

Extended Essay
For the International Baccalaureate Program

Title: A Comparative Essay of Narrative and Visual Techniques in the
Picture of Dorian Gray Portraying Moral Corruption

Research Question: *“How effectively do narrative techniques in The
Picture of Dorian Gray and visual techniques in the 2009 film
adaptation convey Dorian's gradual moral corruption for the
reader/audience?”*

Subject: English B

Category: 2B

Word Count: 3985

CONTENT

1. Content Page	page 2
2. Introduction	page 3
3. Methodology	page 4
4. Analysis 1: Narrative Techniques in the Novel	page 4
- Indirect Moral Signaling Through Narration	page 4
- Character Reactions as Moral Framing	page 6
5. Analysis 2: Visual Techniques in the Film Adaptation (2009)	page 8
- Facial Expressions/ Use of Close-ups	page 8
- Lighting, Color, Atmosphere	page 10
- Visualization of the Portrait	page 11
6. Comparative Evaluation of Effectiveness	page 12
7. Limitations of the Framework	page 13
8. Conclusion	page 14
9. Bibliography	page 16

Introduction

In literature and in film, moral corruption is often portrayed as a gradual process, rather than an immediate transformation where *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel by Oscar Wilde, is an example of this. Gradual moral corruption, which refers to the loss of ethical values along with the separation of outward appearance and inner morality, is a recurring theme both in the novel and the film adaptation. Originally published in the late nineteenth century, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects a Victorian society deeply concerned with morality, reputation and social appearances, showing the consequences of aestheticism. Wilde relies heavily on language, particularly narrative techniques in order to suggest Dorian's internal decay throughout the story. In this essay, these narrative techniques are explored by Wilde's morally evaluative description and the reported reactions of other characters. Much of the corruption throughout the novel is communicated indirectly through these, highlighting the contrast between Dorian's outward perfection and his increasingly corrupted inner life to the reader and as a result, readers are required to actively interpret and imagine the extent of Dorian's downfall.

More than a century later, the novel was adapted into a series of different adaptations of films, most recently in 2009, *Dorian Gray*. Unlike the written novel, the film operates through an audiovisual medium, using facial emphasis and close-ups of the actors, contrasts in lighting and color to convey the moral corruption. This shift in medium explored in this essay, inevitably affects the way the moral corruption is conveyed to the audience. Where the novel depends on linguistics and suggestion, the film adopts a more explicit approach, representing the violence and the decay visually. These differences in mediums raise questions about how language functions differently across them, and how audience/readers engage with abstract themes through narrative techniques and visual techniques.

The essay explores how moral corruption is shaped not only by content specifically, but by the medium through which it is expressed by exploring “how effectively do narrative techniques in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and visual techniques in the 2009 film adaptation convey Dorian's gradual moral corruption for the audience?”

Methodology:

This essay adopts a comparative novel and film analysis to examine how moral corruption is conveyed in two different mediums. The primary sources for analysis are Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)¹ and Oliver Parker’s film adaptation *Dorian Gray*².

The analysis consists of two parts where the first part focuses on identifying narrative techniques in the novel, and the second part focuses on the visual techniques in the film that contribute to the representation of Dorian Gray’s moral decline. The analysis then follows the comparative evaluation of effectiveness, limitations of the framework, and the conclusion.

In the literary analysis, narrative description, language, and the reactions of other characters are explored as mechanisms that shape the reader’s moral evaluation of Dorian. In the film analysis, techniques such as close-up shots, lighting and color palette and the visual transformation of the portrait are examined to determine how they guide the audience’s perception of Dorian’s corruption. Selected scenes and passages from the film adaptation and the novel are used in the analysis. The comparison then evaluates how the differences in literature and cinema influence the graduality, ambiguity and the emotional impact of Dorian’s moral transformation.

Analysis 1: Narrative Techniques in The Novel

Indirect Moral Signaling Through Narration

¹ Wilde O. (2025). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Penguin Classics

² Parker, O. (Director). (2009). *Dorian Gray* [Film]. Ealing Studios.

In the novel, the storyline is based on a narrative that follows more of a suggestive language rather than an explicit one. Wilde's preference for detailed and descriptive language, reflecting its times' use of language in novels, provides the reader with an abundant amount of resource for imagination throughout the story. This narrative description is especially relevant with the gradual corruption of Dorian's morality. The novel signals this through the mentioned use of language where the reader is engaged in the storyline, witnessing Dorian's gradual shift in actions and attitude. Because of the implicit language, the reader is guided to imagine the extent of the story, where up to a point Dorian can certainly be marked as a morally "bad" character, the reader is left to question if he may be still a "good" person inside. An example of this from the novel can be found from the murder of Basil Hallward.

Following Basil's murder, Wilde avoids dramatic moral condemnation and rather uses Dorian's detached internal rationalization, when showing his response to the murder. *"He felt that the secret of the whole thing was not to realize the situation. The friend who had painted the fatal portrait to which all his misery had been due, had gone out of his life. That was enough."*³ shows the euphemistic expressions used such as "gone out of his life" which obscures the brutality of murder, reducing the violent act of Dorian to something rather peaceful and an act of fate. The narrative voice in the novel does not intervene with the moral judgement, instead the narrative mirrors Dorian's approach which is mentally distant. The clause *"That was enough"* helps further emphasize his emotional detachment, implying more of a closure than remorse.

This indirect moral signaling and the illustration of Dorian's way of thinking in the narrative forces the reader to perform the ethical evaluation themselves. Instead of instructing the reader to condemn Dorian, specifically after crossing a moral line such as taking the life of his friend, Wilde presents his self-justification in a more measured and calm prose. The absence

³ Wilde O. (2025). The Picture of Dorian Gray, Penguin Classics, p. 152

of language consisting of the exaggeration of the act and illustration of Dorian's guilt and remorse contrasts with the gravity of the act, creating a dissonance.

However, it should be considered that this scene does not portray Dorian as a sudden monstrous villain, despite being a turning point for how far Dorian could go with such a grave act, but demonstrates a stage in his moral erosion. His corruption manifests not through a dramatic confession but through his emotional numbness and rationalization of the immoral acts, increasing more throughout the novel. By allowing the readers to access his internal perspective, Wilde sustains the gradual nature of Dorian's ethical decline.

Character Reactions as Moral Framing

In the Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde rarely declares Dorian's corruption through direct narration. Instead, the moral evaluation of Dorian is largely constructed through the reactions of other characters and the wider society around him where these responses function as a form of frame that gradually shapes reader's perception of Dorian as rumors and accusations accumulate throughout the novel

One example of this is when Basil confronts Dorian about the rumors circulating in London. He explains that "*the most dreadful things are being said about you in London,*"⁴ before describing how many respectable figures now distance themselves from Dorian and are afraid of his building reputation. He questions why "*a man like the Duke of Berwick leaves the room of a club when you enter it,*" and why "*so many gentlemen in London will neither go to your house nor invite you to theirs.*"⁵ Through this dialogue, Dorian's corruption is presented not through explicit narrative, but through the testimony of others, also mirroring real life for the reader. The repetition of rhetorical questions emphasizes the growing social consequences of Dorian's behavior, and with that the references of the aristocratic figures highlight the seriousness of his declining reputation. Importantly, Basil himself struggles to reconcile the said

⁴ Wilde O. (2025). The Picture of Dorian Gray, Penguin Classics, p. 143.

⁵ Wilde O. (2025). The Picture of Dorian Gray, Penguin Classics, p. 144.

rumors with Dorian's appearance, insisting he cannot believe them, like many others, because of Dorian's "*pure, bright, innocent face.*"⁴ This contrast between the outward beauty and ugly acts demonstrated by his social life help to reinforce the novel's one of the central themes: the separation between external beauty and internal morality.

The reactions of society therefore become a mechanism that the reader gradually perceives Dorian's moral deterioration. Basil's account of ruined acquaintances also reinforces this perception. He reminds the tragic consequences experienced by those associated with Dorian, including "*that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide,*"⁵ and others whose reputations have been destroyed. By presenting a list of damaged lives linked to Dorian in his dialogue, Wilde implies the destructive influence he exerts on others without storytelling the immoral acts Dorian committed directly. This method allows corruption to emerge progressively through social consequences.

Apart from direct confrontation, Wilde uses the reactions of strangers to the public recognition of Dorian. In one scene, Dorian hears two men whispering as they pass him on the street: "*That is Dorian Gray.*" The brief comment suggests that the name has been established and linked with scandal. Whispers thus indicate that the character and the reputation of Dorian have changed. No longer is it something to discuss openly but instead, it has become more like gossip, secretive, and behind his back, a far cry from the days when he enjoyed being admired. He even recalls how good he felt when people "*pointed out, or stared at, or talked about*" him. So, going from being admired to being whispered about demonstrates how the social view and perception of him have changed over time.

He also begins to see how bad his influence was and recalls his destructive influence. At one point, he admits he was "*an evil influence to others and had experienced a terrible joy*

in being so.”⁶ The reflection stands out because it shows the conflict inside him and proves his awareness. He knows he’s causing harm but still enjoys it, almost as if he’s aware of his own corruption but unable to stop himself. The paradoxical phrase “*terrible joy*”⁶ encapsulates the moral contradiction at the heart of Dorian's character: he is aware of the harm he does but continues to derive pleasure from it.

Wilde uses how Dorian’s friends and society react, to build this slow moral judgment. The story allows the suspicion to develop into rumors, social rejection, and the statements of others. Therefore, the reader is given the opportunity to judge how corrupt Dorian is which depicts the corruption as a process that happens gradually, not all at once. This build up is achieved through the help of rumors, social decline and the testimonies of others around him. The accumulation of external perspectives provides the reader with opportunities to analyze and form their own evaluation of Dorian’s becoming.

Analysis 2: Visual Techniques in the Film Adaptation (2009)

While the novel of the Picture of Dorian Gray relies primarily on narrative description, a suggestive language, and symbols, the 2009 film adaptation conveys Dorian’s corruption through visual techniques. Inherent to cinema, facial expressions, lighting and visual depiction of the portrait function as cues that are rather immediate in guiding the viewer to morally interpret Dorian’s behavior. Unlike the novel, in which corruption is communicated gradually through the narration and social reactions, the film often externalizes this moral decline through visual imagery, which allows audiences to perceive Dorian’s transformation more directly.

Facial Expressions/ Use of Close Ups

⁶ Wilde O. (2025). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Penguin Classics, p. 209.

One of the primary ways the film communicates Dorian's moral transformation is through the frequent use of close-up shots, emphasizing facial expression. In cinema, the close-ups allow the viewer to focus on a character's emotional state, making subtle shifts in expression visible to the audience and psychologically significant. Oliver Parker's use of close-ups during Sybil's rejection scene, for example, exemplifies what film theorist Béla Balázs termed the "physiognomic close-up," which externalizes psychological states through facial micro-expressions.⁷ In the 2009 adaptation, it can be seen that the camera repeatedly isolates Dorian's face during moments of moral decision, allowing the audience to observe the gradual emergence of emotional detachment and cruelty.

The most striking example, as mentioned, is Sybil Vane's heartbreaking failure on stage and Dorian's callous rejection of her. The film then focuses for a second on Dorian's face, while the camera frames him in a medium close-up which tends to segregate him from the rest of the scene and isolates his expression. Unlike the novel which describes Dorian's growing lack of empathy through the conversation between characters, here this transformation is expressed immediately: Dorian's face, and specifically his expression, reveals his growing lack of compassion and growing alienation to the audience at once. Something that in the novel was left to be understood through the words and the flow of the narrative.

As the film progresses, more close-up shots are seen more frequently during the more controversial acts that Dorian commits. Many of these close-up shots of Dorian focus only on his face, even as other characters react with distress or confusion, reinforcing his psychological separation from those around him. This serves to further isolate Dorian from his surroundings, and forces the viewer to concentrate on his expressions and reactions to what is happening to him. The camera focuses on Dorian's facial expressions while he commits his questionable deeds, in an attempt to show the progression of guilt into arrogance, into cold heartlessness, and into the joy Dorian gets from manipulating others.

⁷ Balázs B. (1970). *Theory of the Film*, Dover Publications

The effectiveness of this technique lies in its ability to get the rapid response of the audience and therefore generate moral evaluation. As Stuart Hall's encoding /decoding model⁸ demonstrates, audiences actively interpret visual cues through dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings. This aligns with Jaus's reception theory⁹, where audiences "horizon of expectations" shapes their moral interpretation of Dorian's corruption. Viewers instinctively interpret facial expressions as indicators of a character's intention and emotion, and this process is done immediately. As a result, the film can communicate Dorian's corruption visually without needing any extended explanations. However, since the emotional cues are so immediately legible, the viewer's moral judgement forms more quickly than the novel. This can intensify the reaction of the audience but can also compress the gradual process and the ambiguity that Wilde's narrative techniques maintain in the story.

Lighting, Color, and Atmosphere

Another key role in communicating Dorian's transformation throughout the film is lighting and color use. Cinematic lighting often functions symbolically, shaping the atmosphere of a scene and guiding the viewer's interpretation of a character. In the 2009 adaptation, the visual palette shifts as Dorian's corruption deepens.

Early scenes feature Dorian in bright lighting with light, pastel hues that visually align with the youthful and attractiveness of the character. The settings around him are also depicted as open and luminous places which reflect Dorian's innocence and the societal admiration for him. This lighting motif is echoed by the many descriptions of the youth and perfect beauty of Dorian in Wilde's novel.

As Dorian becomes increasingly indulgent in earthly possessions, and is immersed in manipulation, however, the lighting gradually darkens. Scenes depicting his later lifestyle are often framed with heavy shadows, muted colors, and strong contrast in lighting. These visual

⁸ Hall S. (n.d.). Media Studies- Hollywood Film Resources

⁹ Jaus HR. (2025). The Reception Theory and the Value of Adaptation in Literature and Visual Arts

elements help create an atmosphere of moral decay and tension. As film scholar David Bordwell notes, chiaroscuro lighting in noir and gothic cinema “visually encodes moral ambiguity through shadow and contrast, externalizing psychological states.”¹⁰ The use of chiaroscuro lighting, where characters are partially obscured by shadow, visually mirrors the theme of hidden corruption beneath outward beauty.

The change in visual style then allows the viewer to see Dorian's decadence unfolding long before it is acknowledged in the diegesis. With the gradual descent into a shadowy color code the lighting of the film becomes a permanently active moral guide: an index that reminds the viewer that what appears on the surface of Dorian's life has come to conceal an utterly changed person on the inside.

Whereas the novel leaves corruption to the reader's inference by way of allegorical representation and social atmosphere, the film expresses the mood of the corrupting atmosphere directly in the spectator's sensory experience, losing in clarity what is gained in directness.

Visualization of The Portrait

Perhaps the most striking difference between the novel and the film lies in the visualization of the portrait itself. In the novel, the portrait functions primarily as a symbolic device described, with its transformations revealing gradually through narrative description. It is up to the reader to imagine the increasing grotesqueness of the image, which allows the symbolism to grow slowly along with Dorian's moral decline. In contrast, the film adaptation presents the portrait directly to the viewer. As Dorian commits increasingly immoral acts, the portrait physically deteriorates, displaying exaggerated signs of decay, cruelty and monstrosity that would rather be displayed on Dorian's face and expression instead of his beauty and

¹⁰ Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2012). *Film art: An introduction*. (10th ed.). McGraw-Hill

youthful appearance. The camera often focuses on the portrait in dimly lit scenes, emphasizing the distorted features and the stark contrast between the painting's corruption and Dorian unphased appearance.

The sensationalism of the portrait's presence has a major effect on the audience. Instead of merely being described as the horrors of the transformation of Dorian, they are forced to bear witness to them. Rather than being a distant mirroring of the event, the film allows the audience to confront the object of horror itself, and the shocking nature of the "hideous and grotesque image" brings forth an immediate feeling of revulsion from the audience. As the depiction in the portrait serves to reflect Dorian's actions in the external world, it also mirrors the consequences of those actions. Through the vivid depiction of the corruption of Dorian, the portrait makes the repercussions of his actions plain to see. The film adaptation thereby emphasizes the connection between Dorian's actions and the effect the portrait has on society. This vivid illustration of corruption serves to not only elicit an emotional reaction to the events, but also acts as a visual reminder of the morally reprehensible nature of Dorian's deeds.

A possible explanation lies in the way visual effects have to be introduced in order for them to be spectacular: as the wax portrait of Dorian Gray disintegrates on the wall in a burst of smoke and fire, its decay is illuminated for an instant so that the audience can plainly see the changes that have taken place to the face, making the gravity of the situation at once manifest. In the novel the whole point lies in the slow and insinuating way in which the moral corruption of Dorian makes its presence increasingly felt through the medium of description. In the film the tragic consequences of Dorian's downfall are thrust upon the audience's attention for the sake of a dramatic scene that, while enormously effective from an aesthetic point of view, hurries the audience into the emotional consequences of the action.

Comparative Evaluation of Effectiveness

While both the novel and the 2009 film adaptation follow the same storyline of Dorian Gray's moral deterioration, the effectiveness of each medium lies in how it guides the audience's interpretation of that corruption. The novel primarily relies on narrative techniques that require readers to infer meaning through implications, whereas the film adaptation relies on visual techniques that produce immediate emotional responses instead. These differences affect how Dorian's transformation is perceived significantly.

Overall, both mediums communicate Dorian's corruption effectively, but they do so in different ways. The novel's narrative techniques have a slower and more interpretive evaluation of morality, allowing the corruption to emerge progressively through implications and social reactions. The film on the other hand, produces a more immediate response through visuality. With this, it can be said that Wilde's novel is more effective in portraying corruption as a gradual and psychological process, while the film is more effective in generating rapid personal engagement with Dorian's transformation and downfall.

Limitations of the Framework

Although it is possible to gain insight into how audiences morally evaluate characters, it is important to bear in mind its limitations when engaging with literary and film texts in critical discourse.

Firstly, the audience response remains interpreted in the essay, and not verified or proven through scientific experiments. Because the essay does not actually verify or measure the audience's emotional response to these elements, instead of experimental data, it uses theoretical understanding in place of the audience's actual response.

Another limitation with this book is that a comparison of two art forms is made. Literature and film are two media that tell a story in quite different ways. In narrative prose, for example, it allows for extended description, ambiguity, and psychological reflection. This

enables the reader to think about the content of the narrative in more ways than is possible in film. Cinema communicates primarily through visual and auditory signals. As a result, differences discussed may partly reflect the inherent characteristics of the medium rather than the specific choices of the creators.

Recognizing these limitations carries great importance to ensure that the conclusions drawn from this essay remain appropriate within the scope of literary analysis.

Conclusion

This essay, set out to examine how effectively narrative techniques in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*¹ and visual techniques in the 2009 film adaptation convey the gradual moral corruption of the protagonist, Dorian Gray². With the analysis of narrative description, character reactions, symbolic imagery, and cinematic techniques such as close-ups, lighting, and visual representation of the portrait, it can easily be said that both mediums communicate Dorian's moral decline in distinctive yet effective ways.

In the novel, Wilde employs the stylistic device of suggested corruption through free indirect discourse and symbolism and leaves the moral evaluation of the events up to the reader, thus allowing corruption to spread through insinuation and social stigma gradually. The ethical comprehension of the corrupting influence that Dorian is exposed to is not acquired instantaneously, but it arises through the interplay of rumors and hearsay, the repercussions that Dorian experiences and his own realization of the gravity of his deeds as the reader gradually realizes the extent of his corruption. The portrait, serves also to symbolize the corrupting influence that has developed in Dorian's soul, maintaining the ambiguity that pervades the whole novel.

¹ Wilde O. (2025). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Penguin Classics

² Parker, O. (Director). (2009). *Dorian Gray* [Film]. Ealing Studios.

In the film, by contrast, Dorian's degeneration into depravity and corruption is conveyed through purely visual means. His face is shown in close-up as he discovers that part of his soul has been transferred to the portrait; the gradual changes in light and color in the surroundings of the portrait reflect his changing state; and the portrait itself is shown falling apart, again suggesting visual changes in Dorian. This approach elicits a more immediate emotional response than Wilde's novel, and also reduces some of the interpretive ambiguity present in Wilde's prose.

Ultimately, the comparison shows that the medium plays a crucial role in shaping how moral transformation is perceived. While the film intensifies the emotional impact of Dorian's downfall, Wilde's narrative techniques arguably provide a more gradual and psychologically complex portrayal of the corruption. Because the narrative requires the readers to interpret subtle narrative cues and social reactions, the novel allows moral judgement to emerge progressively, which goes hand in hand with the theme that corruption is not a single moment of change but a cumulative process of ethical decline.

Through this comparison, the essay highlights how different artistic forms guide audiences toward moral evaluation, demonstrating that the effectiveness of a medium is linked closely to the techniques through which it is conveyed.

Bibliography

1. Balázs, Bela. *Theory of the Film*. Dover Publications, 1970.
2. Bordwell, David and Kristen Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 10th ed., McGraw-Hill, 2012.
3. Hall, Stuart. *Encoding/Decoding*. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1980.
4. Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated by Timothy Bahti, U of Minnesota P, 1982.
5. Parker, Oliver, director. *Dorian Gray*. Ealing Studios, 2009.
6. Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Penguin Classics, 2025.