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Hardship and Connection: An Ecofeminist Interpretation of The Picture of Dorian Gray

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Abstract: Oscar Wilde's masterpiece *The Picture of Dorian Gray* employs a distinctive aestheticist style to narrate the story of the protagonist Dorian Gray, who attempts to trade his soul for eternal youth, only for his moral transgressions to manifest on his portrait. The novel not only reflects Wilde's profound meditations on human nature, art, and morality but also portrays a series of female characters, such as Sibyl Vane and Lady Brandon, whose emotions and destinies resonate with natural imagery, revealing intricate interactions between humanity and nature. This article adopts an ecofeminist perspective to unearth the latent ecological and gendered dimensions of the text, focusing on the intertwined representations of "ecology" and "the feminine." It seeks to expose the oppression both endure under patriarchal structures and the intrinsic connections between them. On one level, the study examines the symbolic significance of nature in the novel, linking its degradation to Dorian Gray's moral decay, thereby uncovering the text's implicit anti-ecological critique. On another, it scrutinizes the female characters, analyzing their marginalized status within patriarchal society and their shared plight with nature. In a broader context, this analysis invites readers to reflect on contemporary ecological and gender issues, advocating for a harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature, as well as between men and women.

Keywords: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde, ecofeminism, binary opposition, patriarchy

1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde's The *Picture of Dorian Gray* presents the fantastical tale of its eponymous protagonist who barters his soul for eternal youth, while his portrait grotesquely manifests his moral decay and inner corruption. With masterful nuance, Wilde explores profound philosophical dimensions-human nature, morality, and art- tracing Dorian's trajectory from an aesthete's obsessive pursuit of beauty to his eventual descent into hedonistic depravity. The novel's singular aesthetic vision and profound thematic depth have cemented its status as a canonical masterpiece in literary history.

Existing scholarship has predominantly focused on analyzing character psychology, moral allegory, and aesthetic values in the novel. For instance, some scholars have examined Wilde's embodiment of "art for art's sake" through Dorian Gray's characterization from an aestheticist perspective, emphasizing art's autonomy and transcendence. They posit that the portrait symbolizes art's eternal beauty, noting how "Wilde advocated the highest form as abstract decoration devoid of concrete content, where all serves pure artistic beauty." [1] Most studies concentrate on the three central male characters—Dorian Gray, Lord Henry, and the painter Basil—while marginalizing

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female figures, whom researchers term "martyrs to aestheticism." [2] Other analyses adopt an ethical framework, comparing Lord Henry's verbal seduction and behavioral manipulation of Dorian to Mephistopheles' corruption of Faust in *Faust*, describing their relationship as "the devil waltzing with Dorian Gray" and underscoring "the ladder and swamp of desire" [3] as cautionary metaphors about the consequences of moral abandonment. However, these approaches neglect the intrinsic connections between gender and natural elements in the text. This paper thus employs an ecofeminist lens to interrogate the portrayal of female characters and their symbolic kinship with nature.

The 1970s witnessed the concurrent rise of global feminist and environmental movements, whose intersection and mutual reinforcement gave birth to ecofeminism. As a pioneering figure in this field, Karen Warren developed a distinctive theoretical framework. Through her deconstruction of the dominant Western "patriarchal system," she challenged the foundations of traditional Western philosophy and ethics, while offering incisive critiques of the "self-concept" in deep ecology [4]. Warren posited that ecofeminism represents a synthesis of feminist and environmentalist movements, insisting that environmental solutions must be integrally tied to concerns of environmental justice. Significantly, she emphasized ecofeminism's dual mission: to expose the parallel oppression of women and nature under patriarchal structures, and to interrogate the root causes of this systemic subjugation.From this perspective, both nature and women occupy marginalized, dominated positions within patriarchal discourse. In literary works and societal reality alike, nature is routinely framed as a resource reservoir for human exploitation, while women are confined to domestic spheres with their social value systematically diminished.

Building upon this foundation, the following analysis will employ an ecofeminist critical approach to examine three key dimensions: the oppression suffered by female characters and natural imagery, their resistance against such oppression, and their moments of forced compromise. Through interpreting natural symbolism, this study will reveal nature's plight under patriarchal domination. A close reading of characters like Sybil and aristocratic women will uncover the struggles women face in patriarchal society. Furthermore, it will explore the symbolic, socio-historical, and cultural connections between women and nature, thereby comprehensively demonstrating the ecofeminist consciousness embedded in the text. This study aims to address the scholarly gap in examining gender-nature relationships in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, offering fresh perspectives while prompting reflections on real-world issues of gender equality and ecological preservation.

2. Oppression

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde paints a Victorian society thoroughly dominated by patriarchal norms, where women face systemic oppression both in private and public spheres. As scholars have noted, "The Victorian father wielded unchallenged authority, imposing his will upon the household without question" [5]. This oppressive structure reduces women to commodities in the marriage market, where their value is measured solely by appearance and pedigree, while their aspirations are ignored. Their behavior is strictly policed in social settings, with any deviation from prescribed roles met with harsh criticism. The idealized "Angel in the House" image, epitomized by Coventry Patmore's poem [6], reveals the cruel hypocrisy of Victorian gender norms - while women were glorified as "crowned perfect beings," they were in fact confined to domestic servitude, forced to embody the silent, submissive ideal of wife and servant. This parallel oppression of women and nature (as seen in the novel's imagery of ravaged gardens and stuffed nightingales) demonstrates what ecofeminists identify as the shared marginalization of femininity and the natural world under patriarchal systems. Through these portrayals, Wilde exposes how Victorian society systematically erased female agency, reducing women to decorative objects to be consumed and discarded, much like the natural resources exploited by industrial capitalism.

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2.1. The objectification and marginalization of women

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sybil Vane's tragic trajectory exemplifies Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other" in patriarchal society, as articulated in *The Second Sex*: "When she abandons her independence to become merely a mistress, she often chooses compromise... The troubles of love never enhance her professional passion; she only grows anxious about life's obstacles blocking her path to grand romance" [7].Sybil, a young actress from impoverished London, lives with her mother and brother in circumstances that reveal the patriarchal instrumentalization of female talent. Though educated and possessing "a delicate musical voice and graceful charm" [8], her worldview starkly contrasts with her mother's mercenary values. While Sybil believes "love is more important than money" [8], her mother's conditional support for her acting career serves purely economic purposes - constantly "mentioning money" as she reduces her daughter's artistic gifts to a means of familial survival rather than self-actualization.

Sibyl harbored the most beautiful fantasies about love, believing that "love makes people virtuous" [8]. After meeting Dorian, she fell headlong into love almost instantly—"to see him was to love him, to know him was to trust him" [8]. In this relationship, Sibyl centered her world around Dorian, regarding him as her prince and directing all her emotions and life's focus toward him, even to the point of being willing to abandon her acting career for his sake. During a performance after falling in love with Dorian, she suddenly recognized the falseness of the roles she portrayed, seeing through the "hollowness and artifice of performance" [8], and longed to return to her true self, convinced that Dorian loved her for who she was. Yet, her wholehearted devotion earned her no respect—instead, it hastened her tragic fate. Her joys and sorrows became entirely dependent on Dorian's whims, leaving her without independent worth or agency, reduced to a passive figure in the relationship. She credited all her achievements to him: "All of this is thanks to him, entirely to him—my charming prince, my wondrous beloved, my enchanting deity. Compared to him, I am impoverished" [8].Dorian's feelings for Sibyl began with an idealized infatuation. Initially captivated by her stage performances, particularly her Shakespearean roles, he regarded her as the very embodiment of art, even declaring her "a born artist" [8]. However, he did not love Sibyl herself but rather the theatrical personas she portrayed. To Dorian, Sibyl was merely a tool to satisfy his aesthetic desires—her value lay in the artistic beauty she could bring to his life, not in her emotions or inner world as an independent individual. His affection was, at its core, a form of selfish possessiveness. When Sibyl, consumed by love, lost her former brilliance on stage, Dorian's attitude toward her shifted abruptly:

"You have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect. I loved you because you were marvellous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid... Now what are you? A third-rate actress with a pretty face." [8]

Dorian confined Sibyl's worth solely to her theatrical performances, believing she could only provide aesthetic pleasure through brilliant acting. Once she failed to meet this expectation, she instantly forfeited all claim to his love—her emotions and inner world completely disregarded. This epitomizes her objectification and subordinate status in the relationship, reduced to a disposable object deemed worthless when no longer functional. After Sibyl's suicide, Dorian experienced only fleeting guilt before swiftly absolving himself of responsibility, dismissing her death as a tragic twist of fate rather than a consequence of his own cruelty. To Dorian, Sibyl existed merely as a tool to satisfy his aesthetic cravings, never as an autonomous individual. Sibyl's doomed love originated in this very objectification. Her complete anchoring of self-worth to male validation reflects the internalized subservience that patriarchy systematically cultivates in women. Viewed as mere appendages to men, women's emotions, dreams, and aspirations become orbitally fixated on male

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figures, while their own subjectivity is ruthlessly suppressed—a dynamic Wilde exposes through Sibyl's tragic erasure both as artist and human.

Though Sibyl was born into an impoverished working-class family, women of the bourgeois class faced remarkably similar oppression within patriarchal society despite their material advantages. "The aristocracy historically prioritized family status and bloodlines, making social standing the primary consideration in marital selection - endogamous marriages became the prevailing custom among the nobility" [9]. These privileged women were equally reduced to marital instruments, constrained by rigid social expectations that suppressed authentic emotional expression. The pressure of societal scrutiny turned them into embodiments of hypocrisy and emotional detachment, while their financial dependence rendered true independence impossible. Such systemic oppression not only restricted their freedom but transformed them into sacrificial victims of social conventions - a fate shared across class lines, proving how patriarchy universally devalued women's autonomy regardless of economic status. The parallel between Sibyl's artistic commodification and aristocratic women's matrimonial bargaining reveals how all women under Victorian patriarchy were ultimately reduced to exchangeable commodities.

The character of Lady Victoria, Lord Henry's wife, epitomizes the instrumentalization of upper-class women in marriage. In Lord Henry's worldview, the fundamental purpose of matrimony lies in preserving social stability rather than personal fulfillment—a utilitarian perspective that lays bare the inherent unhappiness of Lady Victoria's marital existence. Lady Victoria is expected to function as little more than an ornamental accessory; as the novel asserts, "a woman should be a decorative object, not a thinking being" [8]. Wilde's portrayal of this character is unsparing: Dorian Gray's first impression—"She's an odd woman, whose dresses always look as though they'd been designed in a rage and put on in a tempest. She's usually in love with somebody, and, as her passion is never returned, she has kept all her illusions" [8]—reduces her to a frivolous caricature.

The identity of aristocratic women is inherently multifaceted—in social settings, these ladies must meticulously maintain an aura of elegance and propriety, their words and actions rigidly confined within patriarchal norms. The weight of societal expectations forces them to conform to hypocritical moral standards, rendering them powerless in male-dominated gatherings where self-expression is stifled, leaving them to perform only their socially prescribed roles. Simultaneously, they sustain their own status by belittling others, a practice that gradually numbs them to the suffering of those beneath them. Thus, they exist as both direct victims of patriarchal oppression and unwitting perpetrators of the same system against women of lower social standing.

2.2. Nature's silent suffering

Ecofeminist scholars emphasize the profound historical connection between women and nature, arguing that "there exist essential commonalities between women and nature - the same ideology that justifies gender oppression also legitimizes the oppression of nature" [10]. Within the patriarchal context of Victorian society, this dual oppression forms a crucial subtext in The Picture of Dorian Gray.The novel powerfully exposes the moral decay of the era through three interconnected dimensions: the material environment (such as the contrast between decaying urban spaces and artificial aristocratic gardens), spiritual culture (embodied in the distorted aestheticism that objectifies both women and art), and moral symbolism (most strikingly represented by Dorian's portrait, which externalizes the corruption hidden beneath surface beauty). Through these layers, Wilde's work unconsciously reveals how Victorian society's deterioration manifested equally in its exploitation of women and destruction of nature, both victims of the same patriarchal logic that prized domination over harmony.

From a material environmental perspective, the Industrial Revolution propelled industrialization and urbanization, inflicting direct physical destruction upon nature. Set in the Victorian era when

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industry flourished, the novel depicts cities like London transformed into industrial hubs - factories proliferated while chimneys spewed endless columns of thick smoke, shrouding the city in toxic fog. In this environment, nature's pristine purity gave way to foul air and polluted water sources: flowers and trees struggled to survive in the compromised air and soil, rivers became contaminated with industrial waste, and aquatic life saw their habitats increasingly encroached upon. Such material devastation represents humanity's most visible form of oppression against nature, forcibly "remaking" what was once a harmonious ecosystem into a world dominated by the din of machinery and environmental degradation. This physical destruction mirrors the novel's moral corruption, where both nature and humanity are deformed by industrial modernity's relentless advance.

On the spiritual and cultural level, society's excessive pursuit of material pleasures caused nature's status in people's minds to plummet. Characters like Dorian Gray from the aristocracy indulged in decadent lifestyles, chasing artistic pleasures and sensory thrills while remaining blind to nature's beauty. They squandered their time in social gatherings, lavish banquets, and the acquisition of artworks rather than appreciating natural landscapes.As the text ironically notes, Lady Brandon originally intended to establish a salon, but what "actually materialized was a dining room" [8]. In their value system, the tranquility and simplicity of nature paled in comparison to the instant gratification offered by material possessions.This spiritual neglect and denigration constituted another form of violence against nature. No longer a source of solace or inspiration for the human soul, nature became a forgotten entity, gradually shrinking from humanity's mental landscape—a process mirroring how patriarchal society similarly marginalized women's intellectual and emotional lives. The novel thus exposes how industrial modernity's spiritual alienation from nature paralleled its moral decay.

From a moral-symbolic perspective, Dorian Gray's degeneration represents not only a departure from humanity but also an oppression of nature. His obsession with eternal youth constitutes a fundamental violation of natural law. Wilde ingeniously parallels Dorian's moral corruption with nature's simultaneous devastation through strategic environmental imagery. The novel's opening bucolic descriptions—"the garden where roses bloomed, their fragrance perfuming the air as bees bustled among the flowers," and "sunlight filtering through leaves to cast dappled shadows on the ground" [8]—establish an atmosphere of tranquility that mirrors Dorian's initial innocence. This stands in stark contrast to the sinister transformation following Basil's murder: "a bitter wind swept across the square, making the gas lamps flicker blue, while bare trees swayed with iron-black branches" [8]. These deliberate shifts in natural imagery synchronize with Dorian's actions, externalizing his inner decay through ecological discord. As Dorian descends into depravity, violent storms erupt—"thunder roared outside, lightning split the night sky, and rain lashed against windows as if trying to purge all sin" [8]—where nature's fury reflects his psychological torment. Dorian's spiritual pollution literally contaminates his environment, mirroring society's moral collapse. His disregard for love and life parallels humanity's reckless exploitation of nature. Through this symbiotic relationship between character and environment, Wilde masterfully exposes the interconnection between ethical degradation and ecological oppression, intensifying the novel's artistic power and thematic profundity. The deteriorating natural world becomes both witness and victim to Dorian's sins, just as Victorian women suffered under the same patriarchal systems that enabled environmental destruction.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the oppression of nature operates on multiple levels, serving both as a mirror of social reality and a profound critique of human depravity. Through his depiction of nature's fate, Wilde exposes how humanity's materialistic pursuits and moral decay lead to the destruction of beauty, prompting deep reflection on the relationship between humans and nature, as well as the trajectory of societal development.

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3. Opposition

Ecofeminism examines the interconnected oppression of women and nature while highlighting their unique perspectives and spirit of resistance. This dynamic finds expression even in musical adaptations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where a male aristocrat named Alan exclaims, "The feminists have taken to the streets and clashed with the police!" - a line that ironically underscores the growing female defiance during the Victorian era. While female characters in period literature were often portrayed as victims of patriarchy, Wilde's works reveal subtle forms of rebellion through what we might term "quiet resistance." His play *An Ideal Husband* presents women with distinctive personalities and free will, showcasing Wilde's vision of "New Women", ranging from hedonistic socialites obsessed with pleasure to ambitious self-made women distorted by material desires [11]. Beyond overt confrontation, this resistance manifests through silence, absence, and even self-destruction, as powerfully demonstrated by Sibyl Vane's tragic performance decline and Margaret Devereux's mysterious backstory in this book. Their passive-aggressive defiance, though subtle, delivers as potent a critique of patriarchy as any street protest, proving that oppression often breeds its most poetic forms of resistance in the very margins it creates.

3.1. Portrayals of women pursuing artistic and personal freedom

Art serves as Sibyl Vane's spiritual sanctuary and means of resistance. For her, acting transcends mere profession—it becomes a sacred space where she sheds real-world constraints to embody empowered heroines: a love-defying Juliet, a fate-challenging Imogen. These Shakespearean roles arm her with borrowed agency, temporarily eclipsing the gender inequalities she endures offstage. Her love for Dorian similarly reflects this pursuit of truth and beauty, defiantly embracing her "Prince Charming" despite societal barriers—a stark contrast to her mother's mercenary worldview. Wilde's omniscient narration paints Mrs. Vane with brutal irony: "a faded, tired woman" [8] who fantasizes about her son's Australian fortune while despising her own "theatrical affectations." Having been abandoned by an aristocrat in her youth, Mrs. Vane now performs solely for survival, her speech saturated with financial calculations. When sensing history repeating with Sibyl, she notably fails to intervene like the protective mother in *Lady Windermere's Fan*—instead rationalizing Dorian's potential wealth ("the marriage might be worth considering") [8]. This moral compromise catalyzes Sibyl's eventual suicide, exposing how patriarchal capitalism corrupts maternal instincts into instruments of oppression. Through this generational contrast, Wilde dissects how art can either liberate (Sibyl's authentic performances) or enslave (Mrs. Vane's profit-driven theatrics), framing creativity as both weapon and casualty in gender wars.

Sibyl's wholehearted devotion to love represents a courageous rebellion against patriarchal marital norms, though this emotional armor proves tragically vulnerable. When she discovers Dorian's affection is based solely on her beauty and acting talent rather than genuine love, her despair leads to a profound personal crisis. Refusing to employ her brother's violent threat "If he harms my sister, I'll hunt him down like a dog"[8], she instead chooses the ultimate protest - taking her own life. This final act constitutes both a tragic surrender and a powerful statement: through self-destruction, she preserves her dignity and ideals of pure love, delivering a scathing indictment against the hypocritical society that values women only for their aesthetic and utilitarian worth. Her death in the river, among the natural elements, symbolizes the ultimate rejection of a world that had reduced her to a disposable object, transforming personal tragedy into an unforgettable critique of systemic oppression.

Beyond Sibyl, another pivotal female character intimately connected to the protagonist is Dorian's birth mother, Margaret Devereux. Unlike the impoverished actress, Margaret exists in privileged material circumstances - "her grandfather had bequeathed her the entire Selby Royal estate" [8].

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Liberated from economic constraints, her rebellion manifests primarily on a spiritual plane, rendering it more resolute and practically consequential than Sibyl's tragic protest.

"She was a girl of extraordinary beauty." [8] At a time when all the young ladies of London were vying for the attention of a certain Mr. Carrington, this young man himself became infatuated—nearly to the point of madness—with Margaret, even going so far as to kneel before her in proposal. Yet Margaret not only rejected his advances but mocked him outright. She had the power of choice—romantic, self-assured, and sharp-edged. She would never forsake the love she desired for the sake of so-called family interests. In the eyes of Lord Henry, her love story was little more than a "modern, peculiar romantic scandal." A beautiful woman, driven by reckless passion, burned her bridges and took dangerous risks. [8] Unlike traditional aristocratic women, who meekly submitted to marriages arranged for familial gain, Margaret refused to sacrifice her own happiness. Instead, she defiantly eloped with "a penniless young man," boldly pursuing the love she yearned for. Even after her husband died in a duel and her father forcibly brought her back home, she retained the unyielding pride of her youth and never spoke to him again. In such dire circumstances, she raised Dorian alone until her dying day.

Margaret's vigorous rebellion in the early stage is in stark contrast to the silent return home in the later period, which just reflects the limitations of women's independent resistance in this era. Although rebellion often ended in failure, this willingness to flee reflected women's desire for freedom and independence, and was a typical example of women expressing dissatisfaction and engaging in personal rebellion during this period. During the Victorian period, women received a more complete education than usual, and they gradually improved their self-thinking, constantly breaking the confines of patriarchal society, and striving to realize their self-worth and complete their self-identity.

3.2. Spiritual resistance

The connection between nature and women is natural, women give birth to life, and nature nourishes all things. Unlike women's rebellion, natural rebellion often comes in the form of disasters and is more uncontrollable. But in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this rebellion is silent, a subtle irony of human greed.

Nature in the novel maintains an intrinsic connection with the protagonist Dorian Gray, serving as a mirror to his psychological transformation. Each phase of Dorian's moral degeneration finds symbolic expression through corresponding changes in natural imagery - the author's deliberate landscape depictions trace with remarkable clarity how an innocent, beautiful youth gradually descends into depravity. These environmental metamorphoses simultaneously reflect the moral decay of Victorian society itself. Dorian initially possesses "the rose-red youth and rose-white boyhood" [8], embodying nature's primal purity - a blank slate awaiting inscription. His mother's absence creates an abnormal vacuum in moral education, making him particularly susceptible to external influences. While fortunate to encounter Lord Henry who recognizes his extraordinary beauty, this proves ultimately tragic as Lord Henry epitomizes bourgeois hedonism and patriarchal values, directly shaping Dorian's developing worldview. The novel thus establishes an ecological parallel: just as industrial society ravages natural environments, corrupt ideologies pollute human nature. Dorian's trajectory from rose-fresh innocence to moral putrescence reenacts on individual level what Victorian capitalism was inflicting collectively upon both social and natural orders - a dual degradation Wilde exposes through this meticulous character-environment symbiosis.

The encounters and dialogues between Dorian and Lord Henry are invariably accompanied by evocative environmental descriptions. Their fateful first meeting occurs in Basil's studio, which Wilde portrays in idyllic terms: "The studio was filled with the rich odor of roses...The sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence

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round the dusty gilt horns of the straggling woodbine, seemed to make the stillness more oppressive." [8] This harmonious natural setting mirrors Dorian's unspoiled innocence at this stage. However, as Lord Henry begins poisoning Dorian's mind with his hedonistic philosophy - particularly the idea that youth is the only thing worth possessing - a telling natural metaphor emerges: "A bee flew in...he watched it crawl into the stained trumpet of a Tyrian convolvulus. The flower seemed to quiver, and then swayed gently to and fro." [8] This becomes a powerful allegory for their relationship: Henry (the bee) identifies and exploits the flaw in Dorian's character (the stained flower), setting in motion the young man's moral corruption. The flower's subsequent quivering symbolizes Dorian's vulnerable psyche beginning to internalize these destructive ideas, while its gentle swaying suggests the insidious, almost imperceptible nature of this psychological manipulation. Through such meticulous natural symbolism, Wilde demonstrates how moral decay operates with the same inevitability as natural processes - once the poisonous idea takes root, the corruption spreads organically.

The second significant set of natural descriptions occurs after Dorian abandons Sibyl. Her death serves as a catalyst, triggering subtle yet profound changes in both his portrait and surrounding environment - marking nature's direct confrontation with Dorian's corrupted psyche: "The face on the canvas appeared to shift slightly...The expression had altered, revealing a touch of cruelty about the mouth." As "morning light poured into the room, driving grotesque shadows to tremble in corners...the portrait's strange expression seemed not only to remain but intensify. The dancing sunlight illuminated cruel lines around its mouth, as if exposing some terrible deed..." [8]. Here, the revealing sunlight acts as nature's impartial judge, laying bare Dorian's moral deformities. Having internalized Lord Henry's misogynistic worldview, his soul loses its original purity, giving way to "mad hungers that grew more ravenous with feeding" [8].Dorian's descent manifests in his growing contempt for nature, epitomized by his cynical remark: "Nature's brilliant irony - driving hermits into wilderness to share beasts' food and lodging" [8]. This reflects patriarchal society's systemic exclusion of marginalized groups, as wilderness - far from being hostile - represents an egalitarian space that nurtures life and fosters belonging. Hermits coexisting with beasts embody this harmony, yet Dorian's corrupted perspective rejects it, mirroring how Victorian society ridiculed and erased those outside mainstream norms. His dismissal of nature's balance reveals the same oppressive logic that marginalizes women, the poor, and nonconformists - all victims of a system privileging domination over coexistence. Through this ecological alienation, Wilde exposes how patriarchal values distort humanity's fundamental relationship with the natural world, creating hierarchies that poison both society and environment alike.

Moreover, Dorian's pursuit of a new hedonism leads him into unrestrained debauchery, his soul growing increasingly grotesque as reflected in the deteriorating portrait. When Basil, the painting's creator, sees his once-proud masterpiece for the final time, he recoils at "the shameless forgery, the dishonorable mockery" it has become [8]. Dorian Gray's choice to defy nature's order in his quest for eternal youth invites nature's retribution—a punishment manifested through his accumulating crimes. Warped by prolonged moral distortion and Lord Henry's poisonous influence, Dorian leaves a trail of bloodshed: from Sibyl and Adrian to countless unnamed victims, and ultimately Basil himself, all meeting their demise directly or indirectly through his actions. Yet Dorian remains obstinately unrepentant, frequenting brothels and opium dens while disavowing any connection to the suffering he causes. Meanwhile, the natural world around him grows increasingly ominous and lifeless: "A cold rain began to fall. Streetlamps flickered spectrally through the thick fog," while "the moon hung low like a yellow skull, its light intermittently smothered by groping, claw-like clouds" [8]. The once-flourishing garden withers—a symbolic reversal where Dorian's inner corruption begins to infect nature itself. These environmental transformations serve as nature's silent yet potent rebellion against humanity's unchecked avarice under patriarchal rule, proving that nature is far from defenseless. The novel's climactic irony arrives when Dorian, in a final act of defiance, drives a knife into the portrait—

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only for the blade to pierce his own heart instead. The restored portrait regains its "astonishing youth and beauty," while Dorian's actual visage becomes "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome" [8]. The protagonist, who prized youth and beauty above all else, meets his end as a grotesque figure—a darkly poetic justice underscoring nature's ultimate authority. Though the conclusion is abrupt, its message is unequivocal: when humans disrupt the natural order, nature retaliates with its own inexorable justice. Wilde's ending thus crystallizes the ecofeminist warning—patriarchal exploitation of both women and nature inevitably triggers a devastating reckoning.

Although their defiance remains largely voiceless, the rebellious power of women and nature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is undeniable. Sibyl Vane pursues freedom through art, ultimately protesting societal hypocrisy through her tragic suicide. Meanwhile, Margaret Devereux resists patriarchal constraints by rejecting conventional marriage and asserting her autonomy in pursuit of personal fulfillment.Nature, too, resists human domination in subtle yet profound ways. The novel's symbolic decay—Dorian's grotesque portrait, the "leprous" streets of London, and gardens twisted in "unnatural hues"—serves as nature's silent condemnation of human corruption. In the end, nature exacts its retribution: Dorian's unnatural defiance of mortality culminates in his grotesque demise, a poetic justice that mirrors ecological backlash against exploitation.Whether overt or covert, these acts of resistance—Sibyl's fatal rebellion, Margaret's quiet defiance, and nature's relentless reclamation—reveal a shared yearning for liberation. Both women and nature, though oppressed and silenced, emerge as subversive forces that expose the fragility of patriarchal control. Wilde's narrative thus frames them not merely as victims, but as latent agents of reckoning.

4. Reconciliation (compromise) and reflection

Despite the strong and unshakable authority of Victorian men, women in the Victorian period were looking for a delicate balance to assert their social status in addition to direct sexual resistance. Through their own efforts, they maintain social relationships and realize their self-worth. The Victorian period (1837-1901) was an important period of social change in British history, and although the role of women was severely limited at the time, participation in charitable activities became an important way for many women to participate in public affairs and exert influence. From this point of view, this approach is more like a "temporary truce" with patriarchy. Victorian industrialization brought about environmental pollution, urban congestion and social problems, which naturally became the spiritual sustenance for people to escape the negative effects of industrialization. The middle and upper classes, in particular, were keen on rural life, gardening, and nature exploration, which somewhat eased the anxieties brought about by industrialization. Nature is more like a "mirror" in the novel, reflecting the corrosion of human nature by industrialization and hypocritical social morality all the time.

4.1. A fragile truce beneath the facade

The aristocratic ladies of high society frequented grand social gatherings, with Lady Agatha, Lord Henry's aunt, being particularly devoted to charitable causes. Her first encounter with Dorian reveals her perceptive nature, as she observes, "He is very earnest and has a beautiful nature"—a remark that pointedly contradicts Lord Henry's prejudiced assertion that "women have no appreciation of character" [8]. These women regularly hosted salons, a tradition originating from Parisian artistic exhibitions in 1725, where noblewomen would organize intellectual gatherings in their drawing rooms. The participants—playwrights, novelists, poets, musicians, painters, critics, philosophers, and politicians—attest to the cultured sophistication of the hostesses, dismantling any notion of their intellectual superficiality. In the novel, Lady Brandon's salon serves as the setting where Basil and Dorian Gray first meet, with Lady Brandon herself excelling in the social arena through her sharp wit

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and adept networking, maneuvering through high society with effortless charm. Wilde further counters stereotypes through his portrayal of other noblewomen, such as the "Duchess of Harley, a lady of graceful good nature, adored by all who knew her" [8]. These depictions collectively challenge the reductive patriarchal view of women as mere decorative accessories, instead highlighting their agency as cultivators of art, politics, and intellectual discourse.

In both public and private gatherings, the women of Victorian society engaged not only in domestic gossip but also in discussions of political issues and cutting-edge intellectual theories. While male attendees casually dismissed topics like "the slavery question," female participants refused to remain passive observers. Mrs. Vandeleur pointedly remarked, "We bear such heavy responsibilities" [8], and the Duchess openly critiqued Lord Henry as "quite charming and dreadfully demoralizing" [8]. These women, beneficiaries of progressive education reforms, had begun developing independent moral frameworks and the capacity for self-directed action. Yet their social discourse often remained superficial—though privately discontent, their resistance seldom transcended verbal complaints into tangible activism. This paradox reveals the limitations of their rebellion: while their intellectual engagement and sharp tongues signaled growing autonomy, their compliance with patriarchal norms—prioritizing social survival over radical change—rendered their critiques toothless. Wilde captures this tension masterfully, showing how even educated women became complicit in upholding the systems they lightly disparaged, their half-hearted defiance reflecting a broader societal stagnation. The novel thus exposes a tragic irony: these women possessed the tools for revolution but remained trapped in performative resistance, their "progress" merely ornamental within an unshaken patriarchal edifice.

Victorian marriages emphasized class parity and imposed rigid domestic expectations on women, yet within these oppressive constraints, women carved out subtle spaces for resistance. Though far from achieving true autonomy, they weren't wholly subservient—as seen when the Duchess openly derides her husband's chaired meeting as "preposterous," or wryly notes that "hats are too fragile for harsh words" during marital disputes [8]. Such remarks reveal their defiance stems not from obedience but strategic self-preservation, using wit as both shield and weapon. Yet these acts of minor rebellion rarely translated into substantive change. Lady Henry, for instance, though acutely aware of her unhappy marriage and seeking fulfillment elsewhere, never pursues legal separation or decisive action. Her continued adherence to the empty marital facade demonstrates how even discontented women remained psychologically tethered to traditional norms—outwardly performing spousal loyalty and patience while privately chafing against them. This paradox epitomizes the era's constrained feminism: like ivy twisting within iron trellises, Victorian women grew around patriarchal structures without breaking them, their rebellions confined to gestures that soothed pride but preserved the status quo. Wilde masterfully captures this tension, showing how societal conditioning turned marital discontent into a muted performance where, as the Duchess observes, even rebellion had to be stylishly hat.

Charles Dickens' critique of Victorian marital utilitarianism resonates powerfully in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where marriages function as wealth-accumulating transactions that inevitably deny women happiness.[12] In this era, unions were essentially commercial negotiations—women reduced to commodified assets whose "market value" depended on cultivated accomplishments like music or languages, all designed to secure advantageous matches. Sibyl Vane epitomizes this tragedy: though she initially resists societal constraints through her art, her ultimate transformation into Ophelia (both role and fate) demonstrates how male judgment could annihilate female selfhood.

These women's plights expose the period's fundamentally patriarchal worldview—one that permitted only illusory freedoms. Whether through quiet compromise (like Lady Henry maintaining her empty marriage) or dramatic self-destruction (like Sibyl's suicide), their lives unfolded within what feminist theorist Luce Irigaray would later term "the dominant scopic economy"—a system

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where women's identities remained contingent on male perception. Wilde's novel reveals the cruel paradox: even rebellious acts like Sibyl's theatrical defiance or the Duchess's sharp tongue ultimately reinforced the structures they challenged, their "emancipation" never transcending the boundaries prescribed by patriarchy. Thus Victorian womanhood became a performative tightrope walk between emerging self-awareness and entrenched subjugation, where survival demanded complicity in one's own oppression. The true horror lies not in these women's failures to break free, but in a society that made such failures inevitable.

4.2. The delicate coexistence between nature and patriarchal society

Humanity and nature do not exist in a hierarchical master-slave relationship of conqueror and conquered, but rather form an interdependent organic whole characterized by mutual benefit and dynamic interaction [13]. Humans must abandon the delusion of dominion over nature, recognizing instead a relationship of symbiotic coexistence where each profoundly influences the other. While humans rely on nature for sustenance and resources, our actions—whether through ecological stewardship or environmental destruction—inevitably reverberate through natural systems, disrupting or preserving their delicate equilibrium. Only by adhering to principles of reciprocity, respecting natural laws, and rejecting exploitative practices can sustainable development be achieved, preventing ecological crises from rebounding upon humanity with catastrophic consequences. This ecological holism demands a paradigm shift from unilateral extraction to harmonious coexistence, where nature is valued not as a repository of raw materials but as the very foundation of life itself—a truth Wilde's novel foreshadows when Dorian's violations of natural order culminate in his grotesque physical decay. Just as patriarchal domination distorts human relationships, anthropocentric arrogance corrupts our bond with the environment, making ecological feminism not merely an intellectual framework but an existential imperative.

In the novel, natural landscapes serve as symbolic bastions of order and aesthetic perfection within patriarchal society. The opening depiction of the garden—a paradisiacal counterpoint to the hypocritical urban sprawl—functions as an isolated sanctuary amidst worldly chaos [14]. To preserve this idealized realm, strict segregation from the corrupting city becomes essential; only by severing contact with urban degradation can the garden remain "a haven of peace, shielding against not just physical harm but all fear, doubt, and division" [15]. This imagery mirrors Dorian's initial innocence—both garden and protagonist exist untainted by societal corruption. Significantly, these "ideal gardens"—beautifully enclosed, lush yet meticulously controlled—embody what male authors of the period similarly ascribed to the "perfect home" [16]: spaces where nature's wildness is subdued to reflect patriarchal domestic dominance. The aristocrats' manicured estates, with their artfully pruned hedges and geometrically ordered flowerbeds, showcase human mastery over nature while reinforcing social hierarchies. These designed landscapes operate as dual symbols: they demonstrate horticultural prowess while materializing patriarchal power structures—where every clipped rose and symmetrical pathway proclaims mankind's (particularly upper-class male) dominion over both ecology and social order. Wilde subtly critiques this artificial control through the garden's eventual decay, paralleling how rigid societal constructs inevitably crumble when confronted with authentic human (and natural) wildness.

Meanwhile, nature's cyclical rhythms and eternal presence quietly encompass human societal changes while ultimately rectifying its transgressions. The protagonist Dorian Gray maintains a profound, if antagonistic, connection with nature throughout the narrative. Poisoned by patriarchal ideology, Dorian scorns life's sanctity and natural order, pursuing eternal youth through unnatural means. His debauchery in London's most sordid establishments extends beyond personal corruption—he leads his companions to "madly chase pleasure and plunge into abysses," until they "appear to have lost all sense of honor, morality, and purity" [8]. This blasphemous behavior

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symbolizes patriarchal society's defiance of natural law, attempting to artificially surpass biological limits. Yet nature, though silent, registers its protest through the ever-changing portrait, visually manifesting Dorian's moral decay. In the climactic scene, when Basil beholds the transformed painting, he recoils in horror at "the face of a satyr, foul with wickedness"—a visceral representation of nature's judgment. The portrait's grotesque metamorphosis serves as nature's immutable reckoning, enforcing the truth that no human can ultimately escape natural law. Dorian's eventual demise—his body withered while the portrait regains its original beauty—confirms nature's supreme authority: all attempts to dominate or circumvent it inevitably meet with poetic justice. Wilde thus positions nature not as passive backdrop but as active moral arbiter, whose eternal cycles ultimately absorb and correct humanity's temporal follies.

The progressive decay of the portrait serves not only as a symbol of Dorian's inner corruption but also as nature's silent indictment of human arrogance. Despite societal and individual moral degradation, the cyclical rhythm of seasons persists—spring's rebirth inevitably follows winter's desolation—demonstrating nature's immutable laws remain unbroken. This enduring continuity suggests a profound reconciliation: while humanity may temporarily defy natural order through acts of hubris (like Dorian's Faustian bargain), nature ultimately absorbs these transgressions into its eternal patterns, reasserting balance through subtle yet inexorable forces. The portrait's grotesque transformation—a visual manifestation of moral entropy—exists within this greater cosmic harmony, its horror magnified precisely because it contrasts with the garden's continued blooming and birds' uninterrupted songs elsewhere in the narrative. Wilde thus constructs an ecological paradox: nature tolerates human folly while simultaneously enforcing its fundamental laws, allowing both condemnation (through the portrait) and redemption (through seasonal renewal) to coexist. This duality mirrors ecofeminism's central tenet—that recognizing our embeddedness in nature's cycles, rather than seeking to dominate them, is the path to ethical awakening.

Nature, while subjected to violation and engaged in resistance, establishes a delicate coexistence with society—one marked by inherent inequality yet simultaneously demonstrating nature's resilience and patriarchal society's ultimate impotence before natural forces. Regardless of human societal evolution, nature persists in its eternal rhythms, sustaining the continuum of life with unwavering constancy. This timeless quality stands in stark contrast to the transience of human civilizations, serving as a profound reminder that the pursuit of power and control must acknowledge nature's indomitable force and immutable laws. Though patriarchal systems may appear to dominate nature superficially, nature's cyclical regeneration consistently transcends human comprehension and manipulation, ultimately exposing humanity's insignificance and helplessness in the face of natural order. The silent revolution of seasons, the inexorable growth of vegetation, and the perpetual flow of watercourses all testify to nature's quiet triumph—not through confrontation, but through its patient, inevitable reassertion of fundamental truths that predate and will outlast all human constructs. In this dynamic, we witness the paradox of human achievement: our greatest structures and ideologies crumble, while the humblest sprout breaking through pavement affirms nature's ultimate sovereignty.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, nature and women share a parallel fate: they are both objects of discipline and aestheticization under patriarchy, yet simultaneously harbor subversive power. Aristocratic women, like meticulously manicured gardens, mask societal strife with elegant salons and charitable endeavors, yet their words betray subtle mockery of male authority. Natural landscapes are tamed into the order of aristocratic estates, yet they voice silent condemnation of human corruption through the decaying portrait. Both maintain superficial harmony through compromise—women navigate social spheres with "timid" defiance, while nature tolerates human arrogance through seasonal cycles—yet ultimately expose the fragility of patriarchal order. When Sibyl self-destructs under male rejection, or when Dorian’s defiance of natural law brings his ruin, their suppressed connection erupts in vengeful ecological allegory. In Wilde’s narrative, women and nature form a

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mirror of patriarchal society: they are decorative Others, yet also eternal judges, silently coexisting as they await the collapse of an imbalanced world.

5. Conclusion

This paper employs an ecofeminist lens to uncover the shared plight and intrinsic connection between women and nature under patriarchal society. Female characters in the novel, such as Sibyl Vane and Margaret Devereux, resist social oppression in different ways, embodying women's pursuit of freedom and dignity while mirroring nature's fragility and silent resistance against human exploitation. Wilde symbolically intertwines the moral decay of characters with the deterioration of the natural environment, revealing how humanity's oppression and destruction of nature ultimately recoil upon itself. Dorian Gray's corruption is not merely an individual moral collapse but a microcosm of society's dual exploitation of both women and nature.Through an ecofeminist perspective, this study offers a renewed approach to literary interpretation, emphasizing the shared destiny of women and nature in resisting oppression. It calls for a critical reassessment of humanity's relationship with nature, advocating for a more equitable and harmonious mode of coexistence.

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