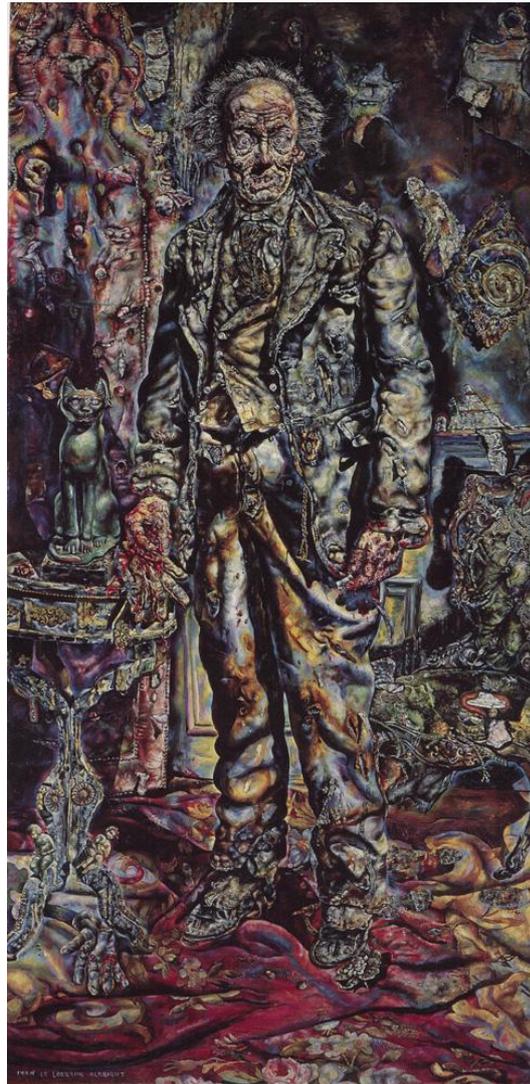
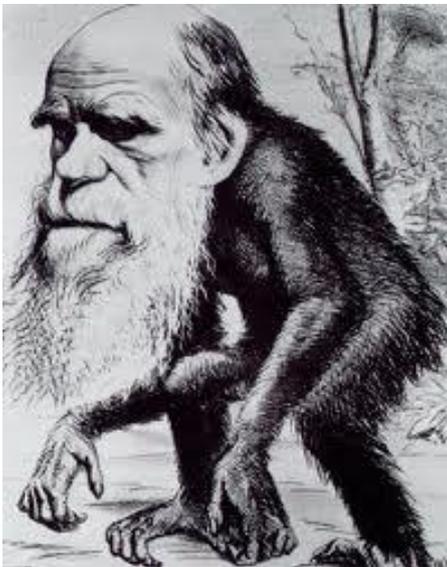


Degeneration, Decadence and Atavism:

The Influence of a Pseudoscience on Late Victorian Literature.

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Introduction

From the first ascent of the Gothic novel in the early 1800s to the Gothic fiction of the *fin de siècle*¹, notions about what is scary changed drastically. Whereas during the first wave the sinister was to be found in remote castles and abandoned graveyards, late Victorian fictions gave rise to a far more urbanised threat, one that came from within. With the rise of industrialisation and urbanisation, 19th century European society changed radically. Familiar patterns of life ceased to exist and Christianity gradually made way for a new belief in a whole range of scientific and pseudoscientific theories. One of these pseudoscientific ideas, which, arguably, inspired the most fear in the *fin de siècle* citizen, was that of degeneration. Although this idea of reversed evolution was first and foremost a continental invention, The United Kingdom was not unaffected by this disquieting theory and many late-19th-century writers incorporated it into their work. The degeneration-motif was one of the dominant themes in late Victorian Gothic fiction. Both Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* show clear use of the degeneration-motif.

In recent years, more and more cultural historians have acknowledged the importance of degeneration theory as a literary theme in *fin de siècle* literature. Lynn Pyket, editor of *Reading Fin de Siècle Fictions* (1996), states that in recent cultural studies about the late 19th century the figure of the degenerate and ideas about degeneration have increasingly become central themes. Degeneration was one of the governing ideas of the *fin de siècle* and had a deep impact on literary fiction. Daniel Pick, author of *Faces of Degeneration: A European disorder, c. 1848-1918* (1989), agrees that degeneration is a recurrent concern in English literature of the *fin de siècle*. Writers influenced by this idea are, among others, H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker and Robert Louis Stevenson. Even though both

¹ Conventionally denoting the period between approximately 1890 and 1914.

Dorian Gray and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* are mentioned briefly and repeatedly in recent studies on degeneration and *fin de siècle* literature, an in-depth analysis and comparison between the two works on the basis of the degeneration-motif is still lacking.

So, in this thesis I will try to demonstrate the presence of the degeneration-motif in late-Victorian Gothic literature, and in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in particular. In the first chapter, I will briefly describe the development from 18th century Gothic novels to late Victorian Gothic fiction and moreover discuss the shift from outward danger to inward threat. Then, in the second chapter, I will discuss *fin de siècle* discourses on degeneration theory and elaborate on their significance in late Victorian literature and society. Subsequently, in the third chapter, I will make an in-depth analysis of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* based on the degeneration-motif, followed by a similar analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in chapter four. I will conclude by comparing these two works and by reaffirming my hypothesis.

Chapter 1: Gothic literature - the first and second wave and the outward to inward shift

The term “Gothic”, as a name for everything that was on the opposite side of reason and order, first gained widespread use in the 18th century, but the origin of the word goes back as far as the 3rd century. Historically, the so-called Goths, an invading East Germanic tribe, are credited with playing a substantial role in the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the subsequent transition into medieval Europe. Accordingly, they have become a symbol for the destruction of culture and civilisation, and the triumph of chaos and barbarity (Luckhurst x). In post-Renaissance England, the word “Gothic” became synonymous with the horrors of the medieval past. When the term came to be employed for a genre of fiction that dealt with the gruesome and the supernatural, this negative connotation remained. Initially, Gothic fiction was not seen as real literature as it “was everything that offended neoclassical taste” (Luckhurst x). While Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is often considered to be the first Gothic novel, the work stands in isolation and the real torrent of Gothic fiction emerged some thirty years later in the 1790s with authors such as Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve and Matthew Lewis, who turned the Gothic novel into one of the most popular literary genres at the turn of the century (Luckhurst xi). After the publication of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1818 the hype quickly died out, not to re-emerge until the end of the 19th century, when manifestations of the Gothic reappeared in the works of Oscar Wilde, R.L. Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle and many others. When comparing these two waves of Gothic literature, an interesting change of theme seems to have taken place in the intervening lull.

To understand the first wave, it is necessary to look at the 18th century in its capacity as the Age of Enlightenment. Although this cultural and intellectual movement was sparked by philosophers such as John Locke and Baruch Spinoza, as early as 1650, it was 18th century France that saw a true culmination of Enlightenment ideas. Among the most prominent

spokesmen of the movement were philosophers such as Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu. The movement believed strongly in the power of reason and took a stand against inequality, superstition and irrationalism. Enlightenment ideology was strongly opposed to the way small minorities, such as the Church and the monarchy, abused their power to oppress the ordinary people by keeping them fearful and ignorant. While this new intellectual force spread to other countries, the French Enlightenment found its own climax in the revolution of 1789 (Israel 51-60). It is no coincidence that the first wave of Gothic novels appeared shortly after. Novels like Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Lewis are characteristic of their age in the themes they explore. Representing the old aristocracy and the institute of the Church respectively, they embodied a very contemporary phantom: the fear of inverted Enlightenment, of reversion into a bygone era of oppression and fear.² Around 1800 the ghastly was to be found in dilapidated castles or haunted monasteries and evil dwelt in the relics of a dark and unsavoury past (Luckhurst xi).

Then, after a silence of more than half a century, the Gothic rematerialised; this time not as a separate, and often not literarily acknowledged, genre, but in the work of many celebrated authors of the *fin de siècle*. While in the first wave the evil menace, which was mainly concentrated in secluded castles or isolated monasteries, seemed to occupy an external position, the second wave displayed a thematic shift that was distinctly introspective. Once again, in understanding this change, a comprehension of contemporary social, historical and cultural developments is vital. The socio-economic upheaval caused by the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent phenomenon of large-scale urbanisation drastically tore at the fabric of 19th century English society. As farming gradually gave way to factory production, what had been a relatively sheltered way of life, often in countryside villages where everyone knew one another, gave way to the anonymity of life in large urban settlements. The city, with

² Of course, in certain British conservative circles there was an equally large fear of revolution and ensuing chaos. (as testified by Edmund Burke's *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (1790)) (Israel 4, 344, 605).

its high crime rates and its lack of social cohesion and surveillance, provided an ideal breeding ground for paranoia and suspicion regarding the perfect strangers that were now one's neighbours.

Moreover, with the rise of cities and the march of science, came also a decline in religious faith. As tight-knit communities began to disappear and familiar patterns began to fade, many people desperately tried to find new forms of religion, to regain the lost feeling of security the Church used to provide them with. Whereas some sought refuge in the relatively newly originated array of esoteric movements, others found it in the equally modern field of science. Rather than the study of the world around them, it was the study of man that most fascinated the *fin de siècle* public. In the late Victorian age, the science of psychology was still in its infancy, but even so, the idea of a more or less autonomous unconscious, as introduced by Sigmund Freud, proved utterly compelling. The idea that man was supposedly largely governed by his own unconscious was especially alarming to the rational Victorian mindset, because the unconscious was precisely that: unconscious and therefore inherently uncontrollable.

Furthermore, religion was also violently shaken by the controversial theories of Charles Darwin, who, in 1871, published his book *The Descent of Man*³, in which he disclaims the idea that people were created by God, and instead contends that they were in fact improved versions of what were once apes. The theory that man was not created in God's likeness, but was essentially derived from a much more animal and primitive origin, was widely met with controversy, but held a certain fascination nonetheless. The pervading sentiment that the real danger came from within society, maybe even from within the self, was clearly mirrored in this second wave of Gothic literature. Many authors such as Oscar Wilde

³ *The Descent of Man* was Darwin's second great work on the theory of evolution, following the 1859 publication of *The Origin of Species*. Although, in the latter, Darwin does not apply evolutionary theory to human evolution, like he does in *The Descent of Man*, it stirred up a great deal of debate upon first publication. Religious leaders and opposed scientists found their spokesman in Bishop Wilberforce, while Darwin was supported by fellow scientists T.H. Huxley and John Tyndall (Greenblatt 1538).

and Robert Louis Stevenson, but also others like Edgar Allen Poe, Bram Stoker and Rudyard Kipling, took advantage of these newfound anxieties, and in novels such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde* the danger often does not present itself as an outside threat, but as the malignant and animal nature that supposedly underlies all of humanity.

Following the popularity of science, a proliferation of pseudoscientific theories also came into being. One of these theories, which is often regarded as one of the governing ideas of the *fin de siècle* (Pyket 13), was the so-called science of degeneration: a theory that put aside the old fear that somewhere there were still corrupted and decadent noblemen, or depraved monks, living a life of seclusion in their remote castles and monasteries and gave rise to an even more terrifying idea: the realisation that the source of this decadence and corruption, this moral and physical decay, was inside all of us.

Chapter 2: Degeneration, atavism, and decadence, and their effect on *fin de siècle* literature

In the middle of the nineteenth century, scientists found themselves at a dead end in their endeavour to find a physical explanation for mental illnesses. The solution presented itself in the form of the so-called “degeneration hypothesis”. Because this idea coincided in time with the Darwinian theory, it gained unprecedented popularity among both psychiatrists and the general public (Ackerknecht 54).

The concept originated in France and built on much older ideas about mental illness and heredity. However, it is Benedict Augustin Morel (1809-1873) who is considered to be the real creator of the degeneration theory. He defined the concept as follows: “Degenerations are deviations from the normal human type which are transmissible by heredity and which deteriorate progressively towards extinction” (Ackerknecht 55). Not only a medical man, but also a devout Catholic, Morel gave his theory a theological foundation, in which he claimed that the ultimate source of degeneration was to be found in original sin. His ideas culminated in his *Traité des Dégénérescences Physiques, Intellectuelles et Morales de l'Espèce Humaine* which appeared in 1857. According to Morel, degeneration could be caused by several things such as “intoxication”; the “social milieu” and “moral sickness” (Ackerknecht 56). Moreover, it was a progressive process. This meant that every generation of a degenerate family would deteriorate progressively till the fourth and final generation, when infertility would occur and the family line would be terminated. In this way “the first generation of a degenerate family might be merely nervous, the second would tend to be neurotic, the third psychotic, while the fourth consisted of idiots and died out” (Ackerknecht 56). Morel used a very vague concept of “hereditary predisposition” that allowed him to connect certain illnesses that occurred in a certain generation to very different diseases that had occurred in the previous one. By

connecting biology and Christian morality, Morel differed from older biologists like Buffon and Blumenbach, who took the term “degeneration” to mean variation, and also from later naturalists who interpreted it as atavism⁴ (Ackerknecht 55). After 1870, his ideas were reflected, most notably, in the work of Valentin Magnan (1835-1916), who abandoned the religious side of Morel’s hypothesis and interpreted degeneration as evolutionary regression.

In England, the debate seems to have been more diffuse than elsewhere in Europe, but even so, biological theories of decline heavily influenced contemporary social critique (Pick 5). English naturalists such as Edwin Ray Lankester took up the subject. In his work *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880) Lankester gives a detailed description of the biological process of degeneration, based on Darwinian evolutionary ideas. He states that the process of natural selection can generate one of three results in an organism, either “to keep it in *status quo*; to increase the complexity of its structure; or lastly to diminish the complexity of its structure. We have as possibilities either BALANCE, or ELABORATION, or DEGENERATION” (Lankester 29). Near the end of his chapter, Lankester makes a statement that accurately expresses the perturbing realisation this theory brought with it:

In accordance with a tacit assumption of universal progress – an unreasoning optimism – we are accustomed to regard ourselves as necessarily progressing, as necessarily having arrived at a higher and more elaborated condition than that which our ancestors reached, and as destined to progress still further. On the other hand, ... we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress. (59-60)

For most of his book, he restricts himself to describing small animals, but at the end he confirms that degeneration also occurs in the human race. To illustrate this, Lankester mentions so-called “savage” races, such as Mid-American Indians and modern Egyptians, as

⁴ The term “atavism” will be explained below (p. 11).

examples of people that have degenerated from ancestors that possessed a much more elaborate civilisation (59), implicitly suggesting that human degeneration is just as much a problem of cultural decline, as of biological regression. He concludes by stating that the salvation of mankind from the terrors of relapse and degeneration is to be found in science (62).

Despite a general similarity in ideas, we cannot speak of one defining degeneration theory, or, as Daniel Pick puts it in his book *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918*: “Degeneration was never successfully reduced to a fixed axiom or theory in the nineteenth century (...). Rather it was a shifting term produced, inflected, refined and re-constituted in the movement between human sciences, fictional narratives and socio-political commentaries”(7).

In the debate about degeneration, the concept of atavism played an important role. The word “atavism” signified something which the French called a “retour atavique”: the return of hereditary characteristics of the forefathers⁵; a relapse into a more primitive state of being. The word first appeared in the 1830’s and was followed by a 30-year period in which scientists struggled to make a clear conceptual distinction between (normal) variation on the one hand and anomalies (monstrosities) on the other (Verwey 46). In his monograph *Der Atavismus* (1897), J.F.H. Kohlbrugge defines the concept as a retrogressive force that combats against the progressive power of evolution (13-14). In 1909, J.A. Thomson stated that atavism denoted “the hereditary reappearance of characteristics which were latent in the parents at least, but which were expressed in definite ... ancestors near or remote” (Thomson 167). The atavism theory found particular resonance in the relatively new field of criminal anthropology, in works such as *L’Uomo Delinquente* (1878) by Cesare Lombroso, who put forward the hypothesis that criminality was inborn. He claimed that a disposition towards

⁵ The Latin word “atavus” means forefather.

crime could be read from physical traits and that the criminal was in fact a kind of survivor of a more primitive race, an atavist. In his extensive study of recidivist criminals, Lombroso came to the conclusion that nearly all of them had “jug ears, thick hair, thin beards, pronounced sinuses, protruding chins, and broad cheekbones” (Lombroso 53). Even the feet of criminals seemed to show a distinct resemblance to those of the primitive forefather, as “feet with a wide separation between the first and second toes reminded him of the prehensile feet of apes and monkeys” (Gibson 308). This notion of “la bête humaine” as introduced by Émile Zola in his eponymous novel from 1890, the sudden and partly unexpected relapse into primitive animalism, greatly influenced art and literature in the *fin de siècle*. It made the degeneration theory even more tangible and frightening for the reading public.

When discussing degeneration and atavism, it is impossible to leave “decadence” out of consideration. Derived from the Latin word for “to fall” it was defined by late 19th century author Arthur Symonds as “a new and beautiful and interesting disease ... a spiritual and moral perversity” (Luckhurst xvii). Decadent authors drew inspiration from late Classical writers “on the brink of extinction of the classical world” as the *fin de siècle* was dominated by a general fear of being, once again “in the last hours of civilization” (xviii). Decadence in relation to the *fin de siècle* period is associated first and foremost with the poets Paul Verlaine and Charles Baudelaire. The French decadence movement drew inspiration from both, and published its own magazine *Le Décadent* from 1886 to 1889. As a literary and cultural movement, it rejected bourgeois values and embraced exoticism, sensuality, perversion and aestheticism. In this last aspect, the French decadence movement was also linked with the English aestheticism movement, spearheaded by authors such as Walter Horatio Pater and Oscar Wilde. The meaning of the word “decadence” signified moral and cultural decline and while it was a way of life that was purposefully cultivated by certain artists, it could also be seen as a sign of the times, a kind of moral downfall that would inevitably set in after a great

empire had reached its climax, much like it had happened in the latter years of the Roman Empire or pre-revolution France.

From the last decades of the 19th century until well into the 20th, degeneration, atavism and decadence proved popular themes in Western literature. One of the earliest, though isolated, examples can probably be found in Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, which was published in 1840. In this story the villain is not only metaphorically inhuman, but actually comes in the form of an orang-utan, arguably making the story an extreme example of atavist theory. In *fin de siècle* Britain many more instances of degeneration-inspired literature can be found. In H.G. Wells' 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, the protagonist travels into the future to discover a ruling class of people-like creatures that are not only very beautiful, but also frail, mentally backwards and genderless (Pick 158). In this depiction of a degenerated future human race, Wells' story is strongly evocative of Morel's progressive degenerationism and Lankester's ideas about the degenerated civilisation of "savage" races. One of the most famous examples is probably Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), where, in becoming a vampire, people undergo the ultimate degenerative metamorphosis: the transformation from man to monster. Vampirism, as a disease, is transmitted by blood, and therefore similar to hereditary illnesses, as it is essentially passed on through the bloodline. The fact that vampires can be distinguished from regular mortals by certain physical characteristics is in turn reminiscent of Lombroso's anthropological criminology. Degeneration, atavism and decadence continued to be recurring themes in fiction as late as the 1910's.⁶ The combination of social anxiety and scientific debate enabled the degeneration-motif to remain both popular and effective, even long after its scientific credibility had expired.

⁶ See: *The Lost World* (1912) by Arthur Conan Doyle

Essentially, states Pick, “(...) degeneration constituted an impossible endeavour to ‘scientise’, objectify and cast off whole underworlds of political and social anxiety” (10). It can be argued that R.L. Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) is “exactly the fictional representation and exploration of that impossibility” (11). Upon reading Stevenson’s story, Oscar Wilde declared that it read “dangerously like an experiment out of *The Lancet*”⁷ (165). Nonetheless, Wilde was also clearly inspired by current ideas about degeneration, decadence and atavism. In his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which was published four years later, in 1890, Wilde also created a protagonist who descends into degeneracy through his own decadence, albeit in a very unexpected way.

⁷ *The Lancet* is a weekly peer-reviewed general medical journal. Founded in 1823, it is one of the world’s best known, oldest, and most respected general medical journals.

Chapter 3: Degeneration, intoxication and atavism in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, written by Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, has been a favourite with readers and critics alike ever since it was published in 1886. The story, about a doctor who gives shape to the dark side of his own personality, is told through several perspectives, including those of Dr. Jekyll himself and of his lawyer Mr. Utterson. More than anything, the story is a product of its time. Some saw in it a moral lesson and the tale was, in that capacity, welcomed enthusiastically in religious circles⁸, but, rather than that, the story is a fictional illustration of a complex array of theories and ideas that governed late-Victorian discourse on crime, society and human biology. The protagonist, Dr. Jekyll, is the pseudo-scientist par excellence. Although Stevenson has taken things a whole step further in the interest of entertainment values, he has clearly taken inspiration from contemporary ideas about degeneration, atavism and decadence. By means of a gruesome narrative Stevenson deals with evolutionary regression, criminal anthropology, intoxication, cultural decline and heredity.

First of all, degeneration, in the Darwinian sense, is prevalent throughout the story. Through his experiments with transcendental medicine, Dr. Jekyll has managed to distil the evil side of his own character into the newly created person of Mr. Hyde. This latter gentleman is not only described as someone who is clearly of a lower social class than his creator, but also distinctly less human. After Hyde first makes his appearance, it immediately becomes clear that he is not like a regular man, and in every subsequent account of Hyde, it is suggested that he is somehow more beast than human. This suggestion is implicit in the way his instincts seem to be much sharper and his movements have a decidedly animal agility to them. However, the comparison is in fact much more explicit than that. Throughout the story,

⁸ “[P]reachers, glad, doubtless, to get so rich a theme, treated the idea as if it were a new gospel, a new revelation given for the first time by Robert Louis Stevenson” (Stewart 68).

his movements, his temper and his behaviour are characterised as being not only inhuman, but decidedly ape-like. The eyewitness account of a maid who witnesses Hyde murder a popular Member of Parliament in the street at night, describes him trampling his victim “with ape-like fury” (351-52), and, in his final account of the situation, Jekyll describes his evil other half as someone who played him “ape-like tricks” (400) out of “ape-like spite” (401). When Jekyll’s servant Poole suspects someone else is living in his master’s laboratory and ventures to have a look he sees Hyde, who, shocked by this unexpected confrontation, jumps “like a monkey” (371) and runs back into the cabinet. Indeed, Hyde seems in many ways to be much closer to the simian forefather, than his creator. He does not smile, but snarls “into a savage laugh” (346). His laugh does not carry the exclusively human capacity to express kindness or amusement, but, as is the case with apes and other animals, is only meant to convey ill-will and aggression. When Jekyll’s experiment turns against him, and he has lost the ability to control his transformation into the figure of Hyde, he goes to bed as Jekyll and finds himself waking up in the body of his other self. Instead of his own, smooth, white, and entirely human, hands, he sees the hand of Edward Hyde lying on his bed cloth; a hand which is “lean, corded, knuckly, of a dusky pallor and thickly shaded with a swart growth of hair” (391). Hyde seems almost like a textbook example of the degenerated man. Not only is he devoid of civilisation, he also displays physical traits and patterns of behaviour that place him further back in evolution. In everything he is the opposite of the bourgeois English gentleman. Instead of manners, he has rudeness; instead of sensibilities he has impulse; nature instead of culture. Hyde’s physical degeneration does not mean he is physically weak or incapable. In many ways he is more able-bodied than Dr. Jekyll: he is extraordinarily strong, agile and light of foot. Essentially, in the incarnation of Edward Hyde, Jekyll experiences a “retour atavique”, a relapse into the characteristics of the ultimate forefather: the ape.

The leap from atavism to Lombroso's theories on criminal anthropology is a small one. Throughout the story, it is frequently stressed that the evil in Hyde's soul somehow shines through and can be detected in his appearance. There is no need to hear him speak, or even to see him act, seeing his face is enough to know that he is utterly wicked. Very early on in the story, when Enfield is asked by Utterson to give a physical description of Hyde, the former says that, "there is something wrong with his appearance ... he must be deformed somewhere" (339). Unable to put a finger on the exact nature of his deformity he admits: "he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point" (339). The idea that the criminal could be distinguished from the law-abiding citizen on the basis of appearance, seems a recurring theme in Stevenson's narrative. At first Utterson cannot decide whether Hyde is a kind of caveman or if it was "the mere radiance of a foul soul that thus transpires through, and transfigures, its clay continent?" (346). Arguably, that fictional statement accurately reflects contemporary medical theories about the skull structure of recidivists, or so-called "born criminals". These people, who were supposed to be hereditarily predisposed towards crime, were thought, like Hyde, to have "Satan's signature" (346) written over their faces. They were degenerated and therefore also biologically different from "normal" people. This idea is repeated even more clearly towards the end of the story when Jekyll makes a final statement of events and compares himself and his evil other half⁹, saying that "[e]ven as good shone upon the countenance of the one, evil was written broadly and plainly on the face of the other. Evil besides (...) had left on that body an imprint of deformity and decay" (388).

Another thing that deserves some attention is the nature of Dr. Jekyll's experiment and the subsequent creation of Mr. Hyde. Puzzled by the duality of human nature and his own soul in particular, Jekyll searches for a scientific way to separate and distil the higher and lower elements of his soul into two different people. After a lot of consideration and careful

⁹ Oddly enough, Jekyll does this in the third person. This emphasises his role as the scientist, who, according to contemporary positivist conventions, had to distance himself from the subjects of his research.

research, he manages to create a potion, a “drug that ... shook the very fortress of identity” (386). His mixture has the desired effect, but due to the unpredictability of its effects, Jekyll soon loses control over his own scientific experiment. He is no longer the detached scientist, but instead gets caught up in events over which he increasingly has no power. Interestingly enough, the first page of the story introduces Jekyll’s friend Utterson as someone who is often “the last reputable acquaintance and the last good influence in the lives of down-going men” (334), and who sometimes wonders “at the high pressure of spirits¹⁰ involved in their misdeeds” (334). Considering the nature of Jekyll’s subsequent decline, this is no coincidence. According to Morel, one of the possible causes of degeneration was “intoxication” (Ackerknecht 56). The problem of alcoholism, especially among the lower classes of society, was a very contemporary issue in *fin de siècle* Western Europe and it was also often connected with degeneration. The hazy distinction between moral and physical decay is illustrative of the late 19th century discourse on degeneration. Alcoholism combined these two aspects, since the addict is affected both mentally and physically by his dependence on the drug. On the one hand physical degeneration might occur in the form of deteriorating health; on the other the intoxication may strip away “civilised” inhibitions and give way to violence and other “primitive” urges. Like Morel, Lombroso was of the opinion that alcoholism was a hereditary disease, and moreover claimed that “the consumption of alcohol constituted a major cause of crime” (Gibson ed. 401). Although his original intentions seem to be scientific, Jekyll’s dependence on the drug and the transformations he undergoes, are much more reminiscent of drug or alcohol addiction. Looking back on his first transformation as Edward Hyde, Jekyll even explicitly says that the experience “braced and delighted [him] like wine” (Stevenson 387). The potion turns him into a brute, into an evil version of himself, but even so, he cannot keep away from it. He tries to give up his addiction, to go into

¹⁰ The word “spirits” seems to be deliberately chosen for its ambiguity, as it can be interpreted as something like demonic forces on the one hand, and intoxicating substances (like drugs or alcohol) on the other.

rehabilitation. However, after two months of total abstinence, during a moment of “moral weakness” (393), he falls back into his old habit. Eventually the drunkard, the degenerate, in him takes over and he loses control over the situation. In ironic accordance with the duality of his own character, his obsession with intoxication makes Jekyll simultaneously a Decadent and a member of the lower social classes. The crucial difference is that, whereas the former revels in his own intoxication, the latter is a slave to his drug. It could be argued that Jekyll starts out at one end and ends up at the other. While it seems to be controlled escapism at first, the addiction itself finally takes over and ruins him.

The appearance of the degeneration-motif in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* might also be interpreted as a kind of cultural critique, which places the reader in a chicken-and-egg dilemma: was degeneration merely a relapse into an earlier stage of evolution, “the Hyde waiting to reclaim every Jekyll, the savage beneath the skin of civilisation” (Pykett 14), or was it in fact the oppressive morality of late Victorian society that created figures like Hyde? Dr. Jekyll himself states that he created Hyde, not purely out of curiosity, but mainly because he felt he could not live on oppressing his darker urges. Being evil, without the constraints of conscience and decency imposed on him by the stifling conventions of his own society, provides him with an incredible sense of freedom. On his first outings as Hyde, Jekyll muses: “I was the first that could thus plod in the public eyes with a load of genial respectability, and in a moment, like a schoolboy, strip off these lendings and spring headlong into the sea of liberty” (389). This gives rise to the idea that perhaps the danger lay not in primitive urges that had to be repressed, and would otherwise rise to the surface; but that it was rather this duty to repress all traces of “indecent” behaviour that produced heavier outbursts of vice and criminality.¹¹

¹¹ As the reader is given insufficient evidence that the text subscribes to either one view or the other, it seems that Stevenson deliberately leaves room for both interpretations.

Embedded into the story of Jekyll and Hyde is also the middle class fear of descent, not solely in the meaning of evolutionary downfall, but also descent on the social ladder. While Jekyll seems the epitome of bourgeois civilisation, Hyde is “a working-class figure usurping Jekyll’s respectability” (Luckhurst xx). In this way, Stevenson cleverly capitalises on both social anxieties caused by rapid changes in 19th century urban society, and the commotion that was caused by new and controversial (pseudo-)scientific theories about crime and social deviance.

Finally, as degeneration and atavism were widely recognised to be hereditary phenomena, both the concepts of ancestry and heredity play a significant role in the story. Due to the fact that Jekyll’s evil side has had less chance to develop during his life, Hyde turns out to be a lot younger than his creator and, in effect, it is almost as if Jekyll has given birth to a son. Hyde becomes known to all Jekyll’s acquaintances as his protégé and the latter even makes him the sole recipient of his will and testament. Their relationship, although not a harmonious one, seems to be that of a father and his son, but while “Jekyll had more than a father’s interest; Hyde had more than a son’s indifference” (393). Moreover, while evil is merely latent in Dr. Jekyll, it comes to its full manifestation in the generation that follows, namely that of Mr. Hyde.

In short, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* can be read as a fictional illustration of the late-Victorian preoccupation with crime and psychobiology. Both the unsettling awareness of man’s close vicinity to the ape, and wide-spread social anxieties concerning crime and alcoholism in urban areas, play significant roles in Stevenson’s gothic narrative. In effect, it is a perfect example of the complex dynamic between late 19th century literature, society and the world of science.

Chapter 4: Dorian's Decadence and Degeneration

Even though Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a story about a young man whose descent into depravity is mirrored by the portrait he keeps hidden in his attic, gained fame and notoriety primarily for its ideas on art, aestheticism and homosexuality, it did not escape the influence of contemporary degeneration-discourse. In many ways it is a perfect example of how late 19th century pseudo-scientific theories found their way into *fin de siècle* English literature and the story's eponymous protagonist is the literary personification of atavism, decadence and degeneration.

When the reader first meets Dorian Gray, he is introduced as someone who is in everything the epitome of purity and innocence. Under the influence of his new friend Lord Henry Wotton, a slightly older and thoroughly cynical man, Dorian gradually immerses himself in a life of hedonism and debauchery. It could be argued that Dorian is indeed pure and innocent to begin with and that he is poisoned by Lord Henry's ideas and opinions, or even that the repressive nature of society itself is responsible for his degradation. Early on in the story Lord Wotton himself claims that "[w]e are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us" (25). However, the text also gives ample fodder for that other possibility: that Wilde's protagonist, rather than being a product of a morbidly repressive social environment, is subject to degenerative forces over which he has no control. In his inability to explain his own depravity, he acquires a sudden fascination for his own origin, and for the ancestors "whose blood flowed in his veins" (159). For a moment Dorian even wonders, quite in line with degeneration theorists, whether "some poisonous germ [had] crept from body to body till it had reached his own" (159). Consequently, he also begins to doubt whether he had ever been pure and good at all, or if there had always been evil elements within him, even if they were latent at first. Around the same time

he concludes that “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” (159): a statement that seems to take inspiration from the degenerationist idea that both physical illnesses and certain mental conditions were transmittable by heredity.

If we can state that in some aspects Dorian is influenced by hereditary afflictions, we might also go one step further in saying that he displays certain characteristics that were, at the time, generally attributed to the “born criminal”¹². In his standard work on criminal anthropology *L’Uomo Delinquente* (1876), Cesare Lombroso writes that criminality and atavism are strongly interwoven and that “many of the characteristics of primitive man are also commonly to be found in the born criminal”(222). Although Dorian’s physique is far removed from the low forehead and protruding sinuses of the Neanderthal, his inherent qualities do resemble those mentioned by Lombroso. The latter characterises the born criminal as someone possessing a “complete absence of moral and affective sensibility, laziness, absence of remorse and foresight, great vanity, and fleeting violent passions” (Lombroso 222). In this respect Dorian has quite a lot in common with the “born criminal” and perhaps only needed Lord Henry to help him realise his true self. Devoted to the pursuit of pleasure, Dorian seems indeed devoid of any moral sensibilities and after killing his old friend Basil Halward, his anxiety stems mostly from the idea of being found out. Moreover, his infatuation with young actress Sybil Vane, and his subsequent loathing for the same girl show both great irrationality and an entire absence of human empathy. Vanity is also one of Dorian’s greatest flaws. Even though he is constantly reminded by others of his own physical beauty, the one that is most fascinated by Dorian’s good looks is Dorian himself. In a way, his corruption is sparked by the sudden awareness of his own beauty. For it is this realisation

¹² Certain groups of recidivist criminals were thought to be hereditarily predisposed towards crime and thus born criminal.

which leads him to utter the wish that will alter his life¹³. Similarly, his predisposition towards “fleeting violent passions” greatly influences the decisions that come to define the course of his life. It is a violent surge of panic that urges him to kill one of his oldest friends and in an equally violent attack he stabs his own portrait and thereby ultimately kills himself.

Rather than as merely a characteristic of criminal man these sudden outbursts of violence may also be interpreted as instances of atavistic relapse. Whereas most people would feel “a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves, and that they are conscious of sharing with the less highly organized forms of existence” (145), this vicinity to a more primitive state of being fascinates Dorian. At that stage he is still unaware that this very phenomenon will herald his downfall. However, when Dorian stabs Basil, the spontaneity of the crime baffles him just as much as the reader. Generally, pre-meditation was not attributed to the atavistic criminal. “Rather, they followed their instincts” (Lombroso 273). This explains why Dorian later wonders how he could have killed his own friend. It was a thing of the moment: a moment in which instinct took over and “[t]he mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him” (Wilde 176). The incident has nothing to do with reason or thought, but, as Lombroso writes about homicidal monomania, “[o]nly a suspension of the intellectual and moral powers can explain such extraordinary events” (Lombroso 273).

Drawing some more upon atavistic theory, the idea that vice and appearance are strongly connected dominates the story. When Dorian tries to suggest his own guilt to Lord Henry, the latter merely laughs at him, saying that someone who looks so beautiful and so innocent can never be evil. “Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face” he says. “It cannot be concealed ... 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” (Wilde 166). In a way he is right,

¹³ When the portrait is revealed to him, Dorian exclaims: “Why should it keep what I must lose? Every moment that passes takes something from me and gives something to it. Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now!” (Wilde 34)

for even though Dorian's real face does not alter at all, the portrait in his attic keeps a precise record of his moral and physical degeneration. At first he is appalled to discover the change that has taken place on the portrait, but soon shock turns into fascination as "he found himself gazing at the portrait with a feeling of almost scientific interest" (108). Like many *fin de siècle* scientists he wonders about this correlation between vice and appearance: "[w]as there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him?" (108).

Not only does Dorian display a scientific interest in his own portrait, he also takes a keen interest in the natural sciences as a whole, finding himself "enthralled" (66) by their methods, and in the study of human life in particular. For a while he is even fascinated by the doctrines of the German Darwinismus movement, finding "a curious pleasure in tracing the thoughts and passions of men to some pearly cell in the brain, or some white nerve in the body, delighting in the conception of the absolute dependence of the spirit on certain physical conditions, morbid or healthy, normal or diseased" (148)¹⁴. However, Dorian's "unhappy dabbling" (Pick 165) with science soon turns against him. The process of his own moral degeneration quickly ceases to be merely a "detached curiosity" (165) when it turns out that he is a helpless victim. Even when he tries to better his own life and endeavours to do a good deed, he soon realises that his good intentions were inspired by vanity and hypocrisy. In effect, the degenerative forces that have ruined his soul are like a sickness he cannot fight or control. Even the conversations of his friends show a fascination for contemporary theories about evolution and decline. When at a dinner party Lord Henry makes a cynical remark about the English to his hostess, the Duchess of Monmouth, she answers him by crying: "I believe in the race", whereupon he answers, in a witty take on Darwinism: "It represents the survival of the pushing." This juxtaposition between progress and degeneration is typical of

¹⁴ Wilde seems to focus on what is only a remote implication of the evolutionary biological perspective of Darwinism.

the Zeitgeist, as the Duchess pleads that the human race shows development and Lord Henry answers that he is much more intrigued by the phenomenon of decay (Wilde 216).

Decay and more precisely decadence¹⁵ also belong to the novel's main themes. The sense of impending doom, associated with these notions, is mirrored in conversation at the aforementioned dinner party: “ ‘*Fin de siècle*’ murmured Lord Henry. ‘*Fin du globe*,’ answered his hostess” (Wilde 198).

In its rejection of middle-class values and its unbridled pursuit of pleasure and beauty, Dorian's life is a textbook example of decadent lifestyle. Moreover, the Decadence Movement's “positive embrace of the image of the exhausted aristocratic line” (Luckhurst xvii) makes Dorian a Decadent par excellence. Not only does Dorian seem to come from a long line of aristocrats, he is also an only child. There is no mention of any living siblings, and when he dies he appears to be childless and thus terminates the line. The last members of old aristocratic families were often considered to be inbred and weakened by centuries of moral perversion descended upon them from previous generations. Consequently, as the last descendant Dorian does not merely serve as a model for Morel's fourth and final stage of degeneration¹⁶, but also as a symbol for the end of a civilisation.

To conclude, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be read as a literary manifestation of theories of both cultural and biological decline, which governed the *fin de siècle*. Not only does the story show a general fascination with contemporary (pseudo)-scientific discoveries, the main character also seems strikingly similar to the definition of the so-called born criminal, and his descent into depravity shows both characteristics of reversed evolution and atavistic relapse. Moreover, the fear of biological decline seems to be mirrored in a general sense of impending doom regarding the direction in which Western society was developing.

¹⁵ See page 12

¹⁶ See page 10.

Conclusion

The comparison between *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not a surprising choice. Both Dr. Jekyll and Dorian Gray have double lives, even though the nature of their duplicity manifests itself in different ways. Critics too have observed similarities between the two novels, regarding their protagonists' "need for duplicity in a repressive late-Victorian era" (Frankel 233). However, in this thesis, I have tried to prove that rather than merely an expression of social criticism, these two novels are also a reflection of contemporary developments in the (pseudo-) scientific fields of psychobiology and criminal anthropology. Late-19th-century concepts of degeneration, atavism and decadence are clearly present within both narratives.

In the analysis of these two novels and their use of the degeneration-motif, many similarities can be found. The characters of Dr. Jekyll and Dorian Gray both have alter egos that represent their descent into degeneracy. In the case of Dr. Jekyll, this alter ego presents itself in the form of Mr. Hyde, while Dorian Gray's degeneration is mirrored in his own portrait. Even though both characters seem to start out as good people, they eventually die as their evil side takes over. Mr. Hyde and the face on the portrait both show a strong correlation between vice and appearance, thereby subscribing to the late Victorian idea, as posited by people like Cesare Lombroso, that the criminal is physically and biologically distinct from the law-abiding citizen. Furthermore, both Mr. Hyde and Dorian Gray seem to possess certain characteristics that might define them as atavists, or so-called "born criminals." Whereas the former is distinctly simian in his looks and behaviour, the latter possesses all the character traits that were generally attributed to born criminals. As he gives in to the pleasures of intoxication, Dr. Jekyll essentially gives in to decadence and similarly Dorian Gray's entire lifestyle is devoted to the pursuit of pleasure.

Despite all these similarities, it is perhaps more interesting to consider the differences between these two novels. Although both protagonists seem to be affected by a combination of internal and external influences, it can be maintained that Dorian Gray is mostly influenced by hereditary forces, whereas Jekyll's degeneration is mostly substance-induced. In his behaviour Dorian shows a remarkable analogy with the born criminal. Moreover, he is seemingly the last descendant of an aristocratic bloodline, which inevitably leads to him being physically or morally degenerated. Jekyll, on the other hand, may have had an inborn disposition towards evil, but his descent into degeneracy, i.e. the creation of his atavist alter ego, is caused by the potion, for without it Mr. Hyde would never have come into being. The question rises whether the potion, and thereby implicitly substance-abuse, is the sole cause for Jekyll's decline or if evil was already latently present within him.

In effect, Stevenson's story might almost be read as a warning, an allegory for the dangers of alcoholism and drug abuse¹⁷. Contrarily, Wilde's narrative is a literary implementation of the fear that the effects of reversed evolution were indeed inevitable, like a disease and that degeneration would not only affect the individual, but modern civilisation as a whole.

The fundamental difference between these two stories is that whereas Dr. Jekyll has a choice, Dorian does not. The fact that so many preachers embraced Stevenson's story, can be explained by the way Jekyll essentially gets punished for making the wrong decisions in life, for choosing the path of vice rather than that of virtue. He is punished for his own indulgence, as the potion that turns him into a brute, eventually ruins him. Dorian Gray's case, on the other hand, seems more problematic. Although, in a certain way, the opening scenes of the book seem to describe a fall from Paradise, it could also be argued that Dorian never had a choice. In many ways it seems that he was predestined for evil and depravity. Even if the

¹⁷ Stevenson himself was not unfamiliar with drug use. He was known to experiment with opium (Harman 98-99), and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was supposedly written during a six-day cocaine binge.

picture had not existed and he had never met Lord Henry Wotton, he would probably still have degenerated, and it is precisely this clash between fatalism and the corruptibility of free will which makes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* so unnerving.

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