

IBDP EXTENDED ESSAY

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ENGLISH B

CATEGORY 3: LITERATURE

**AESTHETICS AS A CONSTRUCTIVE vs DESTRUCTIVE FORCE**

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**How is Aesthetics depicted as both a constructive and destructive force on human nature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*?**

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## 1. Introduction

The Aesthetic movement, which promotes the concept of living without moral foundations, influenced the aesthetic tastes and lifestyle habits of middle-class Europeans in the middle to late nineteenth century. This aesthetic movement, or in other words Aestheticism, argued that art should not be utilized for educational purposes or to promote moral concepts; rather, it should be used to create a sense or a mood. Therefore art in the nineteenth century was structured according to the philosophy of art that focused solely on beauty and aesthetics.

A well known Irish Victorian author Oscar Wilde, was an aesthete who took an important part in promoting the aesthetic movement in the nineteenth century. Wilde argued that aestheticism can help people transcend the monotonous and utilitarian elements of daily life and embrace the beauty and pleasure that art and nature can provide. He perceived art as a method of expressing oneself and delving into the complexity of human existence. The phrase "art for art's sake", which consecutively became the catchphrase of the aesthetic movement, had a significant influence on the formation of Wilde's perspective on art.

Oscar Wilde was mainly focused on the individual, the artist, rather than the art itself. He stated that no artist should prioritize their art before their life. In the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde conveys his thoughts on the aesthetic movement and how the idea of living according to the movement can act both as a constructive and a destructive force on the person. In "The Picture of Dorian Gray," he explores the ramifications of pursuing beauty and aesthetic pleasure above moral issues. While the piece ultimately acts as a warning against the consequences of excess and moral degeneration, it also advocates the significance of aesthetic experience and the transforming and inspirational power of beauty.

An aesthetic thing, whether a person or a painting does not matter, should not have any ulterior characteristics other than being fascinating on the surface. A painting is aesthetic until the deeper meaning behind the canvas is revealed. If the painting has any other characteristics other than the aesthetic illustrations that are represented on the canvas then it loses its aesthetic. The

aesthetic movement promoted that the purpose of art is to have no purpose. Art is to be aesthetic and nothing else.

Wilde also felt that the pursuit of pleasure and beauty was necessary for individual growth, and that only by embracing these things could one genuinely live a meaningful life. In this way, he regarded the Aesthetic Movement as a revolt against the boring, restrictive Victorian norms that dominated society at the time, and as a celebration of independence and innovation. He has a rather mocking tone throughout the book, this is because while he is critical about the position of art in the Victorian era; therefore, he is also trying to endorse his ideas about art through the narrative of the novel. Since the novel argues the aesthetics of art, it has a sense of immortality that comes with the characters and the flow of the narrative. *"The books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame."*<sup>1</sup> It can be understood from this quote that the author, Wilde, wrote this book to present the audience with the ugly truth of the Aesthetic movement and its consequences; therefore the novel has a sense of mockery and immorality in its tone.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde conveys the constructive and the destructive effects of aestheticism through various characters. Lord Henry, who is the main antagonist of the book represents the ideas of the author about the aesthetic movement. Since Wilde was a major proponent of the movement, he uses the character Lord Henry, in order to shock the ethical certainties of the burgeoning middle class, by arguing that art need not possess any other purpose than being beautiful. While the aestheticism's constructive effects are portrayed through the character Lord Henry; the destructive effects can also be observed throughout the book via characters such as Dorian Gray, Sibyl Vane and Basil Hallward. This topic is significant because it emphasizes the dangers of putting too much emphasis on external beauty and pleasure at the expense of inner morality and character. It also raises concerns about the role of art and beauty in society, as well as the dangers of unchecked pursuit of aesthetic ideals. This topic is also worth investigating because it

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<sup>1</sup> Wilde 241

prompts us to reflect on our own values and priorities, and to consider the impact that art and beauty have on our lives and on society as a whole.

## **2. Destructive Consequences of Aestheticism**

### **2.1 Dorian Gray**

Dorian Gray is the main character of the novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray". He is portrayed as a naive young man, who has a magnetic physical attractiveness throughout the book. One of the things that is interesting about the character is that Dorian is aware of his magnetic beauty and the consequences that come with having such a beautiful physical exterior. Dorian, appears as an ideal at the beginning of the novel, he is the paradigm of masculine youth and beauty. As such Dorian is depicted as a statement of the value of life while meeting aesthetic standards. This is mainly because Wilde, the author, wanted to convey his thoughts about art, through the character, Dorian.

Dorian symbolizes the destructive consequences of unrestrained control of aestheticism on one's life. The hedonistic worldview that Dorian claims throughout the narrative, encourages him to pursue beauty and pleasure without any moral or ethical constraints. Dorian's obsession with aesthetics grows as he becomes more and more isolated from the outside world. He transforms into a selfish and an inhuman man, who not only destroys his own life but other's lives around him. Just like the notion of the Aesthetic Movement, Dorian buries his morality and only acts on his selfish and narcissistic impulse, therefore he becomes a piece of art without any emotion buried under the aesthetic exterior.

The theme of good vs. evil is prominent in the novel "The Portrait of Dorian Gray," which depicts the conflict between the desire for moral purity and the allure of immoral pleasure. The novel implies that there is a duality in human nature, and that individuals are capable of both good and evil. Throughout the narrative, the main character, Dorian Gray, exemplifies this duality. Dorian Gray goes through a massive transformation concerning his outlook on life. This transformation's main influence is the character Lord Henry Wotton, who is an hedonistic aesthete.

*"But I seem to have lost the passion and forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself. My own personality has become a burden to me"*<sup>2</sup> It can be understood from the quote that, Dorian is expressing his dissatisfaction with his own existence and his want for love. He admits that Lord Henry's influence has caused him to become very self-absorbed.

## **2.2 Dorian Gray's Moral Decay**

At the beginning of the story, Dorian is depicted as a naive and innocent young man who is led astray by the hedonistic and amoral Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Henry, who fantasizes about turning the naive Dorian into an unrelenting pleasure-seeker, captures the attention of the young lad with a brief talk, evidently with the help of his charisma. Henry persuades Dorian into thinking that his most prominent feature -his youthful beauty- is fading. *"Lord Henry is perfectly right. Youth is the only thing worth having. When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself."*<sup>3</sup> Under Lord Henry's influence, Dorian becomes increasingly interested in sensual pleasures and begins to indulge in a life of debauchery.

As Dorian grows increasingly egotistical and self-absorbed, he begins to engage in different vices such as drinking, gambling, and having sexual encounters with other women. He grows more cynical and vicious, using and manipulating others for his own gain. *"He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age."*<sup>4</sup>

When Dorian's moral decay intensifies, the painting drawn by Basil Hallward of him begins to shift, revealing the real state of his soul. The painting, which was once envied by Dorian himself because of its eternal beauty, starts to lose its beauty. The painting depicts Dorian's physical and

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<sup>2</sup> Wilde 226

<sup>3</sup>Wilde 34

<sup>4</sup>Wilde 144

moral degeneration, but Dorian himself stays untouched and youthful. The painting gets progressively horrific as the narrative goes, illustrating the depths of Dorian's moral degradation.

*"The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all. He would destroy it. . . . His beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery. . . . The thing was horribly apparent."*<sup>5</sup>

In the citation above, it can be seen that Dorian is thinking about the artwork and how it is aging and getting more ugly while he remains youthful and handsome. He learns that his physical attractiveness was only a front for his actual, corrupt character, and that the picture is now bearing the weight of his moral deterioration. The phrase implies that the picture, which was previously viewed as a symbol of Dorian's immortal beauty and youth, has now come to represent his moral degradation and degeneration.

Dorian symbolizes the destructive consequences of unrestrained control of aestheticism on one's life. The hedonistic worldview that Dorian claims throughout the narrative, encourages him to pursue beauty and pleasure without any moral or ethical constraints. Dorian's obsession with aesthetics grows as he becomes more and more isolated from the outside world. He transforms into a selfish and an inhuman man, who not only destroys his own life but other's lives around him. Just like the notion of the Aesthetic Movement, Dorian buries his morality and only acts on his selfish and narcissistic impulse, therefore he becomes a piece of art without any emotion buried under the aesthetic exterior. *"The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful."*<sup>6</sup>

Dorian feels ashamed of himself as he stares at his portrait, which depicts his immaculate, beautiful appearance. He wishes to punish someone or vent his own pain, but understands that he has buried his morals and can only act on selfish and narcissistic desires. The phrase implies that Dorian has become a work of art without any feeling buried under the attractive façade as a result of his moral degradation.

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<sup>5</sup>Wilde 118

<sup>6</sup>Wilde 26

One of the most startling characteristics of Dorian's moral degeneration is how it appears to be self-perpetuating. As Dorian gets more corrupt, he becomes increasingly removed from the repercussions of his actions and more eager to participate in unethical acts. He begins to regard his own moral degradation as an artistic experiment, and sees himself as an aesthetic construct rather than a human being. Dorian, with his transformation from naive and moral to immoral and narcissistic, represents the transformation of art after the Aesthetic movement. He becomes a piece of art without character that possesses nothing but an aesthetic exterior; he loses his character and therefore his own meaning of life.

Finally, Dorian Gray's characterization serves as a warning tale about the consequences of vanity, self-absorption, and moral degeneration. Dorian's moral degradation demonstrates the perils of getting so preoccupied with our own beauty and aspirations that we lose sight of our humanity and are prepared to do everything to retain our social standing. We are reminded of the need for moral integrity via Dorian's terrible demise, as well as the repercussions of failing to do so.

### **2.3 The Picture of Dorian Gray**

The picture of Dorian Gray, which was painted by Basil Hallward, is an exact replica of the human Dorian Gray. It is, as expected, mesmerizing to look at. It is the best piece of art the artist has ever put out, as Basil says. The significance of the painting comes from the meaning behind it.

The artist, Basil Hallward, adores Dorian Gray, he practically worships him. Considering the fact that Dorian is like a piece of art, it is reasonable for an artist to worship him. This can also be an example of the constructive consequences of aesthetics: because of Dorian's aesthetic physical appearance he has the power of taking people under his command, just like he did to Basil Hallward. *"Beauty is a form of genius—is higher, indeed, than genius, as it needs no explanation. It is of the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or springtime, or the reflection in the dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It cannot be questioned. It has divine right of sovereignty. It makes princes of those who have it."*<sup>7</sup> Lord Henry explains to Dorian about the power of beauty and

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<sup>7</sup>Wilde 29



how it may elicit admiration and devotion from others. He contends that beauty is a sort of brilliance that requires no explanation and that it has a divine right of sovereignty, which means that it is intrinsically worthy of respect and appreciation. This phrase says that Dorian, because of his great physical attractiveness, has the ability to command the attention and adoration of everyone around him, causing them to see him as a prince or king. Consequently, Dorian's artistic look provides him power over others, allowing him to command them and affect them in numerous ways.

Basil's appreciation towards Dorian, causes him to display an extensive amount of personality and character to the portrait, which contradicts the concept of aestheticism. The portrait represents the inner self of Dorian and serves as a reflection of his inner moral conflicts. While Dorian becomes hedonistic and narcissistic, his inner conflicts and character are concealed; therefore, the picture represents the hidden side of Dorian. The concept of good vs. evil can be observed through the portrait and Dorian more clearly, because while Dorian becomes obsessed with looking young and aesthetic he wants to get rid of all the sinful and immoral parts of himself, which are presented through the portrait. Therefore, while Dorian looks "good" from his exterior; the portrait, his inner self, looks "evil".

*"I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose? Every moment that passes takes something from me, and gives something to it."*<sup>8</sup> Dorian expresses his envy for Basil Hallward's portrait, which depicts his youthful and beautiful features. He seems to be angry at the fact that the painting will age and decay while he will certainly age and disintegrate. Dorian's wish to stay forever young and handsome reveals his hedonistic worldview, in which he places his personal pleasure and aesthetics above everything else, including moral or ethical issues. This phrase emphasizes Dorian's pursuit of beauty and pleasure without regard for moral or ethical limitations, since he aspires to remain forever youthful and beautiful, even if it means sacrificing his humanity.

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<sup>8</sup>Wilde 34

Dorian's obsession with aesthetic pleasure is displayed when he first gets in contact with the portrait. He instantly gets jealous of the painting's ability of always staying the same age. It can also be understood from the section above that Dorian has a deep obsession with his physical exterior. He feels an extreme pleasure just by looking at himself, because of his deep obsession with aesthetics. However, as the novel progresses, the portrait starts changing. The portrait begins to reflect Dorian's true self, which becomes more and more twisted and ugly overtime. This is because, after Dorian's moral transformation he indulges in various kinds of immoral and unethical behavior. Dorian doesn't get affected by his inhuman behavior on the exterior, however it can be understood that he is experiencing an inner destruction, from the changes in his portrait.

The portrait also depicts the idea that one's exterior (represented with Dorian's physical appearance) is independent from his interior (represented with the picture of Dorian). Dorian keeps on trying to keep his external self pure and innocent, so that he wouldn't lose his aesthetics, while also allowing his internal self to indulge in all kinds of immoral and unethical behavior. Therefore, the painting reminds us that no one can fully escape the consequences of their actions.

*"The senses could refine, and the intellect could degrade. Who knew where the fleshly impulse would lead him? Perhaps the gods had sent him to this sin for his own pleasure."*<sup>9</sup> The narrator implies that Dorian's physical appearance and sensual desires may refine and develop through time, but his intellectual and moral aptitude may deteriorate and worsen. This paragraph indicates that Dorian Gray's painting, which depicts the physical degradation of his looks as well as the degeneration of his spirit, is a symbol of this philosophy. Despite his attractive exterior, the image serves as a visible expression of the deterioration that is unfolding within Dorian.

### **3. Constructive Consequences of Aestheticism**

#### **3.1 Lord Henry Wotton**

Wilde uses the character, Lord Henry Wotton, in order to give the reader a better understanding of how aesthetes perceive the world. Lord Henry, a hedonistic and a self absorbed

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<sup>9</sup> Wilde 68

aristocrat is also an aesthete. Henry, also referred to as Harry throughout the novel, represents the aesthetic movement. Henry, with his well known wit and profound intellect, is a captivating talker which makes him a highly influential character. With his confident and advanced communication skills he has the ability of taking anyone under his spell, which makes him a significant element in the course of the narrative.

Lord Henry, compared to other characters like Dorian Gray, is a relatively static character, he does not undergo any significant transformation throughout the book. Furthermore he highly influences other characters and forces them to transform with his strong ideas. "*Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them!*"<sup>10</sup> It can be understood from the quote that Dorian is reflecting about Lord Henry's use of language and his power to affect others through his speech. Lord Henry's intelligence and wit are stressed, and his communication abilities are shown as significant instruments for changing people's beliefs and actions.

While Dorian is represented as art throughout the narrative, Lord Henry is represented as an outside source of influence, he is the voice of the aesthetic movement. With his strong ideas and selfish lifestyle, Lord Henry is almost like the human form of the aestheticism concept. However, it would not be correct to label Lord Henry as "evil" because his cruelty and immortality only comes to surface when his aesthetic desires are in control of his actions.

*"I cannot sympathize with that. It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing. There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. One should sympathize with the color, the beauty, the joy of life. The less said about life's sores, the better."*<sup>11</sup> Lord Henry shows his dislike for suffering, implying that he is unconcerned with the agony and hardships of others. He indicates that the only things worth sympathizing with are beauty, pleasure, and joy, and that addressing life's troubles and obstacles is repulsive. Lord Henry's ruthlessness and depravity are shown in this remark, since he rejects the relevance of human suffering and appreciates only those things that

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<sup>10</sup>Wilde 26

<sup>11</sup>Wilde 48

provide him aesthetic pleasure. Therefore, Lord Henry cannot be labeled "evil" since his acts are motivated by aesthetic goals rather than actual malice or bad intent.

Unlike Dorian the constructive consequences of aestheticism can be observed through the character, Lord Henry. Because of his hedonistic lifestyle, he is a character who is out of touch from his feelings, which gives him an inhuman outlook towards other people around him. *"I like persons better than principles, and I like persons with no principles better than anything else in the world."*<sup>12</sup> Lord Henry displays his preference for people above ideals, implying that he prioritizes personal pleasure and desire over any moral or ethical code. He also implies that he prefers those who have no values, meaning that he has little regard for individuals who are guided by morals or conscience.

Since Lord Henry is a character with no moral or ethical qualities, he has an upper-hand on those sensibility-indulged people around him, such as Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward. When Lord Henry looks from a very inhuman perspective to life, he gains the quality of having an influence on others. Therefore having a worldview that was formed around the concept "aestheticism" can have constructive consequences on the person, if that person is not in the position of the "art" but in the position of the "audience" of that art. Lord Henry can be defined as an observer, the audience, of Dorian, the art.

Lord Henry sees Dorian as an empty canvas. Henry is ready to paint on Dorian's naive and pure mind, with his aestheticism-induced ideas. *"I am known for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far."*<sup>13</sup> This phrase is originally from a discussion between Algernon Moncrieff and Cecily Cardew, but it demonstrates Lord Henry's effect on Dorian. Algernon is ridiculing the type of language and conduct he believes would be characteristic of someone inspired by Lord Henry's aestheticism, and his statements imply that Henry's views have altered Dorian in some manner. The metaphor of an

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<sup>12</sup>Wilde 16

<sup>13</sup>Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 105

empty canvas implies that Dorian's mind is blank and ready to be filled with Lord Henry's "aestheticism-induced" notions.

Dorian, without hesitation, adopts Lord Henry's ideas and his hedonistic worldview. He embraces Lord Henry's ideas as his own and chooses him as his idol and mentor. This, presumably, results in the destruction of Dorian Gray as a person.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Finally, Aestheticism had a significant influence on the character of Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's work *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian was exposed to the concept of Aestheticism as a young man by his friend Lord Henry, who persuaded him to live a life of hedonism and beauty. Dorian gradually gets concerned with his own physical looks and sensual pleasures, leading him down a road of moral degradation and spiritual rot.

Oscar Wilde's masterpiece *The Picture of Dorian Gray* delves on the complicated link between aesthetics and human nature. Wilde shows the power of beauty and art to inspire and raise, but also to corrupt and destroy, via the figure of Dorian Gray. The story implies that while aesthetics may be a constructive force, when carried to an extreme, it can also be destructive. Unchecked by moral norms, the pursuit of beauty and pleasure leads to the degeneration of the human spirit and the loss of one's soul. *"It is a sad truth, but we have lost the faculty of giving lovely names to things. Names are everything. I never quarrel with actions. My one quarrel is with words. That is the reason I hate vulgar realism in literature. The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one. It is the only thing he is fit for."*<sup>14</sup> Lord Henry attacks "vulgar realism" in writing and highlights the significance of providing "beautiful names to things" in this remark. He says that names and aesthetics are important, and his critique of realism implies that an overemphasis on the practical or material parts of existence may result in a loss of beauty and artistry.

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<sup>14</sup>Wilde 215

On the one hand, aesthetics may be viewed as a beneficial factor since it can encourage creativity and increase global appreciation for art and beauty. When aesthetics is sought at the expense of moral principles and human values, however, it may become a toxic force that corrupts and eventually kills the individual. As a result, striking a balance between the pursuit of aesthetic standards and a commitment to ethical principles is critical. The novel is a cautionary story that emphasizes the significance of developing a strong moral compass to guide one's artistic choices and behavior.

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