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Aestheticism and Degeneration: Echoes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client"

Abstract: The present paper aims at investigating possible points of contact between Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client" (1924), narrating one of Sherlock Holmes's final exploits. When considering the portrait motif and its metaphorical meanings, it is clear that, in Wilde's novel, Dorian's picture is imbued with connotations that are deeply associated with the author's aesthetic beliefs as well as with a decadent parable. In the case of Holmes's adventure, a detailed narrative characterisation of Baron Adelbert Gruner, the evil antagonist, seems to similarly work as a kind of portrait where 'surface' and 'inner truth' are strictly interconnected. In line with *fin-de-siècle* theories such as those of degeneration and criminal anthropology, the villain exhibits blatant physical marks that soon denounce his inner corruption (as does Dorian's picture). Moreover, in the final resolution of the case, the criminal's face, deformed by vitriol, is explicitly described as a painting losing its original shapes and colours. This 'liquefaction process' further highlights the increasingly pervading link between inner and outer decadence, in a way that lets us envisage similarities between Dorian and Baron Gruner, the two corrupt aesthetes.

Keywords: Degeneration. "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client". *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

It is widely acknowledged that Arthur Conan Doyle was an avid consumer of prominent literary works of his time and of popular culture, more broadly. His autobiography and correspondence clearly reveal as much; in both, moreover, there is a discernible emphasis (at times bordering on the self-complacent) on the famous personalities he encountered. This fact is relevant for three reasons.

Firstly, it sheds light on Conan Doyle's immersion in the social and intellectual circles of his time. Secondly, critical assessments of his work frequently highlight how elements from his cultural milieu served as inspiration, or were directly referenced in his stories.[1] These references could take the form of subtle nods or overt intertextual references. Thirdly, as pointed out by Douglas Kerr, Conan Doyle had devised his Sherlock Holmes stories with "a business plan that took into account publication outlets and the market they fostered and served".[2] His voracious consumption of other popular works and his interest in famous figures, therefore, also had the practical

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[1] See A. Glazzard, *The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle's Detective Fiction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2018, p. 7. See also Sir A.C. Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, eds J. Lellenberg, D. Stashower and C. Foley, New York, Harper Collins, 2008; Sir A.C. Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, Cambridge, CUP, 2013; C. Pittard, *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction*, London, Routledge, 2011; J.M. Allan and C. Pittard (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes*, Cambridge, CUP, 2019, *inter alia*.

[2] D. Kerr, *Conan Doyle: Writing, Profession, and Practice*, Oxford, OUP, 2013, p. 13.

SYNERGIES vol. IV, 2023, pp. 93-110
ISSN 2785-1850 DOI: 10.4454/syn.v4.900

aspect of keeping him informed about what was commercially successful at the time.

Among his many sources of inspiration, scholars often cite Oscar Wilde. Their famous meeting at the Langham Hotel with J.M. Stoddart, an editor for *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, in 1889, resulted in the publication of *The Sign of the Four* (1890) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891). Nils Clausson goes so far as to define this event as "the most consequential literary dinner of the English *fin de siècle*".[3] It also left a lasting impression on Conan Doyle, who referred to it as a "golden evening" in his autobiography.[4] His fascination with Wilde, in particular, was so profound that characters like the aesthete Thaddeus Sholto in *The Sign of the Four*, Sherlock Holmes's brother Mycroft, and even the Great Detective himself are believed to have been partly inspired by Wilde and his remarkable wit.[5]

If Wilde's personality made such a strong impact on Conan Doyle's characters, what about his novel? On the one hand, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems to be a good candidate as a source of inspiration for the author of Sherlock Holmes. It aligns with the type of popular fiction which he usually borrowed from,[6] and although the sales did not qualify it as an immediate success, it certainly garnered much interest from the reading public. On the other hand, the type of interest it earned – and the scandal it provoked – would have discouraged Conan Doyle. In keeping with the standards of his main outlet, George Newnes's *Strand Magazine*, he carefully avoided topics and tones which could be construed as 'sensational'.[7]

This article will argue that at least one of Sherlock Holmes's stories clearly looks at *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client", published in 1924 in the American periodical *Collier's* and the following year in the *Strand Magazine*. Specifically, my contribution focuses on the concept of 'degeneration' in relation to the figure of the decadent aesthete, highlighting how this notion connects Wilde's novel and Conan Doyle's short story especially when considering the theme of the portrait. Moreover, I will show how Conan Doyle transformed and adapted some aspects of Wilde's novel which relate to degeneration so as to suit the requirements of detective fiction and of his publication outlet. Finally, I will illustrate how the same concept could be reinterpreted in the light of Wilde's aestheticism, on the one hand, and Conan Doyle's 'rationalised' stance, on the other.

[3] N. CLAUSSON, "Arthur Conan Doyle's Darker Mystery", *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 27 (4), 2020, pp. 18-19.

[4] SIR A. C. DOYLE, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 78.

[5] See for instance A. GLAZZARD, *The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle's Detective Fiction*, p. 118; P. BAROLSKY, "The Case of the Domesticated Aesthete", *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 60 (3), 1984, pp. 438-52; M. SEENEY, "The Fictional Career of Oscar Wilde", *The Wildean*, 9, 1996, pp. 39-50; A. KINGSTON, *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction*, New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

[6] Glazzard, for instance, includes Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins and Robert Louis Stevenson among the most prominent authors influencing Conan Doyle. See A. GLAZZARD, *The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle's Detective Fiction*, p. 7.

[7] See R.R. THOMAS, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, Cambridge and New York, CUP, 1999; M. CAIRNEY, "The Healing Art of Detection: Sherlock Holmes and the Disease of Crime in the *Strand Magazine*", *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 26 (1), 2007, pp. 62-74; C. PITTARD, *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction*; D. KERR, *Conan Doyle: Writing, Profession, and Practice*; C. CLARKE, "Doyle, Holmes and Victorian Publishing", in J.M. ALLAN and C. PITTARD (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes*, pp. 29-41.

1. *Degeneration Theory, Oscar Wilde and* The Picture of Dorian Gray

The concept of degeneration, quite popular during the English *fin de siècle*, originated from the socio-scientific discourse that emerged from Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory. European and British scholars like Bénédict Morel, Max Nordau, or Francis Galton elaborated on the notion that, if individuals could evolve, they might also revert to a less evolved state. This kind of degeneration was seen as primarily affecting individuals who were inherently predisposed, but there was agreement that it could also be triggered by environmental stimuli such as the unfavourable socio-sanitary conditions in large metropolises, excessive indulgence in vices like smoking, drinking, or stimulants, deviant or unregulated sexuality, or even physical traumas. According to these theories, degeneration would be transmitted to the offspring, intensifying over time and thus endangering society as a whole: "degeneration theory posited that 'degenerate' individuals shred a deficient biological makeup, which not only set them apart from society's 'normal' population, but threatened that very population with a potentially contagious disease".[8] Degenerates, in other words, were to be identified, described and potentially isolated from 'healthy' society in order to preserve its progress and haleness: "the writings of […] degenerationists betray a fierce taxonomical impulse: degenerate individuals are singled out as clearly marked and thus easily recognizable (at least by the medical expert), making them amenable to measures of control and segregation".[9]

The instrument that allowed this process of classification was mostly derived from criminal anthropology and, especially in the cases of Nordau and Galton, from Cesare Lombroso's taxonomy of criminal types in *The Criminal Man* (*L'uomo delinquente*, 1876). Nordau, for one, openly acknowledged his debt to Lombroso, the "dear and honoured Master"[10] to whom he dedicated *Degeneration* (*Entartung*, 1892).

Lombroso suggested that criminal men (and women) could be distinguished from the 'normal' population through physical and psychological signs, which he called 'stigmata'. A macrocephalic skull, small and close-together eyes, unlobed ears, and then lethargy or hyperactivity, sexual incontinence, or excessive mysticism are only some of the possible signs which indicated a predisposition to crime, according to Lombroso. These stigmata helped the medical practitioner or anthropologist to *identify* deviance and simultaneously *prove* the innate proclivity to crime of a given subject, in a basically circular process of reasoning.

In a later essay, *The Man of Genius* (*L'uomo di genio*, 1882), Lombroso built on an idea he had introduced in *The Criminal Man* by positing that the "born criminal" (the innately criminal man), the "morally insane" man (an individual deprived of moral sense to a varying degree), and the "man of genius" are three possible incarnations of the same set of signs. These three types of individuals, that is, would all exhibit the same stigmata but instantiate them differently in society. Significantly, Nordau

[8] S. Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the* Fin de Siècle, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 2.

[9] *Ibidem.*

[10] M. Nordau, *Degeneration*, Engl. trans. from the Second Edition of the German work, New York, D. Appleton & Co., 1895, p. vii.

did not concur on this point, sharply differentiating between "degenerates", who are also morally insane and potentially criminal, and "men of genius", who do not exhibit the same outward signs of degeneration. In his systematisation, a flawed biological makeup, being the hallmark of the degenerate, invariably leads to a deterioration in society at large.[11] The man of genius, on the contrary, must stand on the opposite side of the evolutionary scale, leading society to progress. The two, therefore, cannot and must not coexist: as pointed out by Stephan Karschay, degenerates (among whom Nordau included aesthetes) must be controlled and segregated.[12]

Nordau also sealed an immediate correlation when discussing the concept of degeneration in relation to Wilde and his *oeuvre*. Indeed, he devoted a chapter of *Degeneration* to expanding on the evils of Aestheticism and an extensive section of this chapter to Wilde, the "English representative" of this ilk.[13] In addition to this, Karschay, Andrew Glazzard and Dominic Janes evidence how, in his 1896 petition to the Home Secretary, Wilde adopted Nordau's (and Lombroso's) "medicalised view of homosexuality"[14] and the lexicon of degeneration theory in a "feigned acceptance of Nordau's view that, as an *avant-garde* artist, he must be suffering from a psychiatrically recognised pathological condition".[15]

This is also, incidentally, the stance taken on by Conan Doyle in *Memories and Adventures*. After praising Wilde's brilliancy, generosity, and intellectual stature during their dinner at the Langham Hotel, he commented:

> Only once again did I see him, many years afterwards, and then he gave me the impression of being mad. […] Nothing could have been more different from his early gentlemanly instincts. I thought at the time, and still think, that the monstrous development which ruined him was pathological, and that a hospital rather than a police court was the place for its consideration.[16]

If Wilde had affected acceptance of his 'diagnosis', Conan Doyle was evidently in earnest in his adoption of a bio-medical explanation for Wilde's degeneration – taking for granted, moreover, that such a degeneration had indeed occurred over the years. The vocabulary here employed refers to the sphere of moral insanity in the vein of Lombroso and Nordau: Wilde is described as 'mad', ungentlemanlike and 'monstrous', with the proper corrective being identified in hospitalisation.

The same kind of "symptomatic reading"[17] had been applied to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which had triggered similar accusations of being a corrupted and corruptive work. Unsurprisingly, the novel was also used as evidence against Wilde

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 23.

[12] See S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the* Fin de Siècle, p. 2.

[13] M. NORDAU, *Degeneration*, p. 317. See also E. HANSON, "Style at the *Fin de Siècle*: Aestheticist, Decadent, Symbolist", in K. POWELL and P. RABY (eds), *Oscar Wilde in Context*, Cambridge, CUP, 2013, pp. 150-58; C. FERRARI, "Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*", *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 44 (1), 2017, pp. 67-86; S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration*.

[14] A. GLAZZARD, *The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle's Detective Fiction*, p. 118.

[15] S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the* Fin de Siècle, p. 2. See also D. JANES, "Oscar Wilde, Sodomy, and Mental Illness in Late Victorian England", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 23 (1), 2014, pp. 79-95.

[16] SIR A.C. DOYLE, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 79.

[17] S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the* Fin de Siècle, p. 79.

by the Marquess of Queensberry's counsel.[18] This move was favoured by the fact that Nordau himself derived extensive material for his attacks against Aestheticism from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In essence, then, a book which had been perceived as corruptive and almost pathological by contemporary readers was used to build a taxonomy of deviant traits, which were in turn employed to formally accuse its author. The circularity of this reasoning is entirely in keeping with the one that underpinned Lombroso's taxonomical systematisation of criminal stigmata.

Nonetheless, while Wilde's trial, incarceration and public accusation of 'gross indecency' almost inevitably catalyse the attention when dealing with the topic of degeneration, the author's familiarity with the scientific discourse of his time was by no means limited to the later stage of his life. It is worth noting, with Karschay, Michael Wainwright, Suzanne Raitt and Chiara Ferrari, that the scientific vocabulary of evolutionary theory and degeneration had already made its way into *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[19] Any reading of the novel through these lenses cannot but start from an analysis of the portrait, which records the effects of Dorian's corruption as stigmata clearly manifesting on his body. Similarly, another essential starting point is Chapter XI, which acts as a parossistic compendium of Aestheticism crammed with decadent overtones, a diary in which Dorian's activities, passions, studies and narcissistic obsessions are minutely recorded: a portrait within the portrait, so to speak.

When interpreted through Degeneration Theory and its hermeneutical system, the portrait's workings emerge as prominent. As Dorian remains forever young and innocent-looking, the portrait takes on the signs of both his advancing age and moral degeneration. That is why, in the wake of Sibyl Vane's suicide, his mouth instantly and graphically becomes distorted in an evil grin:

> The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly strange. He turned round, and, walking to the window, drew up the blind.
> The bright dawn flooded the room, and swept the fantastic shadows into dusky corners, where they lay shuddering. But the strange expression that he had noticed in the face of the portrait seemed to linger there, to be more intensified even. The quivering, ardent sunlight showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing.[20]

The description of the discovery of this eerie trait is in itself significant: at first, the event is presented as "strange", possibly some trick of an overexerted imagination. Then, however, light, the signifier of illuminist rationality, is let into the room, and the *fantastic* shadows are chased into a corner, leaving space for objective observation. Yet, the "lines of cruelty" remain there, plainly showing the "dreadful thing" that Dorian had indeed done the night before, forever marking him – the 'him' in the portrait – to the eyes of the world.

[18] *Ibidem*, pp. 79-80.

[19] See C. Ferrari, "Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*"; M. Wainwright, *Toward a Sociobiological Hermeneutic. Darwinian Essays on Literature*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 25-48; S. Raitt, "Immoral Science in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", in L. Karpenko and S. Claggett (eds), *Strange Science: Investigating the Limits of Knowledge in the Victorian Age*, Ann Arbor, Michigan U.P., 2017, pp. 164-78.

[20] O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. R. Mighall, London, Penguin Books, (1891) 2000, pp. 87-88. All references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

Dorian's attempt to conceal this consists in burying the portrait in darkness once again, where however it still keeps on recording the stigmata associated with his deviant behaviour. Progressively, the figure in the portrait becomes monstrous, deformed, and blatantly evil. On the one hand, the correspondence between sign and deviance theorised by Lombroso appears to be reversed: Dorian's stigmata do not preexist, but manifest themselves in parallel with his descent into a moral abyss. As such, they do not seem to be symptoms of latent deviance, apparently confirming the effects of 'nurture' rather than 'nature' on the development of the subject. On the other hand, the novel offers multiple suggestions that Dorian could have been predisposed to this descent, i.e. to degeneration. The first suggestion is to be found in Chapter II, as Lord Henry Wotton proceeds to enthral Dorian with his speech, as the latter is sitting for his portrait. Lord Henry is presented as a veritable snake in the Garden, his rhetoric and voice – "such a beautiful voice" (p. 20), muses Dorian – being reminiscent of a Miltonian Lucifer.[21] Still, his monologue touches Dorian in a peculiar way:

> He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself. The few words that Basil's friend had said to him […] had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses. (p. 21)

Lord Henry's words about beauty and youth as supreme ideals strike Dorian not as something completely new, but as an awakening of something dormant within him. The musical metaphor comes back to evoke the image of a tuning fork, a sort of "curious" vibration which finds in Dorian a kindred sounding board. If this moment is identified as the protagonist's first step towards a life of dissolution, then Lord Henry can be said to have corrupted him only insofar as he has triggered a part of Dorian which was actually ingrained.[22]

This metaphoric resonance seems to find a visual equivalent and a more thorough characterisation in terms of heredity and deviance in Chapter XI. Strolling through his family's portrait gallery, Dorian begins to wonder whether his life might be influenced by something at once undetectable and nevertheless material:

> He loved to stroll through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins. Here was Philip Herbert […]. Was it young Herbert's life that he sometimes led? Had some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own?
> Here […] stood Sir Anthony Sherard, with his silver-and-black armour piled at his feet. What had this man's legacy been? Had the lover of Giovanna of Naples bequeathed him some inheritance of sin and shame? […]
> What of George Willoughby, with his powdered hair and fantastic patches? How evil he looked! The face was saturnine and swarthy, and the sensual lips seemed to be twisted with disdain. […]
> And his mother with her Lady Hamilton face, and her moist wine-dashed lips – he knew what he had got from her. (pp. 137-38)

[21] See C. FERRARI, "Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*", p. 72.
[22] S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the* Fin de Siècle, pp. 170-71.

Here, Dorian is studying a collection of portraits much like his, leading us to wonder if these works, too, had captured the true essence of their subjects. If Dorian's musing on the role of inheritance is also modelled on J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours*,[23] Wilde's use of the scientific lexicon of the time remains significant. His reference to a "strange poisonous germ", for instance, echoes Morel's definition of degeneration as a deviant germ that progressively obstructs human progress.[24] According to Wainwright, it also shows Wilde's familiarity with "the environing discourse of late nineteenth-century biology",[25] as well as introducing the concept of atavism, i.e. the possibility that an individual could exhibit regressive traits associated with previous stages of development or deviant ancestors.[26]

This potentiality is also expressed through the use of the term 'inheritance' in correlation with 'sin' and 'shame' and, most of all, by the focus on the lips of Dorian's ancestors. Making the parallel with his own portrait more explicit, this focus shows lips that are "twisted" and "sensual", or "moist" and "wine-dashed", clearly evoking both Dorian's "lines of cruelty around the mouth" (p. 88) and his sensuous turn towards degeneration. Blood and heredity seem to be confirmed as major forces behind Dorian's corruption, possibly predisposing him to fall victim to noxious influences from his environment. The gallery also affords him the chance to perform a sort of anthropological study *à la* Lombroso: applying a scientific methodology,[27] he closely inspects his ancestors to detect in their features possible stigmata which would disclose their interior life to him, and ultimately allow him to decipher his family history through one cohesive key.

It is worth pointing out that Wilde is careful to merge nature and nurture in his description of Dorian's 'descent'. He immediately mitigates his hereditary recognition by having Dorian reflect that "one had ancestors in literature as well as in one's own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament […] and certainly with an influence of which one was more absolutely conscious" (p. 138). This intellectual legacy is also highlighted, as pointed out by Nils Clausson, by the parallel established by the word 'poisonous'. On the one hand, the "strange poisonous germ" (p. 137) transmitted by his ancestors might have predisposed him to degeneration. On the other hand, Dorian is no less corrupted by the "poisonous book" (p. 121) that Lord Henry has given him.[28]

That being said, a focus on reading, detecting and decoding signs of degeneration can also be traced in the inability of high society to correctly 'interpret' Dorian. Seeking reassurance on the moral integrity of his former muse, Basil Hallward observes:

Mind you, I don't believe these rumours at all. At least, I can't believe them when I see you. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret

[23] See O. WILDE, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 246n.
[24] *Ibidem*, p. 13.
[25] M. WAINWRIGHT, *Toward a Sociobiological Hermeneutic. Darwinian Essays on Literature*, p. 36.
[26] *Ibidem*, pp. 36-37.
[27] See also C. FERRARI, "Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*" and S. RAITT, "Immoral Science in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*".
[28] See N. CLAUSSON, "'Culture and Corruption': Paterian Self-Development versus Gothic Degeneration in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", *Papers on Language and Literature*, 39 (4), 2003, p. 360.

vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even. (p. 143)

Basil is here rehashing what the science and the public discourse of the time posited, that is to say, that a criminal or a 'morally insane' person would be clearly set apart from the rest of society.[29] Ironically, he points out the very same features – the lines of one's mouth, drooping eyelids, the shape of one's hands – that Dorian had focused on first in his recognition of the changes in the portrait and then in his observation of his ancestors (pp. 87-88, 137-38). The reader is already alerted to the fact that these stigmata do appear on Dorian and his ancestors, but they do so on works of art. These works, therefore, can be said to capture the real essence of their subjects more than a mirror or an unbiased, rational, even scientific observer ever could.

Paradoxically, while Dorian's body remains immortal and static but is ultimately a fabrication, Basil's art is dynamic and lively, truer than the apparent truth, even in its rational, scientific aspects. Thus Wilde, besides striking a balance between nature and nurture in Dorian's path towards degeneration, also integrates Aestheticism with the scientific discourse of his time. In doing so, he contests the positivist assumption that "reality is a given, truth is absolute and cumulative, and language is transparent"[30] not through a medium sounding "extravagant in its tropes, lapidary in its fascination with exotic words for their own sake, and scholarly in its arcane knowledges undivested of their enigmas",[31] but by using a scientific, or scientised, vocabulary.

On this point, however, Ferrari argues that Wilde knowingly sought out the "aestheticization of the scientific method – a new conceptualization of observation and experimentation. This scientific stance would be grounded in the mechanisms of the imagination instead of the neutral and objective recording devices of external reality".[32] From this perspective, then, one would assume that through *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde actually contributed to a process of destabilisation of scientific discourse, questioning its power to accurately decode and order reality. Clausson sees this attack on positivist thought as typical of *fin-de-siècle* Gothic, remarking that, when this genre appropriates the discourse of degeneration, it mines "Western belief in the power of science to explain all mysteries, and particularly […] the belief that Darwinian evolution offered biological confirmation of progress".[33]

While some critical assessments highlight how Gothic influences achieve similar effects in Sherlock Holmes's stories,[34] it should be underlined that Conan Doyle did strive for a normalising stance that aligned itself with the *Strand Magazine*'s guidelines

[29] See R. MIGHALL, "Introduction", in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. xxii.

[30] M. LEPS, *Apprehending the Criminal: The Production of Deviance in Nineteenth-Century Discourse*, Durham and London, Duke U.P., 1992, p. 154.

[31] E. HANSON, "Style at the *Fin de Siècle*: Aestheticist, Decadent, Symbolist", p. 154.

[32] C. FERRARI, "Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*", p. 70.

[33] N. CLAUSSON, "Degeneration, *Fin-de-Siecle* Gothic, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story", *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 35 (1), 2005, p. 70.

[34] See *ibidem*; M. ASCARI, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; C. DEL GRAZIA, *'No Ghosts Need Apply': Gothic Influences in Criminal Science, the Detective and Doyle's Holmesian Canon*, Brighton, Edward Everett Root, 2020.

and with a rationalistic imprint. Therefore, drawing inspiration from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would basically mean adapting its core theme as well as its use of the notion of degeneration in relation to the aesthete and to the trope of the revelatory portrait.

2. *"The Adventure of the Illustrious Client" and its Intertextual References to* The Picture of Dorian Gray

In contrast with the prevalent opinion of his time, and leaving aside Wilde's claim in the preface to the book edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book" (p. 3), in *Memories and Adventures* Conan Doyle earnestly asserted that Wilde's novel "is surely upon a high moral plane".[35] Notably, he did so from a safe chronological and social distance from the Irish author. "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client" was published in 1924, the same year as his autobiography, and its intertextual references to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are somewhat covert, albeit still detectable. Similarly, his engagement with the figure of the aesthete and the notion of degeneration is much more normative.

A wide array of studies has delved into Conan Doyle's dialogue with Degeneration Theory, criminal anthropology and atavism.[36] In some instances, the detective is understood as a pure instrument of institutional order and reason; more recently, however, his figure has been problematised by evidencing how 'eccentric' Sherlock Holmes can be with respect to the norms of Victorian and Edwardian society. Scholars have also defined Holmes as a sort of undercover aesthete,[37] citing his addiction to cocaine, interest in art, witticism and collector tendencies as evidence of this.[38]

However, if the focus has shifted from the figure of the detective to the structure of the detective story, the role of the sleuth continues to gravitate towards collecting

[35] SIR A. C. DOYLE, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 78.

[36] Among them, see M. ASCARI, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*; M. CAIRNEY, "The Healing Art of Detection: Sherlock Holmes and the Disease of Crime in the *Strand Magazine*"; N. CLAUSSON, "Degeneration, *Fin-de-Siecle* Gothic, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story"; A. GLAZZARD, *The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle's Detective Fiction*; C. PITTARD, *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction*; J. CRANFIELD, "Doyle and Evolution", in J.M. ALLAN and C. PITTARD (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes*, pp 81-95; C. CLAUSEN, "Sherlock Holmes, Order, and the Late-Victorian Mind", *The Georgia Review*, 38 (1), 1984, pp. 104-23; R. JANN, "Sherlock Holmes Codes the Social Body", *ELH*, 57 (3), 1990, pp. 685-708; W. GREENSLADE, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel*, Cambridge and New York, CUP, 1994; R.R. THOMAS, "The Fingerprint of the Foreigner: Colonizing the Criminal Body in 1890s Detective Fiction and Criminal Anthropology", *ELH*, 61 (3), 1994, pp. 655-83; F. LAWRENCE, "*The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the Man on the Tor, and a Metaphor for the Mind", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 54 (3), 1999, pp. 336-72; L. FRANK, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; H.A. GOLDSMITH, "Darwin and the Detective: Aspects of the Darwinian Worldview and the Sherlock Holmes Stories of Arthur Conan Doyle", *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 28 (2), 2010, pp. 19-28; J. MCNABB, "Anthropology by Gaslight: Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle and the Anthropology of Detection at the Victorian Fin de Siècle", *World Archaeology*, 49 (5), 2017, pp. 728-51.

[37] See A. KINGSTON, *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction*, p. 84 and P. BAROLSKY, "The Case of the Domesticated Aesthete", *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 60 (3), 1984, pp. 438-52.

[38] See N. CLAUSSON, "Arthur Conan Doyle's Darker Mystery", p. 18.

clues to interpret reality and on offering a cohesive narrative that should restore order – in purpose, at least.[39] Criminal anthropology is thus presented as one of the possible instruments which Sherlock Holmes has at his disposal to solve the case, a helpful interpretive system to read clues in his suspects' faces. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), for instance, merges the Gothic trope of the animated portrait with atavism so as to foreground the link between the villain and a corrupted ancestor as regards body and (deviant) soul.

Although there are no material portraits in "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client", the story engages with this trope on a metaphorical plane. In this adventure, Holmes is called upon by the unidentified titular "illustrious client" (although it is heavily implied that the Royal Family might be behind this) to prevent the marriage between an aristocratic young woman, Lady Violet de Merville, and an Austrian nobleman, Baron Gruner. Although this is not the most famous of Holmes's cases, Watson calls it "in some ways, the supreme moment of my friend's career",[40] undoubtedly referring to the social prestige of the client, but also possibly hinting at a certain relevance in the outcome of the case itself.

Why would Sherlock Holmes, the 'tutelary deity' of British society, be recruited to break up a couple and prevent a marriage? Because Baron Gruner is actually a degenerate: a libertine and uxoricide, a murderer and fraudster. Yet, he is also an aesthete, a cultivated man, a collector of fine Chinese pottery and books. He is handsome and refined, and his *fiancée*, in spite of being warned time and time again about his true nature, refuses to believe anyone but him. As revealed by Kitty Winter, a woman whose reputation was ruined by Baron Gruner (it is inferred that she is now a prostitute), this foe keeps a diary of his conquests, a scandalous book which, if found, could convince Lady Violet to cancel the wedding. Sherlock Holmes is therefore tasked with the retrieval of this "beastly" object, "a book no man, even if he had come from the gutter, could have put together".[41]

Although the parallels with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* mainly rest on the characterisation of the baron, the description of Lady Violet – her 'portrait', so to speak – helps us to assess Conan Doyle's drawing on the notion of degeneration. She is presented as "young, rich, beautiful, accomplished, a wonder-woman in every way".[42] She is mild and obedient to her father's wishes, save when it comes to her marriage, about which she shows "a will of iron".[43]

Lady Violet seems to be a well-rounded young woman, possessing good breeding, beauty and intelligence. Her relationship with her intended, however, betrays some

[39] See C. CLAUSEN, "Sherlock Holmes, Order, and the Late-Victorian Mind"; J. KISSANE and J.M. KISSANE, "Sherlock Holmes and the Ritual of Reason", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 17 (4), 1963, pp 353-62; P. HÜHN, "The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 33 (3), 1987, pp. 451-66; J. TAMBLING, "Holmes, Law, and Order", in J.M. ALLAN and C. PITTARD (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes*, pp. 111-24.

[40] SIR A.C. DOYLE, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Foreword by R. RENDELL, London, Penguin Books, 2009, p. 984.

[41] *Ibidem*, p. 990.

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 986.

[43] *Ibidem*.

concerning signs. To begin with, it is a feeling that borders on idolatry: "To say that she loves him hardly expresses it. She dotes upon him, she is obsessed by him. Outside of him there is nothing on earth. […] Everything has been done to cure her of her madness, but in vain".[44] This first description of the bond between Violet and Gruner already qualifies it as an "obsession" and as "madness" via a diagnostic language that reminds one of insanity. When Holmes insists on meeting the young woman, this impression is confirmed:

> There was the lady awaiting us, demure, pale, self-contained, as inflexible and remote as a snow image on a mountain.
> "I don't quite know how to make her clear to you, Watson. Perhaps you may meet her before we are through, and you can use your own gift of words. She is beautiful, but with the ethereal other-world beauty of some fanatic whose thoughts are set on high. I have seen such faces in the pictures of the old masters of the Middle Ages".[45]

Interestingly, although the rest of the adventure is, as usual, narrated by Dr Watson, this is Holmes's description. Even if the detective invites his associate to meet the girl in order to possibly give a different portrayal before the case is through, no alternative version will emerge. Holmes's outline ultimately stands out as the objective, rational one. He compares her to a "fanatic whose thoughts are set on high", although, ironically, the object of her adoration is a debased person.

This characterisation is consistent with a 'diagnosis' of degeneration resting on an excessive proclivity for mysticism, a trait that both Lombroso[46] and Nordau[47] stressed as a sign of this condition. Nordau goes so far as to call it "a cardinal mark of degeneration",[48] devoting an entire chapter to the topic. Violet is not a motherlike Madonna, a comparison Watson formulates with regard to his future wife, Mary, in *The Sign of the Four*. Rather, she is like the mystics painted by "the old masters", the school which inspired the Pre-Raphaelites. This mention hardly seems accidental, given that the Pre-Raphaelites had been another of Nordau's targets, who devoted the second chapter in Book II of *Degeneration* to outline the alleged pathology affecting the Brotherhood.

The description of Violet de Merville, then, seems to openly adopt the language of degeneration, with no sign of deconstruction or mitigation regarding the conclusion drawn by Holmes. Moreover, Violet's 'symptomatology' is relevant to Conan Doyle's dialogue with the theme of degeneration in that it foregrounds a sense of anxiety about propagation. If Baron Gruner is indeed a degenerate, as will be shortly illustrated, Lady de Merville's induced fanaticism could be interpreted as a sign of contagion. The contact with a degenerate individual, in other words, represents a real threat to other persons and society at large, so that measures of containment and normalisation are absolutely required.[49]

[44] *Ibidem*.
[45] *Ibidem*, p. 991.
[46] See C. LOMBROSO, *The Criminal Man*, Engl. trans. M. GIBSON and N. HAHN RAFTER, Durham and London, Duke U.P., 2006, p. 313.
[47] See M. NORDAU, *Degeneration*, p. 22.
[48] *Ibidem*.
[49] See S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the* Fin de Siècle, p. 2.

A similar rhetoric informs the final paragraph of the description by means of a contrast between Lady de Merville and Baron Gruner: "How a beast-man could have laid his vile paws upon such a being of the beyond I cannot imagine. You may have noticed how extremes call to each other, the spiritual to the animal, the cave-man to the angel. You never saw a worse case than this".[50] The terms used to characterise Gruner hint at an atavistic regression to a previous stage of development: he is a "beast-man", an "animal", a "cave-man", that is to say, not fully evolved into a moral, progressed being. Violet, on the other hand, seems to have already transcended this earth and become all spirit, the most perfect version of her own self. This stage, according to Conan Doyle's spiritualist beliefs,[51] was something to strive for, and could only be attained after death.[52] Violet's perfection, however, is marred by her fanaticism, her spirituality threatened by her beastlike companion, so that preventing the marriage becomes a moral as well as social imperative for the detective.

The paragraph is also significant in the context of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in that its lexicon seems to recall a famous review of the novel, according to which "Man is half angel and half ape, and Mr Wilde's book has no real use if it be not to inculcate the 'moral' that when you feel yourself becoming too angelic you cannot do better than rush out and make a beast of yourself".[53] As previously mentioned, Conan Doyle deemed *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as indeed a moral text. Yet, when creating his own characters, he separated the 'angel' and the 'ape' through a slightly different process from Wilde's – or Stevenson's, for that matter. In both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), the moral man and the monster are split through a fantastic/supernatural effect, but each of them continues to be part of the same being, so much so that one cannot survive when the other is killed.

In "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client", the angel and the beast are set at a clear distance, and must remain so. It is their recombination, as prefigured in a possible marriage, that would bring about the real threat. As a consequence, the deviant character must be safely 'removed' so that Violet might regain her former perfection. In short, Violet's degeneration is a nightmarish possibility, something that Sherlock Holmes must prevent. Her *fiancé*, on the other hand, seems to be beyond redemption. Holmes immediately suggests that he could be more dangerous than Professor Moriarty (i.e. his own Nemesis): this man is to be regarded as an evil genius rather than a common criminal. He is also depicted as "extraordinarily handsome, with a most fascinating manner, a gentle voice, and that air of romance and mystery which means so much to a woman".[54] He is, moreover, brilliant: "he collects books and pictures. He is a man with a considerable artistic side to his nature. He is, I believe, a recognised authority

[50] Sir A.C. Doyle, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 991.

[51] See C. Ferguson, "Eugenics and the Afterlife: Lombroso, Doyle, and the Spiritualist Purification of the Race", *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 12 (1), 2010, pp. 64-85.

[52] *Ibidem*, pp. 70-73.

[53] Review in the *Daily Chronicle*, 30 June 1890, quoted in B.T. Gates, "Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*", *The Victorian Web*, 10 April 2001, https://victorianweb.org/books/suicide/06g.html (last accessed on 10 July 2023).

[54] Sir A.C. Doyle, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 986.

upon Chinese pottery and has written a book upon the subject".[55]

It might be true that, as Michael Seeney quips by citing Wilde's famous enthusiasm about it, "a love of [blue] china in a fictional character is not enough to prove Wildean parentage".[56] However, Baron Gruner exhibits a rather extensive collection of traits which identify him with the prototype of the decadent aesthete. Like Dorian, he is charming, mysterious, and a collector of beautiful objects, a trait that Nordau explicitly associated with degeneration.[57] Even his name is significant: if Dorian is 'Gray/Grey', the baron is 'Gruner', meaning 'green' in German (he is in fact Austrian). Such a surname also recalls Wilde's essay "Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green" (1885), a literary portrait of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright as an artist and poisoner. If Wainewright had been suspected of poisoning his sister-in-law, Gruner is accused of having killed his wife. The connection is reinforced by the story itself, as Holmes points out that "all great criminals" have "a complex mind", and that "Wainwright was no mean artist".[58] Here, Conan Doyle seems to be more receptive to Lombroso's theory than Nordau's, in that he acknowledges the thin line separating genius from madness. At the same time, Holmes also says of the baron that he "has the collection mania in its most acute form",[59] evidently accepting Nordau's pathologising lexicon and categorisation.

Like Dorian, Gruner is shielded by his own beauty, and sets about tricking people into believing in his innocence by virtue of his good looks and pleasant manners. Yet, unlike Basil, Watson is not fooled by this:

> He was certainly a remarkably handsome man. […] In figure he was not more than of middle size, but was built upon graceful and active lines. His face was swarthy, almost Oriental, with large, dark, languorous eyes which might easily hold an irresistible fascination for women. His hair and moustache were raven black: the latter short, pointed, and carefully waxed. His features were regular and pleasing, save only his straight, thin-lipped mouth. If ever I saw a murderer's mouth it was there – a cruel, hard gash in the face, compressed, inexorable, and terrible. He was ill-advised to train his moustache away from it, for it was Nature's danger-signal, set as a warning to his victims. His voice was engaging and his manners perfect. In age I should have put him at little over thirty, though his record afterwards showed that he was forty-two.[60]

Although the baron is more conventionally dark-haired and Oriental-looking, in the vein of the traditional Gothic villain, the description remains remarkably 'Dorianesque'. Older than he looks, he is "swarthy" and his eyes are "languorous", evoking the "saturnine and swarthy" face of George Willoughby, Dorian's ancestor (p. 138). This languor, or saturnine disposition, is also a trait typically associated with both the man of genius and the criminal genius, according to Lombroso.[61]

A detail that corroborates this parallel is found in Baron Gruner's lips, representing an outward sign of his criminality that Watson does not fail to detect. In *The Picture*

[55] *Ibidem*, p. 987.
[56] M. Seeney, "The Fictional Career of Oscar Wilde", p. 44.
[57] See M. Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 27.
[58] Sir A.C. Doyle, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 987.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 995.
[60] *Ibidem*, p. 996.
[61] See C. Lombroso, *Genio e follia*, Milano, Gaetano Brigola, 1872, p. 17.

of Dorian Gray's portrait gallery, Wilde's insistence on this detail establishes a link between the first outward sign of Dorian's degeneration and the possible influence of his ancestors on his descent towards corruption. Here, the baron's lips are plainly called "Nature's danger signal": there is no doubt about how this sign could work in a system of stigmata. If the "cruel, hard gash" is there to warn potential victims, what the latter must do is learn how to correctly interpret such an indelible and unmistakable blemish.

In the semiotic system of the detective story, the cruel mouth is unambiguous: it is there to be decoded and explained through Watson. Degeneration must remain evident, clearly inscribed in the subject's physical features and univocally decipherable by the detective, or by the medical expert, as in this case. There can be no distance between what is shown to the world and the inner reality of the character, between what we are and what we present to the world, if the detective's taxonomical gaze is to be effective. His hermeneutics of the human type depends on collecting reliable clues through a scientific, and therefore repeatable, process.

However, if the baron's degeneration is immediately evident to the detective and the medical expert, the world risks being fooled by his ruse. This turns the aristocratic aesthete into a danger to society, firstly because he is a murderer, and secondly because the threatens to spread his malady by contracting an advantageous marriage and, possibly, having children. The resolution called for by the classic detective story comes here in a rather unorthodox form. While Watson, in disguise, tries to keep the baron occupied, Holmes, guided by Kitty Winter, breaks into Gruner's house and steals his "beastly"[62] book. The baron reacts but, as he prepares to strike, Kitty takes her revenge by disfiguring the antagonist with vitriol:

> he fell upon the carpet, rolling and writhing, while scream after scream resounded through the house. [...] I seized a carafe from a side-table and rushed to his aid. At the same moment the butler and several footmen ran in from the hall. I remember that one of them fainted as I knelt by the injured man and turned that awful face to the light of the lamp. The vitriol was eating into it everywhere [...] The features which I had admired a few minutes before were now like some beautiful painting over which the artist has passed a wet and foul sponge. They were blurred, discoloured, inhuman, terrible.[63]

This paragraph emerges as noteworthy from multiple perspectives. First of all, the parallels with Dorian's death scene are unmistakable. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we read that "there was a cry heard, and a crash. The cry was so horrible in its agony that the frightened servants woke, and crept out of their rooms" (p. 212). Moreover, the servants are unable to recognise their master in the "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (p. 213) man laying on the ground. In Conan Doyle's story, the same cry resonates through the house, the servants similarly rush in, and they are likewise unable to withstand the horrible view in front of them.

More significantly, the vocabulary used by Conan Doyle clearly evokes the process of a portrait being wiped out: Baron Gruner's face looks like a "painting over which the artist has passed a wet and foul sponge"; his features are "blurred, discoloured". In *The*

[62] Sir A.C. Doyle, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 990.
[63] *Ibidem*, p. 998.

Picture of Dorian Gray, the act of destroying the portrait devastatingly reverberates on the human subject, reuniting the two separated halves of the same whole and restoring the perfection of the work of art. In "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client", both the man and his metaphorical portrait are ravaged: the sly enemy needs to be *revealed* for what he is, to the benefit of society.

Another interesting point regards the use of vitriol to achieve this end. As readers of the *Strand Magazine* would have known, vitriol attacks had become more frequent during the Victorian and Edwardian eras, so much so that "vitriol had entered popular culture as a weapon associated with a stereotypical perpetrator: a woman who acted from motives of jealousy and revenge".[64] Conan Doyle might thus have chosen to include this detail to offer a 'realistic' representation of crime, or at least a popular one, also in keeping with its perpetrator (in this case, a scorned woman). Yet, vitriol, a green acid, is also a remarkable element when seen in the context of Conan Doyle's interest in occultism and spiritualism. In alchemy, the acronym V.I.T.R.I.O.L. identifies either the philosopher's stone, or a compound which could unveil the true essence of any material.[65] Clearly, this is the intended purpose of the entire accident: the baron's looks are made to reflect his inner corruption, his degeneration. It is therefore possible that Conan Doyle had the villain disfigured by this specific acid as a way to convey this sort of revelation.

Finally, a crucial element resides in the person who disfigures the baron. Holmes, who sometimes breaks the law but follows a strict principle of honour, could never have done it; and yet, it had to be done in order to eradicate once and for all the threat posed by Gruner. Kitty Winter turns out to be a perfect candidate for this: as a woman, according to Lombroso and Victorian gender codes, she is much more likely to resort to this weapon.[66] Besides, she fulfils a very specific role by embodying the past that returns to exact its toll. No wonder that Holmes's remark should be "the wages of sin, Watson – the wages of sin! [...] sooner or later it will always come".[67]

This comment is in line with Basil Hallward's observation that "sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face" (p. 143), but it also stresses how here, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the past catches up with the baron to mark his face with the signs of his degeneration, making them truly unmistakable, functioning as a clearer warning signal than his cruel mouth. In Holmes's adventure, there is little space for Aestheticism and its metaphors: degeneration is a social evil that must be traced, categorised, and isolated in order to avoid deadly 'contagion'.

[64] K.D. WATSON, "Love, Vengeance and Vitriol: An Edwardian True-Crime Drama", in A.M. KILDAY and D. NASH (eds), *Law, Crime and Deviance since 1700: Micro-Studies in the History of Crime*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 110.

[65] See J. READ, *From Alchemy to Chemistry*, New York, Dover Publications, 1995, pp. 44-45 and L. M. PRINCIPE, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 120.

[66] See K. WATSON, "Love, Vengeance and Vitriol: An Edwardian True-Crime Drama", p. 110.

[67] SIR A.C. DOYLE, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 998.

3. *Conclusion*

Although "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client" does not retrace *The Picture of Dorian Gray* step by step, there are enough contact points between the two texts to allow us to suppose that Conan Doyle looked at Wilde's novel as an intertextual reference throughout. However, when taking into account how the two authors engaged with the notion of degeneration and with the trope of the portrait, differences emerge too. If Wilde experimented with the Gothic genre to question a monological, positivistic scientific discourse and extol the crucial role of art, Conan Doyle remained within the more normative confines of the detective fiction genre.

While Dorian sets aside his moral sense to go in pursuit of absolute (and immoral) 'beauty', wherever he may find it, Baron Gruner, as though in keeping with Lombroso and Nordau's taxonomy of the degenerate (and the aesthete, in the case of Nordau), seems to lack a moral sense from the very beginning. In "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client", therefore, the portrait (or portraits, when considering the description of Lady Violet) essentially serves as a compendium of evidence for the pathological traits of the subject analysed by Holmes. There is no allegorical gap between reality and representation: the baron already carries traits that would qualify him as a degenerate, and does not refrain from warning his potential victims through his cruel smile. In addition to this, Holmes sets out to make this correspondence even more explicit by denouncing the baron's escapades. Finally, whatever threat could have resided in Gruner, even after he loses the chance to marry Lady de Merville, is vanquished by the vitriol attack, which brings back order by having the signs of the aristocrat's corruption engraved on his face. The structure of the classic detective story, which always strives for a normative solution, would have allowed little else.

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