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Homosexual Panic and Necropolitics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and 'A Painful Case'

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This article provides a comparison between James Joyce and Oscar Wilde's characters in matters of homosexual panic and gender inequality, bringing the analysis to the grounds of necropolitics. Coined by Achille Mbembe, the term 'necropolitics' refers to how certain lives are deemed expendable within neoliberal systems. This article argues that in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, the legal and social oppression of queer people and gender minorities rendered queer people and women vulnerable to the slow death of social annihilation. The criminalization of homosexuality went hand in hand with homosexual panic, a manipulative and necropolitical mechanism which drove queer people to construct and maintain heteronormative appearances. Oscar Wilde's trials triggered homosexual panic that resulted in tightening social control and isolative measures, largely targeting homosexual and bisexual men. Basil Hallward's murder and the suicides of Dorian Gray's lovers in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and James Duffy's isolation in Joyce's 'A Painful Case' are manifestations of the effects of the homosexual panic that forces Joyce and Wilde's queer characters to live in a 'living dead' status unless they comply with an oppressive system. This social control and puritanism also affected women, limiting the roles they could occupy in society, the workplace, and the home. Therefore, this article also analyses the suicides of Emily Sinico and Sibyl Vane, demonstrating how gendered necropolitics impacted their deaths beyond mere tragic love stories.

Introduction

Over time, perceptions of Oscar Wilde's works have changed significantly. Initially considered scandalous and used against him as evidence of gross indecency, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) is now regularly introduced to readers as a canonically gay novel. However, attitudes towards homosexuality had started to shift by the time James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1916) was published, as a direct result of Wilde's sensationalised persecution. This article analyses Joyce and Wilde's characters through the lens of necropolitics and examines how homosexual panic and gender inequality contributed to the tragic, preventable deaths of women and gay men. By depicting the effects of these societal influences, both Joyce and Wilde criticise the strict moral codes that governed the public and private lives of 'sexual deviants' oppressed within a heterosexist system, factors which can be deduced from the treatment of the era's proscription of same-sex relationships, the colonial situation, and gender imbalances promoted by the strict moral codes of the time.

Coined by Achille Mbembe, the term 'necropolitics' refers to how neoliberal systems exhaust those lives who do not contribute to them. Necropolitics is inspired by the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics but departs from it as Mbembe reorients biopolitics to centre 'the power not to preserve the life and well-being of the body, but to expose the body to death and to a kind of death-in-life' (deLacy 2018: 144). While in biopolitics, genocides are justified through the point of view of preserving nations and racism is considered the dividing component of the human species, necropolitics focuses on how in our contemporary era individuals are subjected to 'slow deaths' (Mbembe, 2019: 126). Phenomena such as the climate crisis, mass deportations, and the development of spaces of confinement and surveillance are circumstances in what Mbembe calls 'death-worlds' where 'new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead' (Mbembe, 2019: 92).

Since necropolitics revolves around colonial violence, it is a suitable lens for the analysis of Joyce's texts, which were written when Ireland was under British rule. Although Mbembe agrees that '[l]ate modern colonial occupation differs in many ways from early modern occupation' (Mbembe, 2019: 80), the semi-colonial situation in Ireland parallels late modern colonial contexts. While Ireland displayed both compliance and resistance towards the colonial force from the mid-19th century, these sympathies did not prevent the British government from employing racial, linguistic, and cultural cleansing methods that ultimately rendered the colonised 'disposable'. In the words of Edward Molloy:

> This mass production of death, made possible by both the demands of British capital and the racialisation of the Irish masses, allows us to see how the mechanisms of colonial domination through discourses of race and economic rationality institute death as the defining characteristic of the colonial experience (Molloy 2021: 134).

In this regard, colonial Ireland fits within a necropolitical context, with the Great Famine as the most representative example of death-world.

Besides colonial circumstances, necropolitics has been applied to multiple areas to justify that different forms of oppression and violence reduce individuals' quality of life. Necropolitics can be applied to women, who have historically been victims of sexism and gendered violence, making them more susceptible to murder than their male counterparts. Although Mbembe does not extensively discuss the role of gender and sexuality in necropolitics, 'gendered violence and death makes up a fundamental element of contemporary death-dealing,' and 'movements such as the antifemicide movements demonstrate the subversions and resistances to operations of death-dealing' (Islekel, 2022: 7). In the context of turn-of-the-century Ireland, gendered necropolitics can be linked to the mechanisms of control promoted by strict moral codes which diminished women's opportunities to live beyond their assigned traditional gender roles. In Ireland, a tragic and still sensitive example is the prevalence of institutions such as the Magdalene laundries, which incarcerated women under pretexts of social purity and cleansing. This article will analyse Emily Sinico and Sibyl Vane's suicides under the perspective of gendered necropolitics in order to separate their deaths from the traditional depiction of rejected love as the sole reason for their actions.

Gendered necropolitics offers an expanded view of the politics of death that also includes the perspective of Queer Studies, since '[t]hinking through necropolitics on the terrain of queer critique brings into view everyday death worlds, from the perhaps more expected sites of death making … to the ordinary and completely normalized violence of the market' (Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco, 2014: 2). While most analyses of queer necropolitics focus on current affairs, deaths attributable to sexual orientation and gender identity are certainly not unique to our contemporary era. In fact, homosexual panic in Wilde and Joyce's time can be understood a reaction to the institutionalised homophobia and violence, which deeply affected homosexual people's behaviour and daily lives.

Homosexual panic contains necropolitical implications that are difficult to ignore. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, distinct categories like homosexual and heterosexual, as understood today, were not recognised in the same way. Homophobia was institutionalised, becoming a 'legal measure for social control

after 1885' (Jackson, 1999: 88) reflected in legislation such as Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 in the United Kingdom. Homosexual relationships qualified as acts of 'gross indecency' and those convicted of this offence, as Wilde was, faced imprisonment 'for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour' (1885). This legislation was a response to the social rejection following 'sex scandals' such as the Dublin Castle scandal of 1884, in which people were judged in terms of indecency and sodomy (see Walshe, 2005: 40–41), or the Cleveland Street Affair in London 1889, which 'introduced a heated atmosphere of hysteria' (Frankel quoted in Wilde, 2011b: 9). These scandals spread a wave of sexual blackmail which caused homosexual and bisexual people to become 'aware of their identity, perhaps for the first time' (Jackson, 1999: 89) and then, silenced with fear of discovery.

This aversion towards dissident sexualities and practices raised anxiogenic responses in the population who practiced prohibited sexual acts, as social rejection was accompanied by legal consequences. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coins the term 'homosexual panic' in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) to describe these anxieties, 'a structural residue of terrorist potential, of *blackmailability*, of Western maleness through the leverage of homophobia' (1990: 20). Other scholars such as Joseph Valente (1994), Patricia Smith (1995), and Roberta Jackson (1999) have employed other terms such as 'gay panic' and 'lesbian panic' to describe environments in fiction where characters are unable to acknowledge their sexual desires due to their fear of losing their social status and reputation.

Under the effects of homosexual panic, homosexual and bisexual people were forced to conceal their identities and maintain heterosexual appearances. In the case of Joyce, it is noticeable how he suffered the consequences of this ambient homosexual panic and was careful with his words when writing about Wilde. According to Margot Norris, '[t]he young Joyce brothers were … disturbed by the sex scandals that had shaken the Irish political and literary landscape during their youth' (1999: 64). Despite Joyce's complaints about the veiled homosexual connotations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (*SL* 233), he avoided this conversation through euphemisms and by not commenting on Wilde's sexuality in his 1909 review of the Trieste production of *Salomé*. Joyce euphemistically named Wilde's sexuality a 'sad mania' and 'strange problem' (*OCPW* 148, 150) and attributed it to 'the logical and inevitable product of the Anglo-Saxon college and university system, a system of seclusion and secrecy' (*OCPW* 150)—an educational system he himself experienced.

While Joyce criticised Wilde in 1909 for not having the 'courage' to 'develop the allusions' (*SL* 96) to homosexuality, modern readers will understand that Wilde was forced to censor the novel's homoeroticism in an attempt to avoid the legal and social

persecution that would soon ruin him. Indeed, 'male homosexual panic [anxiety over what is, what is not, who is, who is not] became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement' (Sedgwick, 1990: 185). The maintenance of the heterosexual appearance becomes a priority that justifies acts of violences when these heterosexual and masculine images are threatened. Sedgwick explains that the contradictions between encouraging male bonds while avoiding homosocial desires results in 'acute manipulability, through the fear of one's own "homosexuality"' and a 'reservoir of potential for *violence* caused by the self-ignorance that this regime constitutively enforces' (1990: 186). Since homosexual individuals were forbidden from living as their true identities and vulnerable to social rejection and legal prosecution, it can be understood that homosexual panic is a consequence of necropolitics, because the lives of these individuals existed in a state akin to the 'living dead'.

Institutional homophobia, reflected in measures such as the Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, depicted homosexual people as criminals and encouraged practices such as sexual blackmail, proving a necropolitical power that sustained social control and supervision. Victims of these legal measures were immersed in a state of constant insecurity, anxiety and fear, with their overall wellbeing threatened and 'living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*' (Mbembe, 2019: 92). Joyce acknowledges Wilde's 'living dead' status in his review of *Salomé*, comparing Wilde, prosecuted under the 1885 Act for 'gross indecency', to an undead son of Ossian who met 'his *civil death* while sitting crowned with vine leave at a table and discussing Plato' (*OCPW* 148, emphasis added). As Margot Gayle Backus discusses in their contribution to this collection, more than his literal death or incarceration, it was Wilde's social exile and the punitive removal of his children, his 'civil death', that Joyce saw as 'stripping from Wilde that which rendered him recognizably human' (2024: 7). In *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, the actions of queer necropolitics are noticeable in Basil Hallward's attitude and consequent murder, as well as in the suicide cases of Dorian Gray's lovers.

Necropolitics and the Dehumanisation of Basil Hallward

The Picture of Dorian Gray depicts the unrequited romantic love of Basil Hallward for Dorian Gray. Basil Hallward, a painter, has to conceal his feelings not only to preserve their friendship, but also because of his homosexual panic, which makes him wary of his actions and words. Basil fears being judged and condemned in legal terms because '[g]iven the threat of prosecution, any such acts of male–male desire were driven underground … [in] the interest of self-preservation' (Cameron, 2022: 566). This is why Basil codifies his infatuation in artistic terms in Chapter I of *The Picture* until he

realises that his 'secret' is in good hands with Lord Henry Wotton. Basil goes from explaining that Dorian is just 'a motive in art' to mentioning all the 'extraordinary romance' (Wilde, 2011b: 85) he put into the portrait.

The exchange between Basil and Lord Henry is possible because '[b]oth older men live in a network of male friendship that ramify through the novel' (Dellamora, 1988: 29), which also helps Lord Henry maintain his reputation and conceal his sexuality. Homosexual panic encourages the use of veiled language, which is necessary not only for these two characters to protect themselves from public judgment, but also as part of Wilde's strategy as a writer to evade legal repercussions. The level of codification in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* allows readers to perform suspicious readings, because the book 'managed to suggest, without manifesting in any immediate way, a surface so seductive that we take its symptomatic offerings as inevitable, moving toward the depths it must conceal' (Bowser, 2022: 77). However, Wilde failed to fully hide the novel's homosexual implications, whose passages were used as evidence against him in court.

Basil attempts to confess his feelings to Dorian in Chapter VII and emphasises 'what it cost [him]' (Wilde, 2011a: 80) to paint the portrait, in an attempt to be more explicit. The risks and consequences of being open that Basil tries to avoid are the ones later suffered by Wilde during his sentence. Wilde's sentence, which consisted of two years of imprisonment, contains necropolitical implications because of social stigma and the insalubrious conditions of prisons. In the words of Sarah Lamble:

> Imprisonment itself instantiates the conditions of social, political and civil death and also includes—particularly when considering the health conditions within prison and the premature death rates of prisoner and ex-prisoner populations—biological death (Lamble, 2014: 154–155).

Basil's fear of prosecution and his insecurities about revealing his feelings can be translated as a fear of punishment or death. Death becomes an inescapable necropolitical force because, even if he avoids legal consequences, the collapse of Basil's heteronormative appearance would condemn his reputation as a professional painter, leading him to social isolation and a fate similar to that of Dorian's close friends.

In Chapter X, a list of names related to young men who left the country or committed suicide after becoming intimate with Dorian exemplifies how some homosexuals preferred suicide to punishment from the law (see Sanna, 2012: 31). Mbembe argues that 'suicide brutally interrupts every dynamic of subjection and all possibility of recognition' (Mbembe, 2019: 49), so it is not only preferred to avoid legal, social, and economic consequences, but also a means of ending the constant state of anxiety that degrades their quality of life. The fact that there are several victims (including, as I

will discuss later, women like Sibyl Vane) points to how '[t]he deaths of lives made unliveable are understood to be an issue of a structural and political kind, rather than an individualistic and solely psychopathological one' (Alasuutari, 2021: 608).

In this atmosphere of facing the dual threats of civil and literal death, Basil warns Dorian Gray in order to protect both his reputation and his life. Dorian Gray is aware that if his servants discovered the covered painting, they could blackmail him and be in Allan Campbell's shoes. However, Dorian's hidden portrait and social status allow him to effectively conceal his corruption, since 'the legal definition and subsequent prosecution of blackmail worked ultimately to protect the privileged from extortion by the lower classes' (Cameron, 2023: 567). Therefore, rather than being cautious like Basil, Dorian behaves recklessly because he is '[p]rotected from the social consequences of his immoral actions by his unmarked face, which perpetually offers a false image of innocence' (Bowser, 2022: 69).

Despite his active participation in homosexual affairs, Dorian is not immune to homosexual panic. His panic is triggered by Basil's insistence on seeing the portrait again, which would reveal Dorian's secret. The portrait, which also embodies Basil's feelings, is a source of homosexual panic for Basil as well because he, the artist, 'cannot control the reflection of his feelings in his work, but can only try to control the work's fate' (Abraham, 2009: 62). Exhibiting the portrait to the public would open their relationship 'to public criticism or gossip' (Gordon, 2013: 51), but showing it to Basil becomes proof of Dorian's dishonesty and aversion towards him for representing Dorian's real self. The sudden disgust and hatred that Dorian feels towards Basil after seeing the picture resembles real-world examples involving men who 'lose some measure of self-control if another man makes a pass at him' (Margolin, 2021: 13). By killing his friend, Dorian eliminates the source of his anxiety while also reinforcing the manhood and the heteronormative appearance he must maintain for his survival.

Dorian switches roles with Basil by making himself the victim and Basil the offender for the sake of his own security, since 'perfect security … requires not only complete systematic surveillance but also a policy of cleansing' (Mbembe, 2019: 101). Becoming a surveillant himself by blackmailing Allan Campbell, Dorian can avoid detection by participating in the legal and social suppression of deviance, which, in the case of blackmail, 'protected the gentlemen … [from] the working-class youth who thus, implicitly, became the real (sexual) offender' (Cameron, 2023: 567). In this sense, Dorian also contributes to Mbembe's conception of dehumanising 'manhunts', where individuals 'are marked and ostracized to the extent that they are no longer thought of as bodies of flesh and blood like our own' (Mbembe, 2019: 101). To Dorian, Basil becomes 'the *thing* that had been sitting at the table' (Wilde, 2011b: 240, emphasis added), a nonhuman object.

By removing human traits in Basil, he ceases to be considered a person, and therefore, someone who will be missed and mourned. Judith Butler writes that 'if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note' (Butler, 2004: 34). Basil becomes a literal disposable body that Dorian delivers to Alan as if taking out the trash. Because Basil constitutes one of many targets of the necropolitical system, then his death becomes unavoidable. Dorian, by becoming one of the executors and surveillants of this structure, worsens his corruption while also carefully hiding it. However, Dorian finally kills himself when he tears the portrait with a knife because the portrait represents the only evidence left of his crimes and ultimately it would make his innocence lost credibility.

Dorian's suicide, the death or relocation of his lovers, and Basil's murder, are the result of queer necropolitics where many factors, such as homosexual desire and class differences, damage those who are Othered by those who have better resources to protect themselves. Even though veiled language and escaping represent strategies to avoid legal consequences, characters cannot escape death since ultimately their lives are not suitable to the conditions of the established functioning society. While Dorian Gray prevents himself from a living dead status thanks to his social position and actions involving the murder of Basil Hallward, in 'A Painful Case' by James Joyce involves strategies of isolation in order to protect James Duffy from a system that rejects him.

The Painful Case of James Duffy

The threatening atmosphere of homosexual panic in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* finds an equivalent in James Joyce's 'A Painful Case', one of the short stories in *Dubliners*. The consequences of homosexual panic in the story have been demonstrated by Roberta Jackson, who reads James Duffy as a closeted homosexual man affected by post-Wilde-trials trials paranoia because 'should Duffy be exposed acting on his desire for men, he could receive two years hard labor as Wilde did' (Jackson, 1999: 87). Jackson provides many arguments supporting a homosexual interpretation of this story, including the fact that Joyce was reading the Italian translation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* while revising it. For example, she describes James Duffy's isolation as more than a neurotic symptom because of 'his need to distance himself from the homophobia of the patriarchy' (Jackson, 1999: 90). James Duffy, like Basil Howard, is self-conscious because he fears being reported.

James Duffy's strict routine, writes Jackson, coincides 'with the regularity of someone under surveillance' (Jackson, 1999: 91). Duffy chooses isolation in order to protect himself, deciding 'to live as far as possible from the city' (*D* 103) in a self-imposed 'civil death' to avoid detection and taking precautionary measures that indicate a high level

of alertness. Surveillance serves a crucial tool in necropolitics for maintaining social control and selecting targets, because 'colonial occupation not only amounts to control, surveillance, and separation but is also synonymous with isolation' (Mbembe, 2019: 81). Duffy's lack of social life is rooted in homosexual panic and a fear of discovery. In turn-of-the-century Dublin, surveillance was a mechanism for the exercise of colonial power, because 'Ireland served both as a laboratory for testing out modes of visual control … [and] as a site where difference had to be made visible' (Baylis, 2009: 27). Living within these circumstances, Duffy's isolation reflects how he does not feel safe enough within any social circle, since he may inadvertently reveal himself as Other. Despite his self-enforced solitude, Duffy tentatively attempts to blend in through participation in the Irish Socialist Party and an ill-fated friendship with Emily Sinico.

James Duffy eventually stops attending the meetings of the Irish Socialist Party because he realises that political engagement promises 'no hope for the radical change he needs that would make other bonds possible' (Jackson, 1999: 91). He is aware that political authorities do not collaborate in ceasing legal measures and social discrimination regarding his sexuality: 'No social revolution, he told her, would be likely to strike Dublin for some centuries' (*D* 95). This unsafe social circle includes his relationship with Emily Sinico. Due to the confessional nature of their conversations, it is plausible that Duffy tried to be open about his sexuality with Emily but failed due to a misunderstanding. Emily mistakenly believes that her closeness with Duffy is a courtship that will save her from a meaningless marriage because he has not rejected instances of intimacy, such as when 'they spent evenings alone' (*D* 96). Margot Norris argues that '[t]he entire narrative leading up to this moment has conditioned the reader to expect an adultery story' (1999: 65). Therefore, when Emily makes an advance, Duffy is surprised that she did not understand his true feelings: 'Her interpretation of his words disillusioned him' (*D* 96).

As in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the proscription of homosexuality is a mechanism for necropolitics, which, in the case of 'A Painful Case', isolates James Duffy. Although having an affair with Emily Sinico would both bring companionship and contribute to his heterosexual disguise, it still would pose a risk by establishing a relationship with someone who could potentially betray him. This scenario is likely, considering that continued intimacy with Emily would escalate sexual relations, which he would have to reject. In a sentence usually interpreted as an awareness of the prohibition of homosexuality (Jackson, 2000; Norris, 1999), Duffy's epiphany also reflects the impossibility of friendship with Emily: 'Love between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse' (*D* 97). Even when he wonders

what he could have done to save her life, he realises they would have lived a lie: 'He could not have carried on a comedy of deception with her; he could not have lived with her openly' (*D* 101). Due to the 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Jackson, 1999: 92) that overshadows their friendship, Duffy's safest—but also most detrimental—way to keep up appearances is 'break off their intercourse' (*D* 96).

In order to ensure his safety, James Duffy has to fit his identity into the context of domestic masculinity, where '[a] respectable man of good character ... was defined by the regularity of his habits and the status of his connections' (Cocks, 2003: 118). While his home and his habit of going to concerts could be considered his refuges, his alertness extends to his personal library and his personal diary. The library functions as a traditional and heterosexual display cabinet to reinforce his public image. Among his named books are the complete Wordsworth on the bottom shelf, *The Gay Science* by Nietzsche and a notebook, probably his personal diary, with the title *Maynooth Catechism* 'sewn into the cloth cover' (*D* 92) on the top shelf. The placement of the notebook in such an inaccessible high place suggests Duffy's intention to make it look like a book that no visitor would ever have interest in looking. While Norris and Jackson read James Duffy as a closeted gay man, his home is not a place where he can be his real self; his library exhibits titles that would not raise suspicions for outsiders, making it an extension of his 'closet'. Duffy's maintenance of this responsible, heterosexual, Catholic façade even extends to his personal diaries, where he continues to conceal his sexuality.

While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* employs veiled language to speak the unspeakable, James Duffy opts for omission. Duffy is careful about what he writes because, as Jackson has argued, he 'must remain at some distance from his voice since he cannot risk the consequences of its full, uncloseted presence without being vulnerable to detection' (Jackson, 1999: 94). Duffy writes a diary that contains short sentences and has 'an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose *in his mind* from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense' (*D* 93, emphasis added). This grammatical distancing suggests an effort to dissociate himself from his thoughts, just as he distances himself from his own body: 'He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances' (*D* 93). He cannot grant himself subjectivity, cannot write in the first-person.

There is no evidence that the sentences Duffy crafts in his mind are potential drafts for the sentences in his diary. However, the disconnection between himself and the voice from his writings becomes clear in the narrator's description of the writing process, where 'a sentence was inscribed from time to time' (*D* 92). Both the use of the third grammatical person and the passive voice are attempts to disassociate himself from the writing. Emily Sinico also inquires 'why did he not write out his thoughts' (*D*

95), revealing that the ideas that were brought up during their conversations are not part of the diary. He also writes 'seldom' (*D* 97) once he stops talking to Emily. Duffy takes his time to write and when he does, is careful not insert himself in the content he writes, and whatever sentences he takes down, he also removes himself as the author to avoid being the target of criticism if his thoughts are ever read.

Although he represses his voice and omits himself from the content of his writings, these grammatical techniques might be the only way Duffy can acknowledge his desire. In a compilation of sentences, there is a possibility that something like '[l]ove between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse' (*D* 97) could go unnoticed. If noticed, Duffy could excuse himself because there is nothing wrong in the content, just what was considered the rule regarding interpersonal relationships. For himself, however, this sentence encapsulates his conflict with Emily Sinico and the cause of his isolation, so it is a way of embracing his sexual identity while also carefully obscuring it.

Duffy's choices ultimately prove detrimental to his well-being because they do not bring him happiness: 'He gnawed the rectitude of his life; he felt that he had been outcast from life's feast' (*D* 101). He realises while watching the two secret lovers in the Magazine Hill that, instead of being fearful, he could have pursued a homosexual romance secretly and that he could have been more understanding with Emily. The narrator of 'A Painful Case' compares Duffy to a priest who reads the prayers *Secreto*, the same word Basil uses to describe his romance, perhaps indicating how both characters must keep their feelings a secret. However, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* social connections are what guarantee the safety of the characters. Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton's friendship hides their sexuality while also exhibiting normative homosocial bonds. Dorian Gray who, in addition of the power of the portrait, similarly possesses an upper-class background that offers him immunity towards threats like blackmail. James Duffy is an easier target for criticism and marginalisation due to being a colonial subject, but in the end, his choices drive him into a deeper state of solitude and isolation.

Duffy's isolation and secretiveness to hide his sexuality under colonial surveillance are a product of a homosexual panic that impacts his quality of life and forces him into a living dead status. After Emily Sinico's death, Duffy is certain that '[h]is life would be lonely too until he, too, died, ceased to exist, became a memory—if anyone remembered him' (*D* 101). His lack of meaningful connections makes his life no different than if he was dead because, like Basil's death, Duffy dying would be meaningless in a system where '[i]ndividuals who do not fulfil the conditions of the normative idea of the sovereign subject … tend to be ignored in dominant stories of death, loss, grief and mourning' (Radomska

et al., 2020: 86). Despite working hard to keep up appearances, there is nobody to witness Duffy's efforts and, in the case of Duffy becoming Emily's lover, this relationship would have been prejudicial to the couple for being adulterous. Duffy, then, whether alone or in a lavender relationship with Emily, is condemned to live a life that does not bring him any type of satisfaction and that nobody will remember. However, for Emily it would have been the same because '[e]vidently she had been unfit to live' (*D* 100).

Gendered Necropolitics in the Suicides of Emily Sinico and Sibyl Vane

In both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and 'A Painful Case', a female character commits suicide: Sibyl Vane and Emily Sinico. While their actions have traditionally been read as overemotional responses to romantic rejection, I am instead interested in the necropolitical nature of their circumstances prior to their failed romantic relationships with queer-coded men.

There are similarities between both works; the rejection plot constitutes a strong common aspect. Both Dorian Gray and James Duffy become disappointed toward Sibyl Vane and Emily Sinico once the women reveal their romantic intentions. After discovering their deaths—both announced in newspapers as accidents—Dorian and Duffy regret their actions and even take the blame for the women's suicides. Duffy asks himself 'why had he sentenced her to death?' (*D* 101) while Dorian says, 'so I have murdered Sibyl Vane' (Wilde, 2011a: 65). Since the narration depicts only the male characters' reactions after the fact, these deaths are reduced to a very limited point of view that does not represent the broader difficulties that women had to face in this era. I propose that the deaths of Emily and Sibyl could be attributed to factors of gendered necropolitics.

Western women in the late-19th and early-20th centuries were subjected to discrimination that impacted their quality of life. The increased presence of women in public spaces relegated them to strict traditional gender roles as a result of the earlier Victorian anxieties over the apparent fall of gender-separated spaces because, according to the views in the era, 'those women that wanted to usurp male areas and that found the courage to release their desires were going against nature' (Rossi, 2019: 1). Among a myriad of circumstances, working-class women worked under insecure and unequal conditions while managing domestic duties at home, so 'relatively few women had the means or time that made much leisure possible' (Parratt, 2007: 25). The influence of this gender separation was such that it also shaped perceptions of suicide, justifying anomalies in women's conduct. Since suicide was considered a masculine behaviour, female suicides were perceived as a 'deviation from their prescribed gender role' (Deacon, 2015: 19). Unfavourable circumstances impacted the quality of lives of women throughout the Empire, and in the case of Sibyl Vane and Emily Sinico, there

could be an interpretation where they were under the effects of 'slow death' before ending their lives.

Slow death, used by Mbembe to describe the conditions of colonial camps, is the result of 'exhaustion, labor, or abandonment and indifference' (Mbembe, 2019: 127). Scholars such as Lauren Berlant describe slow death as 'the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence' (Berlant, 2007: 754). During Joyce's childhood, he witnessed the women in his life enduring social positions and roles that were exhausting and unfair for the sake of maintaining their families. In a letter to Nora Barnacle from 1904, he describes his mother's death as systemic:

> My mother was slowly killed by my father's ill treatment, by years of trouble, by my cynical frankness of conduct. When I looked at her face as she lay in her coffin … I understood that I was looking on the face of a victim and I cursed the system which had made her a victim (*LII* 48).

Joyce's mother was not the only victim of these gender dynamics, as the systemic nature of strict gender roles positioned women under adverse conditions. These contextual aspects support an interpretation in which Sibyl Vane and Emily Sinico's suicides stem from more than just romantic rejection. During the Victorian era, female suicides were often associated with heartbreak, obscuring other possible motivations. Deborah Deacon explains that '[e]ven in cases where a female suicide had not been seduced and abandoned, motivations for her death were still rooted in explanations of disappointment in love and affection' (2015: 27). Therefore, it is essential to explore alternative perspectives.

In the case of Sibyl Vane, her suicide could be tied to societal expectations and vulnerabilities in her working environment. As a 17-year-old actress of a third-rate theatre company in East London with whom Dorian Gray falls in love, her roles usually include tragic heroines. But when she discovers what love means in real life, she is unable to continue portraying those feelings on a stage and therefore loses all her charm. After giving an uninspiring performance, Dorian becomes so disappointed that he ends their relationship. Sibyl then commits suicide, apparently due to a broken heart. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does not provide many details about Sibyl's personal circumstances, but the extended version of the text contains additional chapters that bring her into clearer focus. Sibyl comes from an impoverished family with an absent father and an elder brother who is leaving for Australia. Although the traditional interpretation of Sibyl's suicide is that it results from emotional devastation, her working-class background and

precarious profession could have played a significant role in her decision. It is evident that Sibyl's family is struggling economically and that her and her mother's income are not enough to support them. While Sibyl insists on the importance of marrying for love over money, her mother and her brother ultimately accept her relationship with Dorian because he comes from an upper-class background, and they assumed he will help with the family debts. However, prior to their engagement, the family is highly dependent on Mr Isaacs, the theatre manager.

In the 19th century, the theatre was hierarchical institution without a union to help actors with establishing a minimum wage or receive contracts (see Holledge, 1981: 13). It makes sense, then, that Sibyl's mother is protective of their relationship with Mr Isaacs, since he is the only one who can secure acting jobs for her and Sibyl. This level of control from theatre managers was common at the time, but particularly problematic for women because they were often cast 'according to the whims of the managers' (Holledge, 1981: 22). Sibyl's family not only lacks financial security but also control over their income because it is regulated through Mr Isaacs's management. Christopher Nassaar explores the role of Mr Isaacs in the book, comparing the anti-Semitic caricature to the Jewish Daniel from *Daniel Derondo* and Shakespeare's negative portrayal of Judaism, and concludes that this character 'lends money to the Vanes not out of goodness but in order to increase his hold on them' (Nassaar, 2003: 34). In fact, Dorian Gray tells Lord Henry that '[Sibyl] is bound to him [Mr Isaac] for three years—at least for two years and eight months—from the present time' (Wilde, 2011a: 38). This dynamic can be understood in the context of the necroeconomy, where 'the worker—whose body becomes an object of domination in the market—exchanges the performing body with the capitalist, and is subjected to the capitalist's control' (Zigarovich, 2023: 249). Sibyl's family cannot survive without Mr Isaac's support, and the women in the family are content with acting jobs because, in the world of formal and waged labour, women were 'ghettoized into unskilled, insecure, low-paid occupations' (Pratt, 2007: 25).

The financial insecurity of this profession was also accompanied by social prejudices. Sibyl's brother James wants his mother and sister to quit acting, likely due to the working conditions described above but also because of the negative and sexist perceptions attached to the profession. In some cases, fathers threw their daughters out of their houses when they learnt of their acting careers because '[a]lthough the average middle-class father accepted, by the end of the century, that the theatre was suitable entertainment for his daughter, he reacted with horror at the thought of her becoming an actress' (Holledge, 1981: 10). The profession was associated with sexual promiscuity and prostitution, so actresses often faced social stigmatisation when in fact, 'the contradiction between their own sexual ignorance and the prevalent belief

that they were promiscuous often encouraged the actresses into early marriages' (Holledge, 1981: 16). In the case of Sybil Vane, the 17-year-old complains about how her manager speaks to her with the implication that Mr Isaacs 'has sexual designs on Sibyl' (Nassaar, 2003: 29), which was probably an uncomfortable work environment for her.

Under these precarious and intimidating conditions, Sibyl Vane's choice to marry into an upper-class environment constitute an opportunity to escape an unsafe profession. However, it is her acting talent that defines her social circle and lifestyle. Once she delivers the subpar performance, she potentially faces losing her job, being rejected by her mother, and being forced to work in a position under far harsher conditions, such as in a workhouse. Carol Margaret Davison describes how 'Necropower was the order of the day in the workhouse. Entry into the workhouse for the destitute poor, or paupers, served as a type of figurative death' (2023: 258). Even though her mother insists that she has her support because she was also abandoned (in this case, by Sibyl's father), one of the problematic consequences of gendered necropolitics is that its power extends to all the social circles of its victims.

Under the circumstances of bringing shame to the family after her performance and being rejected by Dorian Gray, Sibyl could have made the decision of committing suicide in order to avoid the consequences of being rejected by her family and being seen as a 'fallen woman'. In fact, her brother James does not hesitate about avenging her death by trying to kill Dorian Gray, an action that can be interpreted as a way of restoring the family's honour since '[male honour] consists of safeguarding the female honour and making sure that what belongs to him—or the family—is not taken away or sullied by someone else' (Frevert, 2011: 68). Thus, although Sibyl Vane commits suicide the same night she is rejected by Dorian Gray, the circumstances described above could be seen as aggravating factors in Sibyl's decision. Her working-class background, the risks that acting jobs posed to women, and the necropolitical net of social abandonment that women faced when their actions were contrary to family expectations must have been difficult to deal with.

In the case of Emily Sinico, her life resembles Sibyl Vane's in certain aspects, but it is affected by the circumstances of early-20th-century colonial Ireland. Emily Sinico is a married woman in her late thirties from a middle-class background who pursues a romantic relationship with James Duffy, a man she meets at a concert in the Rotunda. Four years after Duffy rejects her, Emily commits suicide by stepping in front of a tram at Sydney Parade Station. The traditional interpretation of these events is that Emily could not get over Duffy's rejection—a view supported by his guilt over her death—but other incidents in those four years might have influenced her decision. Among them, Emily's realisation about the adulterous nature of the affair could have impacted negatively on her social role.

Had Emily Sinico committed adultery, she would have been harshly criticised—particularly after Charles Stewart Parnell's affair with Katharine O'Shea brought the nation into political and social turmoil. Margot Norris establishes several similarities between Duffy and Emily's relationship and Parnell's affair, such as how 'Duffy, like Parnell, gains access to the Sinico home as a family friend, and Captain Sinico, like Captain O'Shea, is frequently absent from home and judged by Duffy to be indifferent to his wife' (1999: 66). Emily is unhappy in her marriage, but her affair with Duffy would have damaged and risk her social accommodated position due to Catholic Ireland's discourse on public morality. As an adulterous woman, she would have been deemed unfit for her role as a mother. Her husband, Captain Sinico, might have sought some form of punishment or restitution for the infidelity. Therefore, pursuing this affair would have not improved her living conditions.

In the four years following James Duffy's rejection, Emily's habits and routine change as she realises, like Duffy, that she is destined to be alone forever: 'Now that she was gone he understood how lonely her life must have been, sitting night after night alone in that room' (*D* 101). Among those changes, it is notable that, in the news report about her death, both her daughter and her husband agree that she had become an alcoholic. Captain Sinico highlights that Emily's drinking negatively impacted their relationship, which had been good 'until about two years ago when his wife began to be rather intemperate in her habits' (*D* 99). Emily Sinico's depiction as an alcoholic woman is rare because 'the stigma attaching to the female alcoholic is greater than that attaching to the male alcoholic' (Lilienfeld, 1999: 6). Drinking was considered a masculine behaviour and irreconcilable with a woman's family role as a caretaker. In fact, temperance leagues of the era, such as the Total Abstinence League of the Sacred Heart, were initially restricted to women because 'on the wives, mothers, and daughters of a nation, all confess, a nation's weal or woe largely depends' (Qtd. in Malcolm, 1982: 12). According to Conor Reidy, the 'expectation of higher standards of behaviour' placed on women 'resulted in greater levels of outrage when women deviated from [the] norms laid down by society' (Reidy, 2014: 156). Thus, while Sibyl's family could have rejected her for her failed engagement and loss of income, Emily's husband seems to have been dismissive to Emily rather than sympathetic with her, and likely would not have hesitated to leave her due to her addiction. In this context, Emily is not only a victim of gendered necropolitics, but also of the necropolitical complications that addiction entails.

In her thesis *Psychoanalysis, Biopolitics, and the Ethics of Addicted Desire*, Blaise Bayno's explains the following:

> At the level of the body, the addict engages with that which is immediately pleasurable to the point of physical and psychological decay … At the level of the Law, narcotic addiction implicates the addict as a figure of criminality (Bayno, 2022: 5).

Emily Sinico's loneliness drives her to drink, which subsequently causes her to neglect her family and likely feel guilty about not fulfilling her familial role. While Blaise Bayno discusses narcotic addiction in relation to criminality, it is important to note that, during this era it was 'believed that between 60 and 80 percent of the crime in Ireland were alcohol related' (Qtd. in Kilcommins, 2004: 21) and '[d]runken mothers were, therefore, more likely to be detained in prisons and reformatories than their husbands' (Reidy, 2014: 156).

In the news report about her death, it is revealed that Emily 'had been in the habit of crossing the [tram] lines late at night' (*D* 98). It is possible that her alcoholism has also led her to cross other 'lines' regarding illegalities in public spaces. Blaise Bayno explains that when an addict starts to present suicidal behaviours, 'the subject becomes a figure of impossibility that can only be understood and managed through extensive medicalizing rhetoric with which to tame the addict or with juridical measures to extinguish the addict as subject' (Bayno, 2022: 14–15). While at this time there was no formal medical treatment for alcoholism (see Reidy, 2014: 60), there were certified reformatories that would tend to the needs of their inmates and assist them in their road to recovery. The threat of imprisonment or confinement in a reformatory may have been a motivating factor for Emily Sinico's final decision. Her alcoholism affects her both physiologically and socially, intensifying her already difficult and solitary life.

While Emily Sinico drinks and leaves the house late at night to buy spirits, her daughter Mary grows distant. Scholars such as Mary Lowe-Evans considers Mary Sinico to be 'the proximate course of her mother's demise' (1995: 398) due to the loss of support Emily suffers once her daughter sides with her father. As seen in the case Sibyl Vane and her mother, gendered necropolitics withdraws women from their family spaces when they fail to comply with societal standards. Mary Sinico acts as 'a facilitator of patriarchal arrangements' (Lowe-Evans, 1995: 399) by cooperating with her father to convince Emily to join a temperance league because Mary and Captain Sinico 'seem to side together in trying to get rid of the burden of a (morally) diseased woman' (Aláez Corral, 2024: 170). It is also important to note that Emily Sinico could have given the impression of being sexually active by going out late at night, because of the belief that there was 'a connection between a woman's suicidal tendencies and her sexuality' (Nicoletti, 2007: 32). Under these circumstances, where Emily is completely alone and without any support from her daughter or husband, she could have committed suicide to avoid imprisonment, a reformatory, or even institutions like the Magdalene laundries.

In Ireland, Magdalene laundries were religious institutions that detained women in order to 'rescue' them from lives that were considered sinful or deviated from the Catholic doctrine. The dreadful consequences of the treatment of women in these institutions are still palpable today, and it is thanks to organisations such as Justice for Magdalenes Research that the voices of victims and survivors are being heard. In 'Biopolitics in the Laundry', S.E Wilmer explores the necropolitical conditions of these spaces and draws comparisons such as how what 'Mbembe refers to the "triple loss" suffered by slaves could equally apply to the Magdalenes' (Wilmer, 2016: 260). This triple loss consists of 'the loss of a "home", loss of rights over one's body, and loss of political status' (Mbembe, 2019: 74–75). In 1895, political parties such as the Irish Parliamentary Party ensured that the Magdalene asylums were not endangered through legislative measures, which guaranteed the exploitation of these women with impunity, despite MPs presenting evidence about forced labour and related abuses committed in the laundries (see McGettrick, 2021: 9).

While there is no mention of the Magdalene laundries in 'A Painful Case', they appear in another story in *Dubliners*, 'Clay'. In 'James Joyce's Magdalenes', Marian Eide provides the context for the Magdalene laundry in 'Clay' and explains that 'Joyce was aware of the exploitation of fallen women in the Magdalene Laundries and he may have suspected the difficult conditions in which they worked' (Eide, 2011: 62). With regard to the women incarcerated in the laundries, Claire MacGettrick explains that:

> The object of 'rescue' was the prostitute or 'wayward' female who was regarded as 'fallen' even from the status of 'woman', that idealized paragon who was without sexual drive or sexual experience apart from a dutiful response to facilitating her husband's desire (2021: 8).

While the text does not suggest that Emily Sinico might be sent to a Magdalene laundry, they would be one of the few living arrangements available to her as a 'fallen woman' if she were convicted of adultery. Even though it is not certain that Emily Sinico or her family know about the Magdalene laundries, there are certain details that point that they could have been aware of them. For example, living near Sydney Parade, the family would have been relatively close to the Donnybrook Magdalene Laundry and Dublin by Lamplight, the latter mentioned in 'Clay' (Cullen: 2019: 19). In addition, perhaps Mary Sinico in the news report mentioned a temperance league in order to avoid bringing up the topic of the laundry. As a middle-aged woman like Maria from 'Clay', Emily Sinico would not have many job opportunities if she left the family home, so a Magdalene laundry would unfortunately be suitable place to 'rescue' from her vices.

In the end, Emily Sinico's actions align with the actions of many 'fallen women', who became associated with suicide because 'Victorians believed that a woman who lost her purity was a "fallen woman" whose logical path would be one of "madness or death"' (Deacon, 2015: 21). Emily's behaviour is caused by her loneliness, which escalates with Duffy's rejection and her family becoming distant from her. Emily then experiences a slow death until she finally commits suicide because, among many reasons that exacerbate her unhappiness, she would likely be sent incarcerating reformatory or social institution.

Conclusion

Necropolitics is a theoretical framework currently used to analyse matters such as the war on drugs, the climate crisis, and incarceration systems, but it can also be useful to explore certain social dynamics in texts where the effects of late-stage capitalism and the first signs of neoliberalism started to emerge. Mbembe refers to Frantz Fanon to conclude that 'the only subject is a living one' (Mbembe, 2019: 5) in matters of colonial power and war, but this paper demonstrated that factors of necropolitical nature such as homosexual panic and gender imbalances impacted the lives of individuals who did not conform to the norms.

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorin Gray* depicts a necropolitical environment where homosexual individuals face exile, suicide, or murder. The suicides of Dorian Gray's lovers and murder of Basil Hallward are both consequences of system that encouraged the marginalisation of those in same-sex relationships through mechanisms such as the 1895 Criminal Law Amendment Act and blackmail. Homosexual panic then contributed to silencing those whose sexual identities were at risk of being affected by these measures. The loss of homosexual lives becomes an inevitable outcome in this oppressive and controlling environment.

In James Joyce's 'A Painful Case', James Duffy's life is shaped by the necropolitical forces that govern colonial Dublin, where surveillance and social control impose isolation for those who deviate from societal norms. His hyperawareness of being watched, his omission of personal truths in his writing, and his cautious distance from social circles are signs of homosexual panic and the fear of being exposed. Unlike Dorian Gray, who controls his desires thanks to his social position and strategic alliances, James Duffy lacks the protection of wealth, class, or social networks, rendering him more vulnerable to marginalisation. His realisation that he could have sought human connection with Emily Sinico only deepens his sense of exile and confirms that his efforts to maintain a respectable façade have condemned him to a forgotten existence. In the end, since Mr Duffy is denied the right to openly live and love, he is doomed to

live in a living dead status, 'to inhabit as their skin and their truth the fiction that the Other had produced in their regard' (Mbembe, 2019: 5). This is the root for his solitude: 'He felt that he was alone' (*D* 102).

Finally, it is the contention of this paper that the tragic suicides of Sibyl Vane and Emily Sinico should not be solely attributed to romantic rejection but must be understood within the broader framework of gendered necropolitics. Sibyl's reliance on an economically and sexually exploitative theatre industry due to her family's financial uncertainty placed immense pressure on her, makes Dorian Gray's rejection not just an emotional blow but a deeper disruption to her daily life. Similarly, Emily Sinico's social isolation, struggles with alcoholism, and deviation from societal norms led to exclusion from her family, which ultimately proved fatal. The respective suicides of these characters, traditionally interpreted as mere heartbreak-driven despair, reveal the oppressive structures that dominated women's lives in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The slow death they endured—through economic hardship, social marginalisation, and familial rejection—highlights how gendered necropolitics systematically diminished their quality of life. Recognising these deeper influences allows for a more nuanced reading of their deaths, in which the focus shifts from personal tragedy to structural injustice.

The application of necropolitics to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Joyce's *Dubliners* reveals how systemic forces of control, marginalisation, and oppression dictated the fates of those who failed to conform to societal norms. Whether through homosexual panic or gendered oppression, these works expose a world where certain lives are systematically devalued and erased. By examining these texts through this lens, necropolitics acts as a framework that can be expanded to analyse late-19th and early-20th-century literature that portray the social and governmental dynamics that render certain lives disposable.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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LII — **Joyce, J** 1957 *Letters of James Joyce*, Volume II. Ellmann, R (ed.) London: Faber & Faber.

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