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Adres: Maltepe Mh. Şehit Gönenç Cd. No:5 Çankaya Ankara
E- Posta: itbkongre@ankarabilim.edu.tr
Telefon: 444 22 28

The Substance: A Psychological and Existential Exploration of Beauty, Identity, and Social Marginalization

Sadık Çalışkan
Doc.Dr. Inonu Universitesi ,Iletisim Fakultesi
sadik.caliskan@inonu.edu.tr
0000-0001-6699-0424

Tuba Arslan
Ogr.Gor, Ankara Yildirim Beyazit Universitesi, Yabanci Diller Yuksekokulu
arslanntubaa@hotmail.com
0000-0003-0919-1416

Abstract

The Substance is a 2024 released body horror film written and directed by Coralie Fargeat, which has been awarded as the best screenplay at the 77 Cannes Film Festival. Starring Demi Moore, it features an in depth exploration of the psychological impacts of idealized beauty standards, age, and the internalized violence inflicted on women by the society. The film deals with the self-destructing effects of beauty ideals placed upon women through multilayered metaphors, images and nuanced storytelling. Key symbols such as the Hollywood star of Elisabeth Sparkle (the protagonist), which is gradually wearing down, or the substance itself, suggest the deep consequences of social marginalization and beauty standards that emphasize perfection. The juxtaposition of Elisabeth and her idealized younger self, Sue, brings the issue to another level, showing the futile chase for perfection and eternal youth, while body horror serves as the externalization of the misogyny. Toward the end of the movie, the "Monstro", another metaphor, points to freedom through self-acceptance. Ultimately, *The Substance* is a movie that transcends its plot and engages the audience in compelling meditation on societal norms devoid of true worth, identity and self-acceptance beyond physicality. This study underlines the importance of the film as a psychological and existential reflection on the human condition.

Keywords: body horror, beauty standards, self-acceptance

Timeless Obsessions: The Parallels Between the Picture of Dorian Gray and The Substance

Tuba Arslan
Ogr.Gor, Ankara Yildirim Beyazit Universitesi, Yabanci Diller Yuksekokulu
arslanntubaa@hotmail.com
0000-0003-0919-1416
Sadik Caliskan
Doc.Dr. Inonu Universitesi ,Iletisim Fakultesi
sadik.caliskan@inonu.edu.tr
0000-0001-6699-0424

Abstract

This work investigates the captivating connections between Oscar Wilde's famous gothic horror novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Substance* (1890), a body horror film written and directed by Coralie Fargeat and released in 2024. Although the two works originate from different types of mediums and periods, they both reflect the damages caused by the obsession with everlasting youth and beauty, the universal destructiveness of the pursuit of ideal beauty, and the consequences of these standards. *The Substance* parallels the earlier work but gives it a 21st-century feminist twist. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, on the other hand, deals with the excesses of Victorian vanity, writing on beauty and morality. *The Picture of Dorian* Gray comments on the loss of inner depth and the decline of morals when the focus is on external beauty. Using elements of horror and tragedy, the two tales question the societal fixation with the perfection of physical beauty and youth. They both study the duality of self, the pitfalls of external verifications of self, and the deteriorating effect of self-absorption While *The Substance* focuses on the pressure of modern beautification and entertainment, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers an ageless analysis of morals and identity judgments', along with social conventions critics as shallow and corrupting. This study employs a comparative textual and cinematic analysis to explore the thematic connections between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Substance*. Key scenes from the film are juxtaposed with corresponding moments in the novel to uncover shared motifs of beauty, self-destruction, and societal critique. By closely analyzing the dialogue, visual symbolism, and narrative structures of *The Substance*, as well as Wilde's character development and prose, this method highlights the transformation of the original themes into a feminist, 21st-century context. This comparative study of these two works reflects their critique of societal norms and hence puts to light that these themes, though different times and mediums, still stand relevant. The given comparison provides a very unique perspective on the enduring impact of societal ideals on individual identity and mental well-being.

Keywords: external beauty, obsession, everlasting youth, duality of self, self-destruction

Background:

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) is a gothic novel by Oscar Wilde, regarded as one of the most significant, foremost works of the field. Through the protagonist Dorian Gray, Wilde`s only novel, includes themes of aestheticism, self –destruction and morality. Dorian Gray is a young man whose beauty mesmerizes the artist Basil Hallward who paints his portrait and introduces him to his friend Lord Henry. In the same way, Dorian`s striking beauty leaves

Henry in awe, and Henry is already renowned for his ability to provoke people for the selfish pursuit of pleasure and beauty. Dorian is intrigued by the hedonistic ideals of Lord Henry, and his ability to articulate his admiration influences Dorian's perception of himself; "You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr. Gray…And Beauty is higher than Genius" (Wilde, 2003, p.25). The narrative shifts toward a tragic turn when Dorian wishes never to grow old and stay eternally young while his portrait ages instead. His wish being granted results in his moral decline, as he immerses himself into a life of luxury and cruelty. The portrait, symbolizing Dorian`s internal reality, deteriorates while his external looks remain radiant and perfect. Wilde invites the reader to reflect on the superficiality of the society and the consequences of exchanging pleasure with ethical values. For Wilde art and the artist had transformative power on the society, and although he criticized Victorian society he believed the societal progress was dependent on the individual's self-realization (Baker 1969). However, in the famous preface to the novel he claims that "All art is useless", suggesting art should not be valued for its moral utility. This interplay between art, society and the individual was central to his philosophical and aesthetic vision. Because it is Wilde`s only novel and a seminal work of the Aesthetic Movement, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been extensively discussed and researched, and continues to be a central text in aesthetic philosophy. Richard Ellmann (1987) who examined Wilde in detail, his sensational life and works, and wrote one of his most prominent biographies argued that Dorian was a reflection of Wilde`s own struggles with identity and public perception, and highlighted the novels two-fold criticism of the Victorian society's moral rigidity and excess in aesthetic ideals. Eve Kosofksky Sedwick(1990) studies the novel through queer theory, uncovering its coded homoeroticism and the repression of non-formative desires. Sedgwick suggest that Dorian`s internal conflict reflects the social anxieties about identity and the cost of self-deception and moral evasion. Regenia Gagnier`s (1986) work argues that Dorian`s Faustian pact symbolizes the consequences of an uncontrolled pursuit of pleasure and the commercialization of beauty and contextualizes the novel within Victorian debates on morality and individualism.

The Substance is a psychological horror film written and directed by Coralie Fargeat in 2024. The film criticizes the modern standardization of beauty and ageism and the pressure exerted on women, particularly by the entertainment industry. Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore) an aerobic star, once so famous to have earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, is fired by her misogynist boss, who brutally implies that she is no longer of any use to them when she turns 50. Soon her path intersects with a black-market drug called "The Substance" which promises her "a better version" of herself. The drug produces a younger, more desirable version of herself, Sue (Margaret Qualley), through a grotesque and horrifying process. Elisabeth's reliance on Sue to keep her public image increases and that is when things get awry and leads to destructive consequences. Coralie Fargeat harshly criticizes the pressure placed on women to adhere to unobtainable beauty standards and the outcomes when one sacrifices the identity for external validation.

Film reviewers and critics mostly referred to *The Subtance* as a "feminist body horror film"(Jayarajah 2025, Hess 2024). *New York Times* reviewed it as a "mirror-haunted gory fable about fame, self-hatred and the terror that accompanies an identity constructed on the backs of other people's stares" (2024). Regarding *The Guardian`s* review, it acknowledges both the weaknesses of the film and the praises while mentioning its resemblance to *Dorian Gray*. **The films audacity is addressed, how it boldly and rigorously attacks the controversies around**

aging woman and constant online scrutiny (Horton, 2024). Chrissy Jayarajah in her latest publication titled "*The Substance and the Pursuit of Perfection*" refers to R.D. Laing`s book *Divided Self,* to elicit the psychological complexity of the film which portrays Elisabeth`s internal struggle and the madness behind her splendid exterior. She points that the fact that the film reflects the truth of the contemporary society is what makes the body horror elements even more unsettling. The film addresses a deeply poignant issue, particularly relevant to the modern society and, most notably, to women, shedding light on a persistent and painful wound that many are forced to endure. Furthermore, the difference in period between the two works also shows that this phenomenon is universal, perhaps with roots dating back to human existence.
By juxtaposing these two works, the study highlights their critique of societal norms, underscoring the relevance of these themes across time and mediums. This comparison offers a unique perspective on the enduring impact of societal ideals on individual identity and mental well-being.

- In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Victorian social conventions are critiqued as shallow and corrupting, highlighting how societal expectations around beauty, morality, and reputation contribute to Dorian's downfall.
- In *The Substance*, Modern social conventions around conformity and perfection are explored through a feminist lens, examining how they pressure individuals, especially women in show business, to prioritize external appearances or ideals, often at the expense of authenticity and humanity.

Both works expose the destructive power of societal norms on identity and morality.

I. The Faustian Pact: Trading the Soul (or Body) for Youth

Both works have a Faustian bargain at the center of their narrative, a treaty that trades ones soul, or in the case of *The Substance*, one`s identity and body, with eternal beauty and youth. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian's desperate wish -"If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!" (Wilde, 2003, Chapter 2)-sets the stage for his moral and psychological unraveling. Soon his wish is mysteriously granted and while the portrait becomes the monstrous depiction of his inner deterioration, his physical appearance remains as beautiful and as young not touched by time. This duality between outward beauty and inner decay serves as a powerful metaphor for the consequences of vanity and hedonism. Likewise in *The Substance*, once Elisabeth Sparkle encounters a black market drug, namely the substance, that promises "a better version" of her, Sue, she is ready for the Faustian exchange not knowing what it will cost her. Elisabeth`s transformation is depicted in the bloodiest scenes to reveal her suffering, she undergoes a grotesque a grotesque process of self-extraction, literally splitting her identity into two: the aging Elisabeth and the youthful Sue (Hess, 2024). Now Elizabeth's war is with herself, within herself, in a similar way Dorian is left alone with his inner darkness. As Elisabeth becomes increasingly dependent on Sue to maintain her public image, she loses control over her body and sense of self. This externalization of beauty and identity leads to her gradual self-destruction, paralleling Dorian's moral downfall. Both characters sacrifice their authentic selves in pursuit of an unattainable ideal, illustrating the destructive power of societal validation and the illusion of eternal youth.

II. The Portrait vs. The Mirror: Symbolizing Internal Decay

Both works employ potent visual symbols to explore the theme of internal deterioration. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the portrait serves as a supernatural mirror, reflecting Dorian's hidden sins and moral decay. As Dorian indulges in a life of hedonism and cruelty, the portrait grows increasingly grotesque, while his physical appearance remains flawless. This duality underscores the tension between appearance and reality, exposing the hollowness of a life devoted solely to external beauty (Ellmann, 1987).
In *The Substance*, Elisabeth's past glory is immortalized in visual representations—her portrait from her aerobics-star prime, mirrors reflecting her insecurities, and Hollywood billboards showcasing her youthful image (Bradshaw, 2024). Sue, as a living embodiment of Elisabeth's idealized self, functions as a monstrous double, much like Dorian's portrait. The physical strain Elisabeth endures to maintain Sue mirrors the psychological burden Dorian faces in concealing his corruption. Both works emphasize how an obsession with beauty and youth leads to fragmentation and self-destruction, using visual symbols to externalize the characters' internal decay.

III. The Sacrifice of Self for Societal Acceptance

A central thematic connection between the two works is the fear of losing relevance in a society that values youth and beauty above all else. Dorian's vanity isolates him, as he prioritizes his appearance over genuine human connection, ultimately leading to his descent into madness (Sedgwick, 1990). Wilde critiques Victorian society's superficiality and hedonism, highlighting how societal pressures to maintain external allure can erode inner virtue.
Similarly, *The Substance* critiques the toxic pressures placed on women to remain youthful and desirable, particularly within the entertainment industry. Elisabeth is discarded by Hollywood executives who deem her past her "last f***able day" (Horton, 2024), a brutal commentary on the industry's ageism and misogyny. Her reliance on the drug reflects the unattainable beauty standards imposed on women, pushing them toward self-destruction. While Dorian's fears are personal, Elisabeth's struggle is systemic, emphasizing the gendered double standards and societal control over female aging (Jayarajah, 2025). This shift from individual to systemic critique highlights how *The Substance* updates Wilde's themes for a contemporary audience, exposing the intersection of ageism, misogyny, and capitalism.

IV. A Feminist Reimagining: The Role of Gender

While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* centers on an individual male protagonist's downfall, *The Substance* reinterprets its themes through a feminist lens. Wilde's novel focuses on personal corruption, exploring how Dorian's unchecked desires and moral apathy lead to his ruin. In contrast, Fargeat's film critiques the broader social structures that impose beauty ideals on women, particularly in industries like Hollywood (The New York Times, 2024).
Dorian is free to indulge in vice without immediate consequence, reflecting the privilege afforded to men in his society. Elisabeth, however, is constrained by an industry that commodifies women's youth and discards them once they no longer fit its ideals. This shift from individual to systemic critique underscores how *The Substance* updates Wilde's themes for a contemporary audience, exposing the intersection of ageism, misogyny, and capitalism. By centering a female protagonist, the film highlights the gendered dimensions of beauty standards and the societal pressures that disproportionately affect women.

V. The Tragic End: Facing the Consequences

Both narratives conclude with the protagonists facing the inevitable consequences of their choices. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian's attempt to destroy the portrait—a final act of defiance against his moral reckoning—results in his own death. The final image of his withered body, restored to its true age, serves as a stark reminder of the cost of his vanity and hedonism (Wilde, 2003).

In *The Substance*, Elisabeth's overuse of the drug leads to monstrous consequences, as Sue's dominance over her body and identity becomes irreversible. Elisabeth's physical and psychological collapse leaves her broken, a shadow of her former self. The final shot of her decayed body lying on her Hollywood Walk of Fame star starkly symbolizes the toll of societal expectations and the inescapability of these pressures in modern society (Hess, 2024). Unlike Wilde's resolution, which restores a sense of moral order, *The Substance* offers a more ambiguous ending, reflecting the ongoing and pervasive nature of these issues.

Conclusion: A Tale as Old as Mirrors

Both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Substance* serve as cautionary tales about the perils of external validation and the societal obsession with youth and beauty. Wilde critiques individual vanity and moral corruption, while Fargeat expands this critique to address systemic beauty standards and the exploitation of women. Though separated by over a century, these works illustrate how society's fixation on youth remains a powerful force, shaping identity, self-worth, and ultimately, self-destruction.

The Substance's body horror elements amplify its exploration of the fragility of human existence, made even more unsettling by its contemporary relevance. Through its feminist lens, the film critiques gender ideologies and the relentless self-scrutiny imposed on women, delivering a powerful and unsettling commentary that challenges cultural norms and redefines the horror genre. Together, these works remind us that the pursuit of eternal youth and beauty is not only futile but also profoundly destructive, a timeless obsession that continues to haunt us across generations.

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