

“Monstrous Maladies”:

Oppression, Transgression, and Degeneration in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “The Yellow Wallpaper”

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“The bravest man amongst us is afraid of himself” (Wilde 59)

Introduction

“When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself” (Wilde 42); if this statement is true, then Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Oscar Wilde are in perfect accord with themselves, because no critics in the last century can seem to agree on how to tackle “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Since their publications, both texts have managed to capture the attention of literary scholars and critics, all of whom have something to say about the gothic overtones and the progressive (or subversive, depending on the critic) undertones in both pieces. What tends to elude critics, however, is a way to bring these two readings together. The gothic plots of both stories, in which the protagonists slowly deteriorate physically and mentally, have been read as fundamentally in conflict with the progressive plots of homosexual self-discovery (in the case of *Dorian Gray*) and women’s liberation (in the case of “The Yellow Wallpaper”). This conflict means that, often, the criticism of both works falls into one of two categories: the endings are happy and therefore the texts are subversive, or the endings are sad and therefore the texts are conservative. For example, Nils Clausson links the gothic degeneration plot in *Dorian Gray* to “Dorian’s emerging homosexuality, along with his other crimes and sins” (Clausson 344) and suggests that this link undercuts any “progressive hopes” in the novel (Clausson 362). On the other hand, Ed Cohen suggests the story is subversive and its ending hopeful. He interprets Dorian’s death as “killing Dorian into art” and says that “in the end, Dorian’s corpse becomes the surface that records his narrative, liberating Dorian in death” (810). Criticism of Gilman’s story is similarly divided between the sad and conservative reading and the subversive and happy reading. Jürgen Wolter, for example, suggests that

despite her rebellious acts of reading and writing, she ultimately turns out to be the physically weak and psychologically fragile woman of the nineteenth century gender stereotype, i.e. her situation at the end of the story may corroborate the patriarchal argument Gilman set out to disprove. (207)

On the other hand, Rula Quawas says that Jane's story is progressive because she "serves as a New Woman who claims the ordinary rights of a human being to develop her own individuality in an oppressive, uncomprehending society" (50).

Both the conservative and sad and the subversive and happy readings have inherent problems. The subversive and happy readings must try to frame the horrific ends of Dorian and Jane as somehow victorious, even though Dorian kills himself in wild desperation to "kill the past, and [...] be free" (Wilde 250) and Jane loses all sense of self and ends the story "creep[ing]" (Gilman 129) in circles around the room that had been her prison. The conservative and sad readings, on the other hand, must try to prove that Gilman and Wilde either lose control of their stories and undercut their own points or that their aim in writing unsettling texts about taboo topics was to write parables about the dangers of transgression. Neither of these readings is satisfying, since both have the same basic assumption: if the principle characters are not somehow able to transcend the social and political realities of their time and end happily, then the stories must be conservative. Furthermore, both of these readings fail to harmonize the simple reality that "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Picture of Dorian Grey* are both undeniably subversive and undeniably tragic. These statements are both true, so how do they work together to create a cohesive narrative? Dorian and Jane are not written as dangerous deviants; rather, they are written as transgressors who are ultimately crushed by overwhelming social and political pressures – in other words, their fall is not a moral judgment of their actions. Jane does not do anything wrong or criminal throughout the story, but even Dorian, who falls into criminal behaviour, is – I will argue – forced into criminality by a society that criminalizes his very nature. Suggesting that these narratives are

either subversive or sad reduces the stories to parables – as though the complex lives of two individuals can be explained with a moral as simple as “do what you are told.”

In order to understand the complexities of both stories and to bring together the subversive and tragic plots, I will analyze the works in the context of degeneration theory. Degeneration theory is, at its simplest, a scientific theory that holds that socially deviant individuals are the cause of their own destruction and the decay of society. This theory – and related theories – make it easy for those in power to dismiss the voices of marginalized individuals by turning these marginalized individuals into the scapegoats for all of society’s ills. By placing marginalized individuals at the centre of their own stories, Wilde and Gilman give a voice to those that degeneration theories dismiss. Wilde and Gilman write back against degeneration theory and the oppressive structures it supported by repurposing degeneration theory to make the oppressors, not the oppressed, the cause of degeneration and therefore social and individual decay.

The Science

“There were maladies so strange that one had to pass through them if one sought to understand their nature” (Wilde 95)

Before analyzing how both works comment on degeneration theory, I will first explain what degeneration theory is and how it relates to the oppression of women and homosexuals.¹ Degeneration is a set of related theories (now thoroughly debunked) that all deal with the 19th century *fin-de-siècle* fear that civilization was decaying and what Max Nordau, in his book *Degeneration*, terms “the prevalent feeling [...] of perdition and extinction” (20). Nordau succinctly defines degeneration using the following quote from Morel, a famous degeneration theorist:

¹ I recognize that placing modern labels on people of the past is problematic, but I am using the term “homosexuals” to refer to individuals engaging in same-sex sexual and romantic relationships both for clarity of reading, and because “the word itself and the concepts surrounding it [...] gained common currency in the 1890s and beyond” (Grube 130), so the term is not entirely anachronistic when discussing *Dorian Gray*. Furthermore, when I refer to “homosexuals” I am referring specifically to men in same-sex sexual relationships because it was specifically those relationships that were the target of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act and, as I will argue later in the paper, it is this piece of legislation that Wilde is reacting to in *Dorian Gray*.

The clearest notion we can form of degeneracy is to regard it as a morbid deviation from an original type. This deviation, even if, at the outset, it was ever so slight, contained transmissible elements of such a nature that anyone bearing in him the germs becomes more and more incapable of fulfilling his functions in the world; and mental progress, already checked in his own person, finds itself menaced also in his descendants. (16)

Put simply, degeneration is heritable social deviance that results in socially unacceptable behaviour and mental illness that perpetuates in following generations. The theory holds that, if certain deviant behaviours are allowed to continue, then society will collapse under the weight of reverse-evolutionary decay. What exactly constituted “deviation” varied from theorist to theorist, but it was generally a catch-all term for any behaviour that subverted social conventions. In *Degeneration*, Nordau draws on the theories of Cesare Lombroso, who suggested that criminals and the mentally ill were physiologically less evolved than other humans (xi-xx). By pairing his theory with Lombroso’s, Nordau implies that degenerate individuals are physiologically identifiable – indeed, Lombroso’s book *The Criminal Man* contains lengthy passages on the identification of criminals based on certain facial features. Together Lombroso and Nordau’s theories offer insight into not only the fear of social decay but also the need people had to be able to see this decay on an individual’s face. While Nordau’s theory is certainly not the only theory of degeneration, and many different sources are identified as the cause of this reverse-evolutionary decay, all of the theories of degeneration have something in common: the degenerate individuals are to blame for either their own decay or the decay of society as a whole. This aspect of the theories allows those in power to maintain oppressive power structures by making marginalized individuals the objects of disgust, disdain, and dread. Deviant individuals meant anyone not following social conventions including, but not limited to, hysterical women and homosexuals.

Following the introduction of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act that included a “law against unnatural acts” that targeted homosexuals (Grube 128), “homosexuals as a group could take

upon their shoulders the responsibility for the perversions of a nation” (Grube 133). To be homosexual in Victorian England was, therefore, to be outside of “public morality” and participating in “an act seen as a perversion of true human sexual nature” (Grube 128). Krafft-Ebbing, in his book *Pyschopathia Sexualis*, a medical book first published in 1906 that details various forms of perceived sexual deviances, also links homosexuality to degeneration theory: “this defect of the natural laws [homosexuality] must, from the anthropological and clinical standpoint, be considered as a manifestation of degeneration. In fact, in all cases of sexual inversion a taint of a hereditary character may be established” (349). Here Krafft-Ebbing’s theory not only criminalizes homosexuality (specifically with regard to homosexual men), like the “law against unnatural acts,” but it also contributes to the notion that homosexuality is responsible for social decay and degeneration.

Degeneration theory was used in a similar way against women suffering from neurasthenia – the nervous disorder that Jane suffers from in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Neurasthenia and degeneration are related concepts, as Nordau points out in *Degeneration*:

[T]he physician...recognizes in the tendencies of contemporary art and poetry...the confluence of two well-defined conditions of disease, with which he is quite familiar, viz. degeneration (degeneracy) and hysteria, of which the minor stages are designated as neurasthenia. These two conditions of the organism differ from each other, yet have many features in common, and frequently occur together so that it is easier to observe them in their composite forms, than each in isolation. (15-16)

While Nordau holds that the two disorders are different, he does admit that they are part of the same framework of discussing physical and mental health. Jane’s deterioration in “The Yellow Wallpaper” can, then, be read as degeneration rather than neurasthenia. David Schuster also notes that Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell (who is mentioned in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and was involved in “the failed treatment of [...] Charlotte Perkins Gilman” [Schuster 718] that inspired the story) “argued that young women should

refrain from thinking too deeply, stay out of professional careers, and put off college or avoid it altogether" (702). In *Criminal Man*, Lombroso details the behaviour expected of a woman and her perceived role in society:

But when we consider woman from the point of view of her maternal functions, her physiological, psychological, and intellectual nature assumes an entirely changed aspect; for maternity is the natural function of the female, the end to which she has been created. (292)

The expectation that women are meant to be mothers and should not intellectually tax themselves lest they risk neurasthenia or degeneration carries the tacit assumption that, should someone degenerate, they are to blame. Furthermore, these expectations show how Jane, who has "imaginative power and [a] habit of story-making" (Gilman 119) and who "cannot be with him [the baby]" because "it makes [her] so nervous" (Gilman 118), does not conform to her expected social roles.

Degeneration theory is used to keep transgressive individuals on society's margins. If transgressive individuals are scientifically deemed "ill," "deviant" or "degenerate" then their social and/or political dreams and desires can be easily dismissed. Degeneration theory tells society that deviant individuals are the agents of their own (and society's) destruction and decay. This point of view leaves marginalized individuals without even the prospect of sympathy or pity from the heterosexual, patriarchal, society in which they live. This theory and the oppressive structures it is a part of offer no way for marginalized voices to be heard in any meaningful way.

Degeneration was a theory applied to anything deemed "deviant" or against social conventions, so it is, therefore, a natural lens through which to read these two subversive texts. Jane, as a woman resisting her husband's orders, and Dorian, as a homosexual man, are both dangerously deviant by 1890s social standards: their very existence threatens the social structures that marginalize them. In taking up these theories, Wilde and Gilman fundamentally transform them and their discourse, which

allows the silencing and hatred of the marginalized, in order to write back against the theories themselves and the structures that created them.

Oppression

“Your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful” (Wilde 59)

At this point, I can begin to examine how Wilde and Gilman write back against degeneration theory. Both suggest that the theory itself is oppressive and causes the very problems it attempts to diagnose and eradicate: individual and social decay. Neither Wilde nor Gilman debunks the idea of degeneration. Rather, they take up the concept and relocate the blame for this decay from the deviant individuals to the society that views them (and forces them to view themselves) as deviant. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “The Yellow Wallpaper,” oppression itself is revealed to be the underlying cause of degeneration.

Dorian discovers his own homosexual identity shortly after meeting Lord Henry, who is a friend of Basil (the artist who paints Dorian’s portrait). Henry delivers a long, philosophical speech as Basil finishes the painting of Dorian, a speech that culminates in these weighty lines:

“[Y]ou [Dorian] have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame—” (Wilde 59)

Dorian is immediately affected by Henry’s words, thinking that “the few words [...] had touched some secret cord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing with curious pulses” (Wilde 59). This moment of self-discovery is immediately distressing to Dorian: there is “a look of fear in his eyes, such as people have when they are suddenly awakened” (Wilde 61), and Dorian realizes that “he had been walking in fire” (Wilde 60) his whole life. Dorian sees himself and his identity (a recognition that is paralleled immediately in the next scene when he sees his finished portrait and “recognize[s] himself for the first time” [Wilde 65]) and immediately feels the tension between his

homosexual desires and conventional social morality. While scholarship often chooses to separate the gothic plot from the self-development plot to show the opposition between the two² it is clear in the text from the beginning that both plots are inexorably linked. Dorian's own identity is a source of horror for him and for society because of theories like degeneration, so it is impossible to separate Dorian's self-discovery from his horror of what he finds. From this point in the second chapter of the book onward, Dorian's desires must remain hidden lest he risk placing himself in danger. His very nature is unlawful, and he is unsafe wherever he goes.

Jane, the protagonist/narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," similarly finds herself in conflict with social expectations for women. Jane's husband/physician, John, forces the prevailing cultural and scientific ideas that women are inferior to men and can only mentally cope with certain social roles onto Jane by confining her to a room to "have perfect rest" (Gilman 117) until she recovers from a "nervous depression" (Gilman 116). Jane's husband is performing what was known as "the rest cure," a treatment used on women suffering from a range of ailments. Mitchell describes the "absurd extreme" ("Rest in the Treatment" 95) treatment of a woman suffering from what he terms "over-work of the brain" (94): "[S]he was put in bed and left it for no purpose [...] she was forbidden to exercise [...] and she was fed largely but with extreme care" (95-6). Jane undergoes a less extreme version of this same treatment, as she is confined to a room rather than a bed and is "absolutely forbidden to 'work'" (Gilman 116). Jane has this to say about her own illness and John's attempt at a cure:

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

But what is one to do? (Gilman 116)

Jane's personal beliefs about what is good for her are in direct conflict with what the patriarchal society deems appropriate for her. John represents this male-dominated society because, as Jane's husband

² Like Clausson does in his article "Culture and Corruption."

and doctor, he is in two positions of male authority. Jane has no say in her own treatment and no authority over her own body. John repeatedly dismisses her opinions (Jane says “he laughs at me” [118]) and ignores her (“he does not believe [Jane is] sick” [116]) and controls what she does and when she does it without allowing her any input on her own treatment. From the first page of the story, Jane’s desires and beliefs have to be suppressed in obedience to a patriarchal authority figure’s beliefs about her.

Jane and Dorian are both, very early in their respective stories, forced into conflict with social and legal authority. Their own desires, for sexual freedom or for intellectual freedom, clash with the prevailing social norms of their age. This conflict places both Dorian and Jane in the position of having to view themselves as degenerate. Degenerate behaviour is something that threatens the moral integrity of society; therefore, by being in conflict with society, Jane and Dorian must necessarily view their own desires as degenerate and wrong. Jane “feel[s] basely ungrateful” (Gilman 117) and it “weigh[s] on [her] so not to do [her] duty in any way” (Gilman 118), while Dorian feels that “he [is] walking in fire” and that “the air is stifling” (Wilde 60). Both feel immense pressure from the conflict between their desires and the social expectations placed upon them, and both must determine how to cope with that pressure. In order to deal with the tension between self and society that has been forced upon them, Jane and Dorian find themselves in the position of having to perform transgressive acts in secret in order to attempt to relieve the tension.

Transgression

“The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it” (Wilde 59)

Jane’s initial response to the oppressive rules that John places on her is to “write for a while in spite of them” (Gilman 116). It is this transgressive act of writing, which is against the orders of her husband/physician, that reveals the source of her internal tension. Jane states that “it does exhaust [her] a good deal—having to be so sly about [writing], or else meet with heavy opposition” (Gilman 116).

In other words, Jane does not find the *writing* exhausting; rather, she finds *hiding it* exhausting, and it is being forced to hide her writing that causes Jane's deterioration. Throughout the story, Jane's prose gets progressively more hectic and confused, and her sense of self begins to melt away until she begins to "creep by daylight" (Gilman 126) around the room she is confined in and to believe that she "came out of that wall-paper" (Gilman 128) like the woman she has been seeing throughout the story. John thinks that over-exertion and mental exhaustion are causing this deterioration, but if he knew that Jane was writing he would identify this practice as the source of her degeneration because it is a transgressive act. Writing is transgressive both because a patriarchal authority figure told her not to do it and because it is an intellectual exercise. Jane, however, states that "I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me" (Gilman 119). Jane's analysis of her own condition indicates that the pressure of thinking and having no outlet for those thoughts is the source of her distress. This analysis, then, reveals that it is the oppressive rules that are causing her mental degeneration, not her transgressive acts.

This same conflict between self and society also threatens to destroy Dorian Gray, but Wilde deals with it differently than Gilman does. Like Gilman, Wilde is writing against degeneration theory, but instead of saying that oppression is the direct cause of degeneration, he argues that oppression forces marginalized individuals to choose between self and society. In other words, since homosexuality is criminalized and Dorian is homosexual, he must decide if he wants to deny himself and remain a part of society or accept himself and embrace criminality. Dorian chooses to embrace criminality, and his first step toward doing this is banishing the painting ("the face of [Dorian's] soul" [Wilde 188]) to his attic. In doing so, Dorian banishes both his social conscience and his soul from his body. This banishment means that Dorian is free to live out his desires without having to worry that "sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face" (Wilde 181) – an idea that specifically links the story to the theory of degeneration and Lombroso's claim that criminality is visible on an individual's features. Dorian is able to remove "the

visibility of vice” (Mighall 195) from his body by banishing the painting to the attic; in the process, however, he also banishes his soul. This removal banishes more than Victorian laws and social taboos against homosexuality. In removing his soul, Dorian rejects all laws and social expectations. Because Victorian society considers homosexuality – an indelible part of Dorian’s identity – deviant and unlawful, Dorian is forced into conflict with that society. Dorian must, therefore, make a choice to either follow social rules and go mad with the “self-denial that mars our lives” (Wilde 59) by denying his true nature or cast off social rules and “get rid of [...] temptation [by] yield[ing] to it” (Wilde 59). Society forces Dorian to choose between banishing his own soul and social conscience in an act of self-preservation, or going mad with internal conflict.

The Picture of Dorian Gray and “The Yellow Wallpaper” not only encompass subversive elements within the stories, but the acts of writing them were in themselves subversive. Degeneration theory allows for the dismissal of marginalized voices but, in writing about them, Gilman and Wilde give “deviant” individuals prominent voices. Their stories are loud, unsettling, memorable, and not easily ignored. The very existence of these stories is transgressive. As Paula Treichler puts it, “by living to tell the tale, the woman who writes escapes the sentence that condemns her to silence” (69). Women are not supposed to write or pursue intellectual activities, and yet Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper.” In a similar way, homosexuals were not supposed to exist or be acknowledged, yet Oscar Wilde forced society to confront the reality of homosexuality. Clearly, both of these works and the characters in them are transgressive. How, then, can the tragic ends of Jane and Dorian be reconciled with these transgressive themes? It is undeniable that Jane and Dorian degenerate, but Wilde and Gilman place the blame for their degeneration not on the individuals themselves, but on the social pressure that forces them to hide their true natures.

Degeneration

“Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us” (Wilde 59)

Dorian starts to degenerate when the effects of his banished conscience become fully realized: he is not only free to guiltlessly pursue homosexual relationships that society would deem deviant, but he is also free to guiltlessly behave with reckless disregard for the lives of others. When Dorian is cruel to Sibyl Vane, the painting develops “a touch of cruelty in the mouth” (Wilde 127). Dorian immediately realizes that “for every sin that he commit[s], a stain w[ill] fleck and wreck [the painting’s] fairness” (Wilde 128); in other words, the painting will degenerate (like his body would) every time he commits a sin. This first instance of cruelty that mars the painting’s beauty wholly upsets any argument that Dorian’s degeneration is caused by his homosexuality. Nils Clausson argues that “a [...] paradox of sexual liberation leading to destruction and degeneration takes place in *Dorian Gray*” (356), but Dorian’s degeneration is linked from the first incident not to his homosexuality, but to his cruelty. This cruelty is the direct result of Dorian banishing his social conscience, a social conscience that, because of society’s views of homosexuality, would have driven him mad. Dorian commits countless acts of casual cruelty because of this lack of social morality. He is “cruel” (Wilde 127) to Sibyl (who kills herself), murders Basil, ruins Alan Campbell (who also kills himself), and does the same to a series of other people. Dorian’s carelessness and cruelty destroy them and this destructive, immoral behaviour makes Dorian degenerate. Furthermore, if Dorian’s degeneracy were linked to his homosexuality, then Dorian’s statement that Basil and the “noble and intellectual...love that he bore [Dorian] [...] could have saved him” (Wilde 153) would not be true. This statement, however, reveals the real cause of Dorian’s degeneration: because Dorian has been forced to banish his conscience and soul, he cannot be saved by Basil’s love; instead, he can only be cruel. If social rules allowed Basil and Dorian’s love to be “beautiful and pure” (Wilde 128) and not “made monstrous and unlawful” (Wilde 59), then Dorian would not have to banish his conscience and could be saved from degenerating.

Jane’s degeneration, like Dorian’s, spirals out of control as the story progresses. John continues “infantilizing and animalizing her” (Seitler 69) by denying her personal agency and intellectual exercise,

and Jane continues to secretly rail against this treatment until she degenerates entirely and is reduced to “creep[ing] smoothly on the floor” (Gilman 129). This “creeping” serves to demonstrate the totality of Jane’s degeneration into an animal state. The progression of Jane’s degeneration is clear in even the rhetoric of “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” She begins to repeat words and phrases and abandon grammatical convention as the story goes on and the conflict between her hidden life and her real life puts her under increasing pressure. Were Jane allowed to write in public, freely, she would not have an internal conflict between duty and desire, between self and society, and she would not degenerate.

It is clear in the way that Gilman and Wilde write the struggles of these protagonists that they are writing back against degeneration theory rather than upholding it. Gilman and Wilde critique the oppressive structures that degeneration theory reinforces by showing that Jane and Dorian, respectively, are marginalized by societal structures that refuse to give them a voice or a space in which to exist. While they work out their critiques slightly differently – Gilman shows oppression itself as the direct cause of degeneration, while Wilde shows how oppression forces individuals into criminality, which in turn leads to degeneration – both are ultimately saying the same thing: degeneration theory allows society to treat marginalized individuals like monsters and, in doing so, society creates the very monsters they fear. Jane and Dorian degenerate due to the pressure exerted on them by society – they are forced to think of themselves as degenerate, to hide their true natures, and to attempt to reconcile what they want with what they are told is right. As Lord Henry tells Dorian, their true natures are “what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful” (Wilde 59); that is to say, it is law, degeneration theory, and society that makes Jane and Dorian into monsters in their own eyes and the eyes of others. They are left without options, so they degenerate, becoming the animals that society already thinks they are. These endings, far from being conservative (i.e., parables about the dangers of transgression), are rather tragedies about individuals who are crushed by an unforgiving society. With these stories, Wilde and Gilman subvert the very discourse that they employ. They create haunting gothic stories of Dorian

and Jane's downfalls at the hands of a cruel society in order to haunt the reader and the society that destroyed them.

Conclusion

"Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic" (Wilde 75)

The tragic ends of Jane and Dorian do not disarm the subversive nature of the stories. Rather, their tragic ends critique the oppressive structures within which individuals like Jane and Dorian are not free to exist. Jane in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are figures that demonstrate the evils that societal oppression can wreak upon individuals. Both are placed into conflict with social expectations and laws through no fault of their own, and both are forced to try to reconcile their desires with the expectations society places upon them. Jane must hide her transgressive behaviours, so she is placed in constant conflict between what she wants to do and what patriarchal authority allows her to do. Jane's internal struggle leads her to mentally degenerate to the point that she becomes an animal. Dorian must banish his own soul in order to avoid the feelings of horror and guilt forced upon him, so he removes all morality and is swept into criminality. Dorian is forced into the margins of society and out of the bounds of social morality. This banishment leads to cruelty, vice, and immorality, which all exist entirely independent from his homosexuality, but are forcibly connected to it because homosexuality was criminalized. Jane and Dorian are thus placed in impossible positions, and their individual desires have to fight for release from the oppressive restrictions of society. This conflict tears apart Jane's mind and Dorian's body and leaves them both in grotesque, animal states. Far from "undercut[ting]" "progressive hopes" (Clausson 344; 362), Gilman and Wilde both present pleas for freedom from suffocating social pressures. By linking degeneration to social oppression, Gilman and Wilde show that it is not degenerate individuals who will destroy civilization; rather, it is the oppressive rules of civilization that cause civilization to destroy itself. It is not the degenerating individuals who are monstrous; rather, it is social oppression that makes monsters of the oppressed.

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