrait starts to alter whereas Dorian does not. The supernatural elements in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exemplify the problem with both the aesthetic ideal and imperialism in Victorian Britain. Dorian's portrait becomes representative of the dangers of exploitation for self-enrichment, and it does not require much imagination to apply this message to the way the colonies were occupied for the profit of the British Empire. Moreover, the portrait shows the moral conflict of the male characters struggling with homosexual desire. Basil is afraid to display the painting because it might reveal his feelings for Dorian, whereas it later comes to show the moral consequences of Dorian's actions as he – contrary to Basil – yields to the temptation that is his homosexual desire. Dorian's preoccupation with his appearance disguises an inner conflict that is represented by his portrait: by expressing his wish of eternal youth in exchange for his soul, "Gray hopes to merge appearance and essence, displacing the dialectic and rewriting the relation between outside and inside. In other words, he entertains the fantasy of producing in himself the fiction of a secretless self—a self that refuses the distinction between public and private" (Glick 139). Instead of doing so, however, the split between Dorian's looks and the state of his soul only increases.

## Conclusion

*The Sign of the Four* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are exemplary texts of late nineteenth century Britain. The aim of this thesis was to explore the ways in which crime and morality were represented in both texts, and to establish a connection with types of masculinity that could be distinguished, namely that of manliness and the dandy. The most important conclusion of this analysis is that the social and political backdrop of British imperialism is crucial to the understanding of crime and masculinities in the Victorian era, as it caused a series of societal changes but also elicited a need for renewed norms of morality and masculinity. An ideal of manliness was established to counterbalance the unfamiliar threats from the colonies, which became increasingly associated with immorality and crime. The fear of Oriental ‘Otherness’ and the political rebellion of the dandy both resulted from a preoccupation with appearances and the belief that the way a man looked represented his identity. Morality defines masculinity, with on the one hand the manly ideal as a conformity, and dandyism on the other as a way to stand out. Masculinity defines morality as well: homosexuality, for example, was condemned as a result of the homosocial construct of manliness.

Although Sherlock Holmes is essentially a solver of crime, and Dorian Gray becomes a criminal himself, both characters have much in common because they are both dandies, and both place the thrill of pleasure above morality. Both men are fascinated by things others would find ugly or vulgar: for Holmes, the pure cleverness of a criminal or the mystery of a crime, for Dorian Gray, all the things that are seen as immoral. Furthermore, they are lovers of artifice: Holmes is exceptional at finding the truth behind a false façade, most probably because he is such a good actor himself; Dorian Gray believes that life should approximate art and loses interest when it turns out to be mundane after all, as when he is for a brief period

infatuated with Sibyl Vane. John Watson, Holmes' companion, and Basil Hallward, the painter of Dorian's portrait, show many similarities as well. Watson describes Holmes through his own eyes, whereas Hallward paints a very personal image of Dorian. They are both men struggling to conform to the ideal of manliness by denying their homosocial desires or, in Watson's case, by projecting these desires onto a woman like Mary Morstan.

In both novels, colonial stereotypes are associated with Otherness, and also with a much-feared moral degeneration. Tonga originates from the Andaman Islands and is described as a lower type of man, who is prone to aggression and animalistic urges and is unable to understand moral codes. Small is originally an Englishman, but his prolonged stay in the Orient has resulted in a decline of his morality. Others who also have a connection to India have adapted some of this 'curse', such as Arthur Morstan and the Sholto's; just like Indian artefacts, such as the treasure of Agra. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oriental imagery represents the connection between pleasure and vice: Dorian collects expensive Oriental artefacts and smokes opium to forget about his sins.

Masculinities and crime in the two novels are in many ways closely connected to one another. They form a complex triangular connection with British imperialism, with each factor shaping the way in which the others are represented.

## Bibliography

### Secondary texts:

- Barolsky, Paul. "The Case of the Domesticated Aesthete." *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (1984): 438-452. Web.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1999. Print.
- Clausson, Nils. "'Culture and Corruption': Paterian Self-Development and Gothic Degeneration in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." *Papers on Language and Literature* (2003): 339-364. Web.
- Craft, Christopher. "Come See About Me: Enchantment of the Double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." *Representations* (2005): 109-136. Web. 4 January 2016.
- Doyle, Arthur Conan. "Mr. Stevenson's Methods in Fiction." *The Living Age* 15 February 1890: 417-424. Web.
- . *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: Memories and Adventures: an Autobiography*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2007. Web. 7 February 2016.
- Francis, Martin. "The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity." *The Historical Journal* (2002): 637-652. Web. 1 November 2015.
- Garelick, Rhonda K. *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. Print.
- Glick, Elisa. "The Dialectics of Dandyism." *Cultural Critique* (2001): 129-163. Web. 27 October 2015.

Grella, George. "Murders and Manners: The Formal Detective Novel." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* (1970): 30-48. Web. 10 December 2015.

Hall, Donald E. "Muscular Christianity: reading and writing the male social body." Hall, Donald E. *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 3-16. Print.

Jann, Rosemary. "Sherlock Holmes Codes the Social Body." *ELH* (1990): 685-708. Web. 19 November 2015.

Kimmel, M.S., J. Hearn and R.W. Connell. *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2005. Print.

Mallett, Phillip. "Preface." Mallett, Phillip. *The Victorian Novel and Masculinity*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. vi-xiii. Web.

McBratney, John. "Racial and Criminal Types: Indian Ethnography and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Sign of Four"." *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2005): 149-167. Web. 8 December 2015.

McCrea, Barry. "Introduction." Doyle, Arthur Conan. *Sherlock Holmes: Selected Stories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. vii-xxiii. Print.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 1978. Print.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. Print.

Tosh, John. *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2005. Web.

Wilson, Kenneth. "Fiction and Empire: The Case of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle." *Victorian Review* (1993): 22-42. 25 January 2016.

**Primary texts:**

Doyle, Arthur Conan. "The Sign of the Four." Doyle, Arthur Conan. *Sherlock Holmes: Selected Stories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 3-101. Print.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.