

Fear, Unsettled; Poe, Wilde, and Gothic Anxiety

An Honors Thesis for the Department of English
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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, for sacrificing everything so that I would have the chance to be where I am today. Todo sale.

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Introduction: The Unsettling

Gothic literature is oft cast aside as an outdated genre, though the popularity of its works remains a driving force for its inclusion in the literary tradition. Sigmund Freud's essay on the "Uncanny" as well as Ann Radcliffe's critical and authorial influence serve as major modes of interpretation in reading the Gothic genre. Freud's psychoanalytic approach coupled with Radcliffe's undeniable stake in the establishment of the Gothic have proven to be ubiquitous in analyzing the genre, but I will argue that the concept of the "unsettling" occupies a space yet to be identified in that analysis. The unsettling is a disruptive critical lens, incorporating facets from both psychoanalytic and affective schools of thought, and is a crucial framework needed to better engage with literature. The unsettling emerges after a linguistic terror that is a result of the tumultuous relationship between language and syntax, and as such differentiates itself from fear itself because of its lingering quality. It displaces one in a manner not unlike the reaction to the uncanny, though it divorces itself from the Freudian concept in a lack of influence from the unconscious. This idea of the unsettling works particularly well with Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe because of the way the self-reflexive nature of their writing as well as their consideration of art as having agency.

To analyze gothic literature without the space created by the unsettling is to miss a vital understanding of the genre. Though the unsettling, like gothic literature itself, defies genre boundaries and acts to displace the idea of genre itself, it is particularly suited to a gothic reading because of its tendency towards fear and manipulation. The unsettling's subtle paradoxical grip on lingering fear opens a threatening space that is suffocating in its inexplicable pull into the text. This thesis seeks to explore the hold the unsettling has on language, and how that might

provide the tools for a disturbing investment and preoccupation with a text. Though the unsettling is not tied to thematic discourse and can be applied as a critical lens for a wide array of genres and literary forms, for the purpose of this thesis it will be discussed solely in relation to the gothic genre.

To further understand and enumerate the importance of the gothic genre, one can turn to the one of the genre's founders, Ann Radcliffe. Her seminal work, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, remains one of the markers of the genre, especially insofar as it establishes the conventional gloomy atmosphere, mysterious male characters, and inquisitive young women. The unsettling lurks beneath the pages of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in its languid textual description, as evidenced by scenes that combine picturesque language with the omnipresence of fear, "The gloom and the silence that prevailed, except when the bell returned upon the air, together with the wildness of the surrounding scene, struck Emily with a degree of fear"¹. Radcliffe's position as a pillar of the gothic genre is supported both by her novels and her critical pieces. Her last piece of criticism, unfinished though published posthumously, "On the Supernatural in Poetry", is an interesting foray into the poetic undercurrents of the gothic, suggesting that much of classic literature shows the early developments of the genre. One of the primary characteristics Radcliffe delineates in the essay as being easily attributed to the genre is the degree of obscurity in gothic works. Much as Edmund Burke relies on obscurity to in part produce the effects of his conception of the sublime², Radcliffe believes that obscurity is what lends the gothic and poetry in particular its mystical properties.

¹ Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 47.

² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.

Perhaps the most relevant argument in “On the Supernatural in Poetry” to the concept of the unsettling is Radcliffe’s distinction between terror and horror. For her, “Terror and Horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them”³. Radcliffe goes on to clarify that terror can only be produced in conjunction with obscurity, though that is not to say that the obscure should be associated with confusion. Far and away the obscure actually produces a state of mind that is in itself so chaotic that there is no space for confusion or uncertainty at all, though Burke will interchange the two. Terror is a mental phenomenon that is undoubtedly essential for the gothic aesthetic as Radcliffe frames it, and as it “awakens the faculties” it throws the body into fight or flight mode, preparing to react to danger. However, terror ultimately fades. What this thesis refers to as “the unsettling” is what occurs after terror, but does not fully transcend the boundary between terror and horror, which can be interpreted as a more immobilizing and finite reaction to a specific instance of fear, rather than the interminability of the unsettling. The unsettling acts as an unconscious after-effect of terror. Difficult to identify though uncomfortably present, the unsettling has imbues the text with the aftershocks of terror. Though it may be argued that the unsettling can occur independently of terror, it could also be certainly possible that the terror was felt on such a minor level, for example the slam of a door in the dead of night—startling, enough to set one’s body on alert and tinge one’s mind with fear, but not necessarily identifiable as terror. As such, the terror is acknowledged subconsciously, and as a result the “awakening” Radcliffe mentions exposes the self in such a discomfiting way that the unsettling is born.

³ Ann Radcliffe, “On the Supernatural in Poetry,” 5.

As previously mentioned, the uncanny and the unsettling share similarities without converging into one theory. The Freudian uncanny relies on the idea of the unconscious as being a site to which the self has no autonomous access. The unconscious can also not be read, so if one were to come into contact with a memory of something from the unconscious, it would be impossible to recognize it as such and would be indecipherable to the one affected. Thus, the uncanny is born when one brushes against something that triggers a repressed memory or association in the unconscious, without the latter connection coming to fruition and being identified. The uncanny is frequently used in gothic literature, as its nature suggests that one does not fully have control over their every mental faculty. In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian's experience with the yellow book gifted to him by Lord Henry is primarily unsettling, though the uncanny is present as well, particularly in the figuration of the phrase, "And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it,"⁴. As such, the uncanny is an uncomfortable feeling of known but not known, certain to throw the person afflicted into a brief mental disorientation.

This disorientation is characteristic of the subtle iteration of terror that was previously mentioned. It is the same type of terror as the slammed door, seemingly innocuous but somehow unidentifiably indicative of a greater danger. In terms of the uncanny, that danger is the unveiling of a trauma long repressed. The unsettling, however, as has been established is a reaction to the affective response to danger. It is when the mind remains on high alert because of a previous terror. The unsettling lingers and creates trauma in a warped echo and inversion of the uncanny; the prolonged reaction to fear has the mind take on a paranoid quality. The distinct unreadable

⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 105.

discomfort of the unsettling is very similar as that of the uncanny, but they ultimately differ in source and effect on the mind and body.

In regards to the use of the unsettling as a lens through which to read gothic literature, it is a phenomenon generated in a text through a terror born from the interplay between textual language and syntax. While it can certainly be experienced in the quotidian as well, when reading, the unsettling is produced by the trauma of language. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to be discussed later at length, Dorian is reading his hedonistic yellow book, and mentions the “cadence” of its sentences producing a type of “monotony”⁵. These two descriptors draw attention to the rhythm of the sentences themselves, and after careful consideration it becomes apparent that the syntax eerily echoes or informs the language of a text in a deeply unsettling way—even more so the play is not deliberately addressed. The unsettling here is born from the trauma of the language’s apparent agency in the syntactic echo, which is enough of an incursion into the Radcliffean “awakening” of the soul that deep discomfort is brought to the surface. If it is acknowledged it is no less unsettling—one is then privy to the terrifying knowledge that the syntax has the capacity to manipulate their every reaction.

Syntax and textual language do not have to resonate with each other to produce the unsettling, however. The text itself can also work to provide a grating dissonance with the syntax. For example, say the text of a poem or paragraph in a novel is written with lilting, melodic language, but the lyrical quality is violently fractured by frequent clausal variation. This would produce an instant unsettling effect; on first read-through it may not be recognizable that the discomfort is produced by the violent contradictory clash of language and syntax. Just as

⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 104.

easily as they may work against each other, textual language and syntax often work effortlessly to generate and reinforce the unsettling. Wilde's language is seductive, mysterious, and enticing, and the syntax echoes this dangerous lure by producing an orchestrated feel, suggesting that language itself is working independently to incur the unsettling.

This thesis will explore the linguistic capabilities of the unsettling in Chapter One: Of Yellow Books and Monstrosity via further analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Chapter Two: Anxiety as Textual Repetition will engage with the unsettling through a study of repetition and automatism in the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Chapter Three: The Poetics of Doomed Subjects will synthesize the linguistic explorations of the first two chapters in a study of the displacement of the poetic genre as a result of the unsettling.

Chapter One: Of Yellow Books and Monstrosity

While Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is undeniably a work concerning corruption, crime, and degradation, it is not always convincingly referred to as a gothic novel. Though Basil's painting of Dorian Gray mirrors Dorian's worrying descent into utter hedonism and appears to contain the young man's soul, the rest of the novel seems to simply tell the tale of a life gone wrong. The supernatural presence of the painting is overshadowed by the apparent normalcy of Dorian's life, as immoral as it may be, resisting a typical gothic label. However, the language of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* betrays how unsettling and insidious the text is, giving credence to its inclusion in the gothic genre. Doing so would open the analysis of the text to include the provocative criticisms characteristic of the genre.

To continue discussing the passage formerly mentioned, in Chapter Ten Dorian's dear friend and mentor, Lord Henry, gives him a yellow book meant to help Dorian move past the death of his lover. The book's self-indulgent commitment to immorality and disregard for political law frames Dorian's descent as a character. The narrator muses on the book while Dorian reads, and the language used demonstrates how unsettling the text is. The book is described as being written with "metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as subtle in colour"¹. The use of the simile "monstrous as orchids" gives cause for a pause, as orchids are typically representative of delicacy, beauty, and resiliency. The fragility of an orchid makes it an extremely difficult flower to grow, transforming the successful nurturing of the flower into a celebration, and a praiseworthy feat. Orchids defy their frail natures and grow to be stunning,

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 104.

coveted flowers, and so to be described as “monstrous” is at first, shocking. However, the juxtaposition of monstrosity with beauty lends itself to the sinful and corruptive lifestyle promoted by the yellow book. If the determination and self-growth of an orchid is to be described as “monstrous”, then the nurturing self-development of the flower is undermined by its end result. The metaphors of the yellow book present a choice between a life of debasement or one of self-improvement. Therefore, Lord Henry’s gift of the book is in itself a confrontation, much like one would plant a seed to grow a flower. A seed, though it has potential, must be cultivated; and the space provided by the unsettling provides those tools.

The narrator’s thoughts also suggest that the language of the yellow book works twofold as the text pertains to Wilde’s novel itself, creating a double of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Lord Henry’s gift. The yellow book is referred to as “a poisonous book. The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain”². The use of the word “poisonous” recalls an image of a creature or thing; and when thinking of the word “poisonous,” a snake often comes to mind. “Poisonous” can also describe either the presence of venom itself, or the ability to poison, or corrupt, one’s mind or ideas. In conjunction with the descriptor “poisonous,” the book is also said to “trouble the brain” because of a heady smell of incense. The physical state of the pages therefore “trouble”, or weaken the capacities of the brain, making it more susceptible to the “poison” of its contents. The serpentine nature of the degradation and venomous attack on the mind and its limits harkens back to the story of Adam and Eve’s manipulation and corruption by Satan. The hint of an evil as great as Satan lurks below the

² Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 104.

surface of the text of the yellow book and therefore of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well, adding a slight tinge of fear and distrust to language itself.

Perhaps the most unsettling depiction of the yellow book though, is the way the sentences themselves are rendered. The narrator begins by musing on the “cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music”³. The “cadence” or rhythm, of the sentences creates a form of music, though the “subtle monotony” of said music immediately denies any romanticizing of a lilting melody weaving through the page. Instead, the “monotony” represents an uncanny facsimile of music, one that is just off enough to be “subtle” in its wrongness. This strange song is “produced in the mind of the lad”⁴, and the word “produced”, together with the latter description of the sentences as having “their [own] music”, implies a production of music not unlike an orchestral performance. The different cadences and music working to “produce” this show in Dorian’s mind implies that someone, or something, is using the moving parts of the book to orchestrate a performance. The fact that Dorian is then described as passing through the chapters in “a form of reverie”⁵ implies that the musicality of the language has put him in a trance of sorts, indicating a form of hypnosis. The ability of the text to fully gain control of his mental faculties and launch him into a daydream of sorts is disturbing in its own right, but add to it that his “reverie” makes him “unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows”⁶, and suddenly the hold the language has over Dorian’s mind takes on a malignant tone. The fact that Dorian is so fully entrenched by the orchestrated textual performance that he becomes “unconscious” of time passing by and the threatening “creeping” of the shadows in his room

³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 104.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

implies that he has lost control over his own thoughts and self. The agency of the yellow book is unsettling, and reinforces the suggestion that there is an insidious presence seeping through the words on the pages of the yellow book, and of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The description of the style of this subtly sinister yellow book serves to further establish the writing's malevolent agency. The narrator mentions that the "the style in which it was written was that curious jeweled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of *argot* and of archaisms,"⁷. The use of the words "vivid" and "obscure" in conjunction initially presents an obvious duality, though the two cannot simply be labeled as dichotomous. While the visceral, intense connotation of the word "vivid" appears to be at odds with the shrouded nature of the obscure, one must recall Ann Radcliffe's conception of the obscure as being a state of utter mental chaos. Radcliffe's supposition that the obscure's complete mental occupation renders the mind helpless in the face of disorder posits the obscure not as a mysterious and unknown phenomenon, but a deeply powerful and almost sentient force. Radcliffe's belief that terror can only occur in the presence of the obscure further forms the obscure's reworked definition of a distinct danger to an individual's ability to think. As such, the obscure is no longer an incomprehensible or vague idea of the unknown, and its dark flourish works instead as a more malignant cousin of the bright, gaudiness function of the word "vivid." Together, the two make a formidable team against a susceptible individual's mind. The yellow book's agency slithers back into this description of its writing then, this time suggesting the vast offensive power lurking in its "vivid and obscure" style. The writing's venomous quality, added to the striking all-consuming power of the obscure creates a terrifying vision of the totality of the yellow book's ability to affect its reader.

⁷ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 104.

Though the sheer destructive power behind the language of the yellow book is awe-inspiring in its own right, it is also pointedly alienating. This alienation perpetuates the linguistic terror implicated in the mention of the obscure, opening space for the unsettling. Aside from the vivid, obscure writing, the style of the book is also described as being “full of *argot* and of archaisms”⁸. The stylistic choice to italicize the word “argot” immediately makes it the focal point of the phrase, highlighting the importance of the word choice. “Argot” refers to a secret or hidden language used by groups of people that wish for the “outside world” to remain ignorant of their conversations. The innate binary of us/them that is created by using the word “argot” suggests that the text of the yellow book is working to prevent or expel a certain type of individual from understanding its contents. Conversely, according to the binary implicated in the choice of “argot”, for there to be a group of outsiders, there must be a group that is privileged to the knowledge the book has to offer. As Dorian proves to be susceptible to the “malady of dreaming”⁹ generated by the yellow book, it is clear that he is one of the few that understands the argot of the book.

The inherent coding of the use “argot” is reinforced by the subsequent use of the word “archaisms”. The “archaisms” that ostensibly fill the pages of the yellow book once again create a distancing between text and reader. Invoking the antiquated nature of the archaic suggests that the text is, to an extent, illegible and *obscure* to the “modern” reader. The us/them binary raises the issue of alienation, as without the actual text of the yellow book itself, one is rendered permanently “them”. However, though the privilege of the separation from the text allows for the recognition of the poison the yellow book injects into its prey, the sting of alienation lingers,

⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 104.

⁹ Ibid.

giving way to the unsettling realization that even through the multiple degrees of separation from the text the yellow book still holds power.

While the aforementioned language certainly serves to perpetuate the trauma of the yellow book and invoke the unsettling, the syntax plays a major role in doing so as well. The phrases “vivid and obscure at once” and “full of *argot* and of archaisms” are both bracketed by commas, creating a physical representation of the distance generated by the language. The passage of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that the fragments are pulled from, “The style in which it was written was that curious jeweled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of *argot* and of archaisms, of technical expressions and of elaborate paraphrases, that characterizes the work if some of the finest artists of the French school of Symbolistes”¹⁰, is one sentence, prolonging the sense of trauma that the obscure raises in the text. This continued exposure to the violence of obscurity, the inescapable “vivid” details, and the distance invoked by the words “argot” and “archaisms” contribute to Radcliffe’s belief that terror “awakens the soul.” However, as the soul is left raw and open after the initial trauma, and the sentence’s unrelenting extension prevents a reprieve or move away from the effects of terror, the unsettling arises.

Thus far, this thesis has only used the unsettling to evaluate the agency of the written word in a reading of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. While the unsettling is caused primarily by the interplay of syntax and language, its function as an analytic lens is not limited to the study of reading itself. After all, language itself cannot be limited, and so there is nothing to suggest that a character, setting, or other plot device cannot also be a site for the unsettling. Art, in its many forms, serves as a perfect vessel for the unsettling. Painting figures heavily in the

¹⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 104.

novel, as the focus is not in fact on the yellow book, but on the sinful painting of Dorian Gray. In the beginning of the novel, Basil Hallward, a noted painter, is pleased and smitten with his extraordinarily beautiful friend and model, Dorian Gray. His painting of Gray becomes a site of corruption with the introduction of Hallward's friend, Lord Henry, who sees Dorian for the first time when he is sitting for Basil. This meeting is Basil's ruin, as he foresees the damage that his hedonistic friend can do to the innocent young man. His consternation grows when Lord Henry suggests exhibiting his portrait of Dorian, as the painter realizes that he has infused far too much of his own soul into the painting.

While such a stunning piece of artwork should theoretically age with grace, the portrait, now in Dorian's possession, begins to decay instead. The decay is not physical; rather the portrait becomes a mirror of sorts for the corruption of Dorian's soul. As the soul rots under the influence of the yellow book on its master, the breathtaking depiction of Dorian melts away into a hideous monster. Dorian's sweet countenance changes drastically as the unsettling effect of the yellow book worms its way into his every action. He breaks off his engagement to the actress Sybil Vane, leading to her suicide, distances himself from Basil, and brings ruin to various other social acquaintances. Through these vile actions, Dorian's portrait becomes more warped and withered, and as a result Dorian's beauty never diminishes and he gains an immortal quality, never aging. In the text describing Dorian's fall from grace, the unsettling reappears to highlight discomfort once more. In particular, the unsettling plays a major role in the last meeting Dorian shares with Basil.

After a chance encounter on the street, followed by a deflection of his former friend's desperate inquiries about his declining morality, Dorian manages to convince Basil to come to

his attic to “show you my soul. You shall see the thing that you fancy only God can see [Dorian’s soul]”¹¹. Dorian’s strange behavior and blasphemous challenge is enough to put one on edge, but Basil’s reaction upon seeing the painting is the ultimate site of the unsettling. The painter is dismayed at the sight, declaring, “It was some foul parody, some infamous, ignoble satire. He had never done that. Still, it was his own picture. He knew it, and he felt as if his blood had changed in a moment from fire to sluggish ice”¹². Basil’s vehement and repetitious statements of denial are separated through the use of fragmentation via punctuation. The phrases “some foul parody”, “infamous, ignoble satire”, “he had never done that” and “he knew it” are foregrounded by the natural pauses caused by the punctuation used in passage. This focus is insistent in its demand that one pause at the right moments, transmuting Basil’s panic into a more accessible anxiety, as one’s breath, physical or mental, shortens to accommodate the rhythm of the passage.

To briefly return to Ann Radcliffe’s “On the Supernatural in Poetry”, Basil exhibits symptoms of both terror and horror in his encounter with the portrait. His mental awakening occurs in his resignation and fear at Dorian’s moral ruin, and Basil’s soul also “contracts, freezes”¹³ in response. His body begins to fail him in an outward reflection of horror’s effects, viewing Dorian with “the eyes of a sick man. His mouth twitched, and his parched tongue seemed unable to articulate”¹⁴. Basil’s grasp on language abandons him, as his tongue can no longer cooperate with his mouth to produce sound. Throughout this draining moment, Dorian

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 128.

¹² Ibid, 130.

¹³ Radcliffe, Ann. “On the Supernatural in Poetry.” *New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1826, 150.

¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 130.

observes with the patience of a predator stalking his prey. He is almost excessively interested in Basil's reaction to the portrait, and watches the scene unfold, "with that strange expression that one sees on the faces of those who are absorbed in a play when some great artist is acting"¹⁵.

This brief mention of the theatre is an uncomfortable reminder of the heart-wrenching suicide of Dorian's betrothed, Sybil Vane, after his rejection of her. In recalling the terrible moment of the suicide, the language becomes a manifestation of the unsettling through its residual echo of the terror Dorian felt upon hearing of Sybil's death. However, any shadow of emotion that Dorian felt at that moment is now gone, and he is shockingly emotionless as Basil entreats him to explain the decay of the portrait. Instead of rising to the same desperate tone his friend has adopted, Dorian's expression contains "neither real sorrow in it nor real joy"¹⁶. The absence of sorrow and joy, arguably two of the most powerful human conditions, is cause for alarm. The phrase is matter of fact, and the language of "neither/nor" does not allow for speculation or projection of uncertainty onto Dorian's emptiness. It is made clear by the language of the passage that Dorian's hold on humanity is ruined. Given the aforementioned control the yellow book holds over Dorian's mind, and its slow but total poisoning of his thoughts, it can be postulated that the book is the cause of his corruption.

The unsettling mood created by the realization of Dorian's fall from humanity and grace is further accentuated as he takes a flower out of his coat before speaking or responding to Basil's fear. Dorian brings the flower closer to his face, "and was smelling it, or pretending to do so"¹⁷. The appearance of the flower in this scene is seemingly random, though if we return to the orchid metaphor previously mentioned, it becomes less so. In Chapter Ten of *The Picture of*

¹⁵ Ibid, 131.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 131.

Dorian Gray, the metaphors in the yellow book are described as being “as monstrous as orchids”¹⁸. At that moment in the text, the simile is in itself a cause of the unsettling because of the tension between monstrosity and the beauty of orchids, though now the relationship between the two begins to clarify. Now, the unsettling seeps through the text because of the lingering effects of the latter analysis. Though the flower in Dorian’s pocket is not named at any point and therefore cannot be assumed to be an orchid, it still figures as a universal symbol of purity. The presence of the flower recalls connotations of virginity, innocence, and purity associated with roses. Thus, when Dorian suddenly crushes the flower in his hand as he finally responds to Basil, the act serves as a senseless and shocking act of violence. The use of the word “crush”¹⁹ is intrusive, terrifying, and unpredictable. Once again, the unsettling is generated from terror born from language and syntax and their capacity to manipulate. The shock of the crush is meant to be disruptive, as Dorian’s previously disconcerting silence and stillness in the face of Basil’s breakdown is shattered. This act of violence against purity is one of the defining moments in the novel in which Dorian is portrayed as truly being evil, as opposed to simply hedonistic.

The subsequent conversation between Basil and Dorian is upsetting and stressful; as the violence that Dorian is capable of is now made clear. Basil, however, does not notice the change in his once-naïve friend’s countenance, and so bemoans the loss of Dorian’s innocence loudly and declares that it is his fault for introducing him to Lord Henry. Dorian, as much as he dislikes the portrait’s representation of him, is defensive over his soul, and so begins to anger at Basil’s words. He looks to the painting as Basil continues to fret, and in doing so loses his tenuous hold on his temper, “Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of

¹⁸ Ibid, 104.

¹⁹ Ibid, 131.

hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips”²⁰. As Dorian’s overwhelming hatred begins to take control of his mind, one can recall the role obscurity plays in the construction of the unsettling. The obscure, in Radcliffe’s conception of the idea, completely floods the mind with its presence, creating chaos and leaving no room for sense. This occupation completes Dorian’s descent into pure predator, awakening his mind through terror and creating the perfect source of the unsettling, “The mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him, and he loathed the man who was seated at the table, more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything. He glanced wildly around,”²¹. The personification of the portrait acts as a primary source of terror in the text, with its “grinning lips” inducing the “passions of a hunted animal” and loathing in Dorian. The unsettling then emerges from the language of the passage, in the repetition of the word “loathing” in relation to Basil, adding to the unhinged quality of Dorian’s thoughts.

Following Dorian’s break into the animal, he finds a knife that he had previously left in the attic. He resolves to take the knife, and as Basil is talking, he “moved slowly towards it, passing Hallward as he did so. As soon as he got behind him, he seized, and turned round,”²². The language and syntax of the latter phrase continue to prolong the trauma of this encounter, creating space for the unsettling to bloom. Dorian’s slow movement to the knife is echoed in the syllabic structure of the word “slowly” by the drawn out “o” sound and the lilting quality of the “ly” sound joining together. This is held sharply in contrast with the following sentence, “As soon as he got behind him, he seized, and turned round” because of its comparatively more choppy structure. The multiple clauses that break up the sentence, together with the repetition of

²⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 132.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

the sound “d” in the words “behind,” “seized,” “turned,” and “round” and a stop motion quality to the sentence, providing a foil to the more legato nature of the phrase “moved slowly towards it”. The “d” sounds in the aforementioned words also create a staccato inference that acts as a foreshadowing to the stabbing of Basil Hallward, accentuating the presence of the unsettling.

In this last passage of Basil’s life, it is interesting to note that Dorian stops referring to his former friend by his first name. Instead, Basil is referred to exclusively by his surname, Hallward, in the sentences leading to his death. This symbolizes the final step Dorian’s violent abstraction from his life prior to the yellow book, and reiterates the previous analysis of alienation in the language of the book. Basil’s death echoes the violence of Dorian’s crushing the flower, “He [Dorian] rushed at him [Basil], and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man’s head down on the table, and stabbing again and again”²³. The viciousness of the words chosen to depict the death, “rushed,” “dug,” “crushing,” and “stabbing” punctuate the sentence in a way that parallels each stab into Basil’s body, drawing one into the murder itself. Basil’s murder is more than the killing of an old friend, it also is a murder of the self, as Dorian’s snap from reality foreshadows his future stabbing of the portrait, effectively killing himself and ending the novel.

The effects of the portrait on both Basil and Dorian demonstrate the way in which the unsettling can erupt through character actions and depictions of art. As the novel progresses, the horror of his new life begins to weigh on Dorian, and he gives his past actions more thought, ultimately pinpointing the source of his complete character shift as the yellow book. He angrily confronts his friend and mentor in corruption, Lord Henry, during a conversation about reading, and tells him “you poisoned me with a book once. I should not forgive that, Harry, promise me

²³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 132.

that you will never lend that book to any one. It does harm”²⁴. Lord Henry reacts negatively to Dorian’s comments and the explicit blame being pinned to him, arguing that it is impossible for a book to affect an individual to that degree. He retorts, “as for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has not influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame, that is all”²⁵. Lord Henry’s response is laughable in the face of the utter carnage that the yellow book has inspired in Dorian Gray’s life. The claim that “art has not influence upon action” would pretend to negate the dissolution of Dorian’s engagement, Sybil’s suicide, Basil’s descent into panic at sight of the portrait, and his murder, among other actions. The book changes Dorian from a sweet and innocent young man to a despicable murderer, and the portrait physically whispers to him to encourage the grisly act. Art has an undeniable effect on action, and for Lord Henry to suggest otherwise is both ignorant and naïve, inverting his role as mentor with Dorian’s mentee.

Lord Henry’s lofty idea that “art annihilates the desire to act” and is “superbly sterile” is further proof of his fall from the role of mentor. Lord Henry forgets that the his very intention of gifting the young Mr. Gray with the yellow book was to inspire him to become more free-spirited and hedonistic, which would suggest that he does in fact believe that art can *produce*, and not annihilate, action. It is also prudent to remember that art is born from movement and continues to be reinterpreted through movement, the stroke of a brush, the writing of a sentence, even thinking is its own form of mental movement. Aside from Lord Henry’s supreme obliviousness in responding to Dorian in such a way, the syntax of the sentence once again

²⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 180.

²⁵ Ibid.

induces the unsettling, proving that art can affect its consumer. The short, punctuated, nature of Henry's speech is expressed by the multiple full stops in the passage. Recalling the melodic quality of the yellow book's writing previously mentioned, it could be interpreted that the change in cadence of the sentences in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is due to Dorian's renunciation of the cursed book. When Dorian was still hypnotized by the rhythm of the yellow book, language was expressed melodically, however, it is now characterized by the severe completion of fragments rather than extended clauses. This adds urgency and finality to the passage, and more reinforces the violence of the last third of the novel. Each small fragment coming to a full stop, especially the last sentence Lord Henry utters, "That is all", is a powerful reimagining of the multiple stabs that killed Basil.

Thus, the presence of the unsettling is inescapable in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Without reading the novel through the lens of the unsettling, a comprehensive analysis cannot be completed. Oscar Wilde's already insidious writing becomes even more ominous when it is read via the unsettling, cementing his place as a gothic author and bringing a more self-reflexive style to the gothic genre, making it more diverse and involved with interiority. Without the unsettling, the Gothic's multidimensionality is lost, and its role as a genre that is crucial in the development of literature, especially 19th Century British literature, is diminished.

Chapter Two: Anxiety as Textual Repetition

Edgar Allan Poe is commonly lumped into the genre of horror, which is often conflated as part of the gothic, predisposing one to expect fear as a result of his writing. This expectation closes off several readings of Poe's works, especially his short stories, and also can leave little room for any interpretation other than fear, though anxiety and frustration are often exposed through the writing as well. When one abstracts Poe from the idea of horror, especially as dictated by Ann Radcliffe's more physical iteration, it enables a more complex understanding of the language in his works. It becomes clear almost instantly that Poe's use of repetition in his stories allows for the transmutation of plot and narration from words on a page to living, breathing creations. The repetition in "The Tell-Tale Heart", "The Fall of the House of Usher", and "The Black Cat" highlights the micro expressions of emotion and instability in the language used by the narrator, creating a more multifaceted and immersive experience. In focusing on repetition, the automatism of language and syntax is once more brought to the forefront as a primary agent of the unsettling. In reading Poe as simply an author of physical horror and cheap thrills, one undoubtedly misses the incredible intricacy of both his capacity as an author and his mastery of language as directly related to emotion.

One of the most recognizable iterations of obvious repetition giving way to a textual reading of anxiety in Poe is that of the beating heart in "The Tell-Tale Heart". In the story, the narrator details how he brutally murders the old man that he lives with, and as his guilt over the act worsens, he begins to imagine that he can hear the old man's heart beating in his grave, "Meanwhile, the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and

louder every instant”¹. The narrator becomes so preoccupied with the sound that it wholly occupies his every waking moment, and the frenzied tone of the tale increases as the narrator loses his grasp on reality. Characterizing the (perceived) heart’s pulse as a measure of growth is a reminder of the heart’s purpose of maintaining and promoting life while simultaneously attributing independent life to the organ. In doing so, the heartbeat becomes an entity abstracted from the old man’s body, displacing and unsettling the known conception of personhood as the synergy of mind and body. Every thought the narrator has is fraught with the anxiety that someone will hear the old man’s heart, and that he will not be able to get away with the murder. As the grave is under the floorboards of the narrator’s sitting room, it slowly drives him mad, and when the police come to inquire about the old man, he cannot focus on their questions, “I must scream or die! And now-again! –hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!”². The exclamation points used to punctuate his thoughts act as a sharp declaration, emulating the staccato patter of the undead heart and allowing for an immersive exploration of the narrator’s desperation.

Similarly to “The Tell-Tale Heart”, in “The Fall of the House of Usher” the main character experiences repetition to an extent that transcends the written page. The narrator in “The Fall of the House of Usher” must bury his best friend Usher’s twin sister when visiting their family home. The two men inter her body in a coffin in the old jailing room, and continue to dwell on her cause of death, as it causes Usher to slowly waste away as well. The narrator’s paranoia comes to a head as he fancies that he too, is being affected by the curse of the house, “It was no wonder that his [Usher’s] condition terrified - that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 13990.

² Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 17548.

superstitions”³. The use of the word “infected” grants autonomy to the Usher curse, it is acting upon the narrator, preying on him. This living infection then carries the potential to spread, much as the Usher’s superstitions “creep” slowly into the narrator’s psyche, polluting his ability to reason and invading his every thought. The diseased quality of Usher’s unknown sickness is ultimately revealed when the narrator follows his friend one night, who frantically murmurs the same phrases, “And yet I dared not- I dared not speak! ... Have I not heard her footsteps on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart?”⁴. The beating heart and footsteps reverberating throughout the house cannot clearly be detailed as reality or as a figment of Usher’s imagination, leading him to grapple with the belief that he has buried his sister alive. The way in which Usher and the narrator present the tale raises the uncomfortable possibility of the blurring between truth and fiction as the status quo rather than a deviation from the norm.

The obvious, recurring sounds and phrases in Poe’s stories are not, however, the only form of repetition crucial to creating a sense of anxiety and urgency in the text. The more subtle instances of repetition are just as effective, if not more so, in producing the space for tangible affective reactions. In “The Black Cat,” the narrator seems torn between regret and justification while telling his reader about his abusive and violent tendencies. His favorite cat, Pluto, suffers horribly one day as the narrator convinces himself that it looks at him maliciously, and he cuts the cat’s eye out before hanging it a few days later. After adopting a cat hauntingly similar to Pluto, the narrator begins to experience the same paranoia that the cat is judging and following him, “It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader

³ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 11313.

⁴ *Ibid*, 11407.

comprehend”⁵. The only thing preventing the narrator from hurting the new cat is the knowledge that he killed Pluto, and the apparent strain of not injuring or punishing the cat becomes clear in the way the narrator begins to overanalyze every detail of his life. He believes that the white patch on the cat’s chest is shaped like the gallows; pointing both to the method he used to kill Pluto and also what he imagines would be his punishment if people were to find out about his degrading nature. The repressed fury the narrator experiences is clear in the language used, “The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness”⁶. Even the simple act of the cat bumping into him while following him down the stairs sets the narrator off, and the frequent use of commas in the latter passage creates severed clauses rather than allowing for syntactic completion, mimicking the act of taking a restrained breath in between each fragment to help push anger away rather than addressing it head on. That is to say, there is a clear link from the punctuation to the containment of the narrator’s emotion, and as one mentally pauses between each phrase, the idea of utter control is automatically invoked.

The methodical nature of Poe’s characters manages to add yet another facet of repetition to the short stories. The narrator of “The Black Cat” attempts to clear his name with his reader immediately upon beginning to tell his story by compellingly describing why he shouldn’t be regarded as insane, “Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not – and very surely do I not dream”⁷. The language the narrator uses attempts to manipulate his perceived audience into trusting him by acknowledging the claims that he is mad, and that his own experiences are unreliable to testify against that suggestion. If he can clearly see why his accusers are calling him mad, then perhaps his

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 10010.

⁶ Ibid, 10031.

⁷ Ibid, 9925.

levelheaded approach to societal perception can exonerate him. Later in the story, the narrator reminds his audience that it is up to their discretion whether or not the murder of his wife and pets is unjustified, and clinically exclaims, “But I am detailing a chain of facts – and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect”⁸. The scientific way in which the narrator justifies his actions and innocence is at odds with the previous analysis of his textual anxiety. As such, the tension caused by his mercurial narration generates an overwhelming sense of confusion: does one trust the charming upfront personality presented by the narrator, or does one acknowledge the wrongness of his repressed emotion? This confusion leads to an amorphous anxiety that, when explored through the lens of the unsettling, is understood to be a result of the dichotomies in the text.

A similar phenomenon occurs in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” as the narrator’s initial cheery personality prevents an unbiased evaluation of his character. The narrator begins his story after he has already snapped from the pressure of the beating heart and handed himself over to the police, but instead of being morose or apologetic, he is surprisingly jovial as he attempts to convince the reader that his murderous act made perfect sense. He implores his unnamed audience to listen to him, “But why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them”⁹. The way in which the narrator questions his being labeled as “mad” takes on a petulant tone when he then tries to explain that his psychotic break wasn’t detrimental, rather illuminating. The skewed logic he presents is reminiscent of a young child trying in vain to rationalize whatever messy thing they have done, not realizing that their misguided explanations only serve to prove to the authority figure that they did something

⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 9976.

⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 17479.

wrong. By assuring his audience that his senses had been “sharpened” and not “destroyed” or “dull”, the narrator attempts to present a state of mental clarity that is at odds with the murder of his old housemate; though in suggesting that his state of mind is due to a “disease”, he taints the image of purity he put forth. This conflicting narrative gives way to an underlying anxiety in the text; this indeterminism generates a sense of suspension, or limbo, in its obscurity. Throughout the story, a similar sense of dissonance as that of “The Black Cat” is introduced, as the narrator also pursues a clinical approach in his description of the murder of his housemate. This methodical delineation of both the circumstances and explicit details of the murder conflicts with the anxiety and disorientation that leaks from the page whenever the narrator mentions the sound of the old man’s beating heart. He continues to starkly describe why he is not insane, “If you still think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body”¹⁰, and then proceeds to specify how he dismembered the old man’s body and put it under the floorboards of his living room. The pragmatic tone of his recollection is later undermined by the aforementioned degeneration of his character in the face of the beating heart.

The works of Edgar Allan Poe are complex, opening ideas and spaces in such a variety of ways that criticism will always fail to account for one detail or another. Of course, this adds a nebulous sense to Poe-ian analysis, unwittingly creating a space in which the unsettling thrives, both in the text itself and its understanding. Surpassing the base inclination to attribute the discomfort of Poe’s writing to fear, or a physical sense of horror, leads to a realization that the anxiety generated by the conflicting narratives in the stories is a key factor of the unsettling. Repetition is a key way in which Poe’s language engenders automatism, allowing the text to

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 17525.

inhabit a life of its own. By encouraging an environment in which anxiety is smothering and the text is unreliable in its manipulations, one is left questioning a horrible realization: if it is possible to be influenced by the emotions seeping through Poe's language, then is the text suggesting that everyone is capable of the same atrocities and unnerving events of these stories and these characters? Perhaps that is to be the unattainable knowledge that plagues critics of Poe, plunging them all into the tumultuous and obscure realm of the unsettling.

Chapter Three: The Poetics of Doomed Subjects

While Chapter One dealt with the linguistic effects of the unsettling, Chapter Two evolved the theory of the unsettling syntactically. Chapter Three will explore the displacement of poetry from genre as an agent of the unsettling. Edgar Allan Poe's "Berenice" toys with visceral imagery, particularly through an appropriation of poetic language within the format of the short story. The grisly language used to detail Berenice's painful degeneration works together with the maddeningly cyclical narration not unlike Poe's writing in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Tell-Tale Heart". Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s passionate artist Basil Hallward rises to a poetic standpoint, delivering verbose and lyrical orations in defense of art. Similar to the unsettling hold the yellow book has on Dorian, Dorian himself becomes the central source of the unsettling for Basil. The theory of the unsettling itself resists genre, and thus is integral for a nuanced reading of gothic literature, which itself should not be confined to the boundaries of genre. Critic Anne Williams goes so far as to caution readers that "as long as we think of genre in terms of 'drawing the line,' of distinguishing things *inherently* Gothic from things that are not, we will be trapped."¹ The unsettling's emergence as the afterbirth of tension between language and syntax allows it to arise at any time in any genre, much as "Gothic flavor"² can range from texts such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* to modern films like Jordan Peele's *Get Out*.

Returning to the literary iteration of the unsettling and its place in the scholarly analysis of Gothic literature, Edgar Allan Poe's short story "Berenice" adopts a poetic use of language and repetition, creating the perfect breeding ground for the unsettling. "Berenice" is a story of

¹ Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, 15.

² *Ibid*, 14.

narrative self-doubt, blindness, and unadulterated Radcliffean obscure terror³. Its narrator Egeus, one of the few Poe named, frames the story through his fixation on his ill cousin, Berenice. Berenice, once beautiful, suffers from an unknown degenerative disease throughout the story. Though she occasionally lapses into “trances”⁴, or periods of catatonia, the two are to be married. The story opens with Egeus contemplating misery and happiness, and the relation the two have to his perception of his circumstances (to be revealed later as his engagement to his dying love). It is made clear that Egeus is telling his story, rather than experiencing it in present-time, when he introduces himself to his audience, “My baptismal name is Egeus; of my family I will not mention. Yet there are no towers in the land more time-honored than my gloomy, gray, hereditary halls. Our line has been called a race of visionaries...”⁵ Already, Egeus’ introduction recalls an epic poem. Naming himself but omitting his family name could be read as a reluctance to involve his family in the happenings of the tale, but coupled with the multiple references to his family’s legacy, including the “hereditary halls” in his family home and the self description of his “line” as a “race of visionaries” suggests otherwise. Rather than attempting to hide his family by being purposely evasive, the nonchalant manner in which Egeus describes his home as the “family *mansion*”⁶, along with likening his family line to an individual (and superior, given his use of the word “visionaries”) race instead points to his family as being established and wealthy. Therefore, it can be reasonably assumed that to his intended reader, Egeus’ family name would be well known or easily identifiable amongst the upper

³ “Obscurity leaves something for the imagination to exaggerate; confusion, by blurring one image into another, leaves only a chaos in which the mind can find nothing to be magnificent, nothing to nourish its fears or doubts, or to act upon in any way,” Ann Radcliffe’s “On the Supernatural in Poetry”, 6.

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “Berenice.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 3228.

⁵ *Ibid*, 3204.

⁶ *Ibid*.

echelon of society. Egaeus' decision to omit his family name shatters the illusion of an honorable epic poem, and begins the story on an unstable note.

The duality of Egaeus' narration continues as he begins to speak of Berenice, unwittingly revealing his obsession with her perfection. Berenice is described as "agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy... roaming carelessly through life, with no thought of shadows in her path", while he is "ill of health, and buried in gloom", and "addicted"⁷ to her. Curiously, Egaeus focuses on the physicality of her body, rather than his physical or emotional attraction to her. The words "agile" and "graceful" point to a lithe, dancer-esque body, one capable of enduring challenges while still maintaining a feminine elegance. Her excess of energy is linked to the lack of hardship or internal demons in her path, while he explicitly positions himself as her foil in every way. The focus on the past echoes Egaeus' repeated engagement with the concept of time via his recounting of his own birth, the legacy of his family, and his own preoccupation with pain in relation to time, "Either the memory of past bliss is the anguish of to-day, or the agonies which *are*, have their origin in the ecstasies which *might have been*"⁸. By continuing to invoke time, especially the past, as a major player in the telling of his story, Egaeus is subtly suggesting that change is on the horizon. Given his nostalgic memories of Berenice in her youth and her athletic splendor and recognizing his own "addiction" and darkness of character, this change is sure to be sinister.

Though Berenice's disease is never named, it is characterized as fatal and as changing her mind, body, and spirit completely. Here, the unsettling begins to seep through the lines on the page. Egaeus remarks that the disease "...pervade[ed] her mind, her habits, and her character,

⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, "Berenice." *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 3222.

⁸ *Ibid*, 3204.

and in a manner the most subtle and terrible, disturbing even the identity of her person! Alas! the destroyer came and went! – and the victim – where is she? I knew her not – or knew her no longer as Berenice.”⁹ The sentence lulls the reader in its clausal structure, creating a leisurely forward movement that mimics the insidious quality of the disease and the imagery of its invisible tendrils slowly invading and infecting her very soul. As such, the sense of calm replicates the effects of anesthesia numbing one to the horrible nature of disease. The sudden declaration “disturbing even the identity of her person!” punctuated by an exclamation point shatters the illusion of peace and violently interrupts the quietude. Using the words “destroyer” and “victim” add to the shift in tone, and liken Egaeus’ inability to reconcile his love’s affliction to a battle, or war. The repeated use of hyphens to abruptly break the sentences is a harsh adoption of using a caesura, adding to the tension caused by the juxtaposition of the aforementioned numbness and destruction.

Recalling the linguistic analysis of the cadence of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the way in which it unsettlingly suggests an orchestration mentioned in Chapter One, the writing in “Berenice” creates a similar space for the unsettling to thrive in-between its lines. Egaeus desperately attempts to justify his all-consuming obsessive personality to the his intended reader in a drawn out paragraph-long sentence, though the general tone and quality can be captured in the following excerpt, “...to lose myself, for an entire night, in watching the steady flame of a lamp, or the embers of a fire; to dream away whole days over the perfume of a flower; to repeat, monotonously, some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to

⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, “Berenice.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 3232.

convey any idea whatever to the mind...”¹⁰ Contrary to the hypnotic quality of Egaeus’ description of Berenice’s disease, here the exaggerated use of fragmentation forces Egaeus’ self-diagnosed monomania to the forefront. The content of the speech is beautiful, poetic in its imagery and dependence on the senses. Sight, smell, sound, and touch are all drawn on to paint a much more detailed picture for the reader, of the smell of a burning ember, the sensation of a flower petal brushing one’s nose to inhale its “perfume”, and the sensation of one’s tongue stumbling over an oft repeated word. Much as the yellow book in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* works to subtly manipulate in a parody of orchestration, the excessive fragmentation in this passage delicately traps one into pausing after short phrases, or in some cases, every word. This in turn unsettlingly places as much attention to Egaeus’ language as he does to his own fixations, influencing a cohabitation of his mental instability.

Of course, one cannot mention the unsettling in any capacity when discussing “Berenice” without touching on the story’s gruesome climax. As Berenice’s disease progresses, she becomes a veritable walking corpse, or to be more specific, a corpse bride. She is so emaciated that her skin appears to be falling off her body, her hair is limp, and her eyes are described as “lifeless, and lusterless, and seemingly pupilless”¹¹. However, one aspect of her body remains pristine in a mockery of her former beauty: her teeth. As one might expect, Egaeus’ monomania soon directs itself towards her flawless teeth, and he becomes a man possessed by desire. These teeth are, pardon the pun, the *root* of Egaeus’ descent into, or perhaps his embrace of, madness. This madness appears as though in a passion, and Egaeus can no longer control his narration as a result, “The teeth! – the teeth! they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, “Berenice.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 3242.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 3283.

palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them, as in the very moment of their first terrible development...For these I longed with a phrenzied desire.”¹² The language in this passage works to draw the reader’s attention uncomfortably, *unsettlingly* to their own teeth, once again implicating the reader in Egaeus’ instability. The “th” vocal formation in “the”, “they”, “there”, “their, and “them” draws one’s tongue to the underside of one’s top row of teeth, forcing the reader to become painfully aware of their own teeth as they engage with the text. The “ph” is “phrenzied” acts in much the same way, this time pushing the bottom lip into the front teeth, again blurring the line between Egaeus’ attention to detail and one’s own.

The unsettling works with linguistic play and clausal structures to blur the line between reality and fiction. At no point does this become clearer than in “Berenice’s” shocking and grisly end. Upon being informed of Berenice’s untimely death due to an epileptic attack during the night, the reader is faced with an intentional break in the text. This break is disorienting, reintroducing the story directly after receiving news of Berenice’s death. We awaken with Egaeus, as he struggled to remember Berenice’s interring past a “memory replete with horror – horror more horrible from being vague, and terror more terrible from ambiguity”¹³. Recalling Ann Radcliffe’s distinction of the physicality of horror and the internal constriction of terror, one cannot help but feel terribly worried at the combination of the two in Egaeus’ memory. This terror arises from the obscurity of his inability to remember, and the lingering fear that causes him to ask himself, “I had done a deed – what was it? *What was it?*”¹⁴ is a direct result of the

¹² Edgar Allan Poe, “Berenice.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 3297.

¹³ *Ibid*, 3310.

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “Berenice.” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Complete Collection of Poems and Tales*, edited by Giorgio Mantovani, 3310.

unsettling surfacing as an unconscious after-effect of the terror that momentarily seized him. A box on his bedside table becomes the physical embodiment of the unsettling in this moment, and with the question moves from “What was it?” to *what is in it?* Perhaps it would be better to leave the question unanswered in an attempt to leave a lingering dread in my own text, but for the sake of clarity, after Berenice is found alive in a violated grave, Egaeus struggles to open the box until “it slipped from my hands and fell heavily, and burst into pieces; and from it, with a rattling sound, there rolled out some instruments of dental surgery, intermingled with thirty-two small, white, and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor.”¹⁵

Moving away from what is arguably Edgar Allan Poe’s most disturbing short story, the question of the displacement of poetry as a genre as a result of the unsettling is prominent in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, though in a markedly different role than in “Berenice.” While “Berenice” invokes the poetic via its syntactical focus on repetition, texts breaks, and a subtle nod at the epic form, the figure of Basil Hallward in *Dorian Gray* embodies the poetic in his devotion to his art and art itself. His burgeoning obsession with his young, beautiful friend Dorian Gray shifts his focus from art to Dorian himself and his artistic depictions. The unsettling rears its head as Basil attempts to explain to Lord Henry Wotton his loss of control over his art, and how he feels the distinction between art and artist no longer exists. Basil’s obsession with Dorian proves to be his downfall, as he loses both his artistic inspiration and ultimately, his life.

Basil’s first indication that he is being consumed by his art is when Lord Henry first sees the portrait of Dorian Gray and subsequently demands to know why the portrait will not be exhibited. Basil’s response is both an answer to his friend’s question and a moment of

¹⁵ Ibid, 3323.

vulnerability, “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul.”¹⁶ T. S. Eliot said, “The purpose of literature is to turn blood into ink”¹⁷, and for Basil, the purpose of art is to pour his soul into paint. This raises the question of whether Basil co-opts poetic and literary discourse in applying it to art, or, if like the unsettling and the gothic genre, artistry and poesy resist definition. Confining art of any form to something as strict and even meaningless as a stock definition detracts from the malleability of both the artist and the consumer’s experiences. For Basil, art is as personal as writing a poem meant only for his eyes, or of a whispered confession under the cover of nightfall. The fear he expresses at the thought of sharing the portrait points to the hold art has over his actions, as though it is not just the sitter who is “the accident, the occasion”, but the artist is as well. Surely if he knew that his own soul would be revealed so obviously in this portrait, he would have tempered his strokes in some way, reinforced his own protections. As fear is the result, however, it is clear that the art has guided and influenced his actions rather than he himself doing so, recalling the sensation of the yellow book manipulating Dorian.

Art is not the only force to influence Basil, however. Dorian Gray himself intoxicates the man, changing his outlook on life, his relationship to art, and his ability to live for anything, or one, else. At first, Basil is infatuated with Dorian’s beauty and innocence. He justifies his obsession to Lord Henry, waxing poetic about how the youth is responsible for opening his eyes to a new art form, “There is nothing that Art cannot express, and I know that the work I have

¹⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 8.

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 147.

done, since I met Dorian Gray, is good work, is the best work of my life. But in some curious way – I wonder will you understand me? – his personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently, I think of them differently.”¹⁸ Basil’s rhetorical question to Henry, “I wonder will you understand me?” betrays the way in which Basil feels as though his relationship with Dorian is unique, intimate. To “wonder” suggests a curiosity strengthened by awe, betraying his own sentiment of amazement towards his revelation. *How* could Henry understand him if he himself is still surprised and delighted with Dorian’s influence on his art? How could anyone? Thus, this change in perspective lies solely with himself and Dorian, creating a new realm that only the two of them inhabit.

Dorian’s influence stretches beyond the mere recalibration of Basil’s artistic knowledge, he invades the artist’s mind in all capacities. What is most unsettling, however, is the fact that Dorian does this all unwittingly. It is Basil’s own susceptibility to the young man that warps his worldview, and Dorian’s presence alone begins to slip its way under Basil’s skin. Speaking of an unrelated, landscape painting that he would not part with either, Basil explains to Lord Henry, “It is one of the best things I have ever done. And why is it so? Because, while I was painting it, Dorian Gray sat beside me. Some subtle influence passed from him to me, and for the first time in my life I saw in the plain woodland the wonder I had always looked for, and always missed.”¹⁹ Here, Dorian becomes the solution to all of Basil’s previous preoccupations and dissatisfactions with life. It is because of *Dorian*, not his own expertise, that Basil finds the “wonder [he] had always looked for”, indicating that Basil views Dorian as the gateway to the life he has always desired. This total dependence and enthrallment is eerily similar to Dorian’s dedication to the

¹⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

yellow book, and Egaeus' obsession with the teeth, indicating the burgeoning presence of the unsettling.

It is Basil's vehement exclamation that finally convinces Lord Henry of this mysterious young man's worth, and he forcefully requests to meet him, "I must see Dorian Gray"²⁰. This is the metaphorical beginning of the end, as Lord Henry's corruptive influence is what ultimately separates Dorian and Basil, leading to both their deaths and misery. Basil foresees this immediately, and attempts to sway him otherwise, "You might see nothing in him. I see everything in him."²¹ Lord Henry becomes derisive, suggesting that Basil should, ironically, take a page out of a poet's work and paint for exhibitions rather than himself. Lord Henry's fluctuating attitude towards Basil's manic passion for Dorian and art proves his true disinterest in his friend's work, choosing instead to focus on the object of Basil's pleasure rather than the justification of said pleasure. This foreshadows Lord Henry's own corruption of Dorian via his focus on a hedonistic lifestyle, and causes great tension between him and Basil. In a final declaration meant to quell his friend's hurtful words, Basil cries, "Harry, don't talk like that. As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me. You can't feel what I feel,"²² effectively ending the conversation and demonstrating his dedication to the young man. The use of the word "dominate" adds a violent undertone to the exchange, suggesting that systems of power and hierarchy are at play, placing Basil at a disadvantage. This disadvantage will surface multiple times throughout the novel, notably at Dorian's dismissal of Basil (as he never shared the same devotion to the artist), and during Basil's final scenes.

²⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 13.

²¹ Ibid, 14.

²² Ibid, 15.

Dorian's portrait decays according to his moral degeneration, but Basil is left unaware of his work's corruption. After several aborted attempts to reconnect with Dorian, Basil manages to surprise his former friend one day on a walk. Basil lectures Dorian on his worsening reputation, and pleads with him to return to his previously naïve and kind state. Dorian seems to play with Basil as a predator would prey, and finally acquiesces on the condition that Basil glimpse his soul. Basil, confused, does not understand how his portrait can display Dorian's soul, but he is quickly grasps the severity of the situation, "It was some foul parody, some infamous, ignoble, satire. He had never done that. Still, it was his own picture. He knew it, and he felt as if his blood had changed in a moment from fire to sluggish ice."²³ The adoration Basil had for Dorian is abruptly put out in this scene, the "fire" representing his passion for Dorian's wellbeing immediately smothered by the "sluggish ice" he now feels. The use of the word "sluggish" is interesting in that it also suggests that Basil's mental faculties have slowed and are struggling to push through the overwhelming negative stimuli he faces. "Sluggish" also implies that some forward motion is occurring, though not efficiently or well. Even when faced with the monstrosity that is Dorian's soul, and the degradation of his own in the paint of the portrait, Basil valiantly (or masochistically) attempts to see the good in his former friend.

Basil's horror at seeing his former masterpiece represent evil itself clouds his judgment and his vision. Instead of understanding that the portrait has changed *because* of Dorian's wrongdoings and therefore his old friend is now sin and malice incarnate, Basil continues to treat Dorian as the young, innocent man that had previously sat in his studio. In doing so, he misses Dorian's increasing impatience and frustration, which would have alerted him to his precarious

²³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 130.

and vulnerable situation. Suddenly, “an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward”²⁴ overwhelms Dorian, who “glance[s] wildly around” and finds a knife “glimmering”²⁵ on top of a table. Basil, ignorant to all but his own complete horror, misses Dorian’s unsettling pull to the knife. As such, he loses his opportunity to escape, and when “[he] stirred in his chair as if he was going to rise” Dorian “rushed at him, and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man’s head down on the table, and stabbing again and again.”²⁶ The repetitive motion of stabbing Basil punctuates the oppressive “crushing” of both the physical body and the spirit, proving to Basil even in death that his final plea of innocence fell on Dorian’s deaf, corrupt ears. As the narrative perspective shifts to Dorian’s point of view in the paragraph of Basil’s death, the text is uncomfortably swept into the frenzy of Dorian’s hatred and violent tendencies. The saga of Basil Hallward ends as he is punished for his deep, unsettling love of Dorian Gray; and as Dorian continues to stab Basil’s unmoving body, the reader is faced with the literal death of the author (or artist).²⁷

The unsettling is a crucial critical category that must be reckoned with to gain a more nuanced understanding of literature, particularly in the gothic genre. This thesis has grappled with the unsettling in its linguistic iterations, and is born from the relationship between language and syntax. As many of the textual references cited in this work were chosen for their detailed sounds and word choice; the unsettling finds its footing amongst the micro expressions. The unsettling primarily acts to displace control and implement a sense of automatism, prompting critics of literature to reevaluate their sense of subjectivity and question where and *how* their opinions are born.

²⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 132.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”.

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