

EXTENDED ESSAY

IB English Language and Literature

Category 3

Aestheticism and moral corruption in The Portrait of Dorian Gray

“To what extent does Wilde use aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to expose the moral corruption underlying the pursuit of beauty?”

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Research Question: “How does Oscar Wilde use aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to reveal the contradiction between the pursuit of beauty and morality?”

Introduction:

Irish-born poet, playwright, and novelist Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) is one of the most well-known authors of Late Victorian England. His only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is now considered to be a classic in literature. Its highly controversial themes has inspired many essays, books and films. When the novel was first published, it was heavily criticized for its themes of immortality and corruption. Oscar Wilde was imprisoned after his affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and passed away in exile in 1900.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is an everlasting story about a young man whose soul lost its purity and become despicable. This essay will analyse how Wilde uses aestheticism as a symbol of seductive and destructive force in order to reveal contradictions between pursuit of beauty and requirements of morality. Rather than examining solely the theme of corruption, this essay will focus on the role of aestheticism, the role of Lord Henry as its spokesman, and the symbolic function of the portrait. Representing the separation of art from ethical responsibility.

Through Dorian's transformation, Wilde demonstrates how the worship of outward beauty can lead to moral corruption. But this hedonistic ideal was first introduced to Dorian through Lord Henry. He encourages Dorian to detach himself from society's moral codes. This detachment results in heavy sins and despite his face stays beautiful his self-portrait becomes corrupted. The Portrait becomes an inward mirror as his soul gradually transforms something much uglier than his face. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the attempt to live purely for

beauty results in spiritual corruption which reveals that ethical responsibility and aestheticism shouldn't be exist independently.

This essay will evaluate how does aestheticism function as a tool to show the contradictions of beauty and morality. The analysis is organized around three key topics: characterization, symbolism, and philosophical context. Careful analysis of quotations from the 1891 addition of the novel is used to account for influence of aesthetic ideals influence on the characters and especially the contributions of moral decay of Dorian Gray. In addition, there are several other sources used in this work such as The Preface and Wilde's essay The Decay of Lying are examined to illuminate the aesthetic philosophy. These primary sources are supported by academic articles about the topic to balance out the interpretation of how aestheticism plays a key role as an artistic ideal and a source of moral corruption.

Chapter 1: Context and Philosophy

The Picture of Dorian Gray was first published in July 1890, during the final years of the Victorian era. Although traditional values and moral codes were beginning to weaken, they still held a strong influence over the more conservative members of society. (Subbarao, 2019) Moreover, by the time he lived, Victorian society valued art and life by moral standards. They were convinced that art has something to do with the artist's life. The chapter will cover Wilde's high involvement of the aesthetic movement which consumes his era and highly attribute to this philosophy in his novel.

Aestheticism characterizes the apparent preoccupation that groups of late Victorians (roughly from the 1870–1900 era) had with the necessity and urgency of celebrating beauty in the face of ugly and violent modernity. (Cambridge 2018) The novel was written in the late Victorian era and when aestheticism is the highest value amounts society. Morality is another theme of

the novel which is highly delicate. What is morality? Morality in Victorian era are the ones hold by social codes and Christian ethics. However, hidden vices and sins are creating moral decay. In the Preface Wilde declares that art has no moral function, yet the novel dramatizes art corrupting Dorian. That indicates that Wilde both celebrates and critiques aestheticism. In this essay Wilde's usage of aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to expose the corruption underlying the pursuit of beauty will be discussed with support of quotes and the Victorian era's pursuit of beauty.

Aesthetic or some call it Decadence movements are movements that declare beauty is more of the essence than moral values. Decadence means "moral or cultural decline as characterized by excessive indulgence in pleasure or luxury." (Oxford Dictionary) the movement often summarized by the phrase "art for art's sake". According to the proponents of this movement art should be valued for its own beauty rather than judged under moral values. Wilde did not only support this philosophy but become a public persona who is "the spokesman of a cult of beauty who sought to turn his life into art" quoted from the bibliography of Richard Ellmann (1987).

The thought of Decadence is visible throughout the novel, concentrated in the figure of Lord Henry, who possesses a 'hedonistic ideal' and adopt a life dedicates to beauty and sensation. His philosophy influences Dorian from the second they met in Basil Hallward's house. "The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it" (Wilde 20). In this passage that Lord Henry stated suggesting resistance to desire is pointless. Yet this ideology will bear darker consequences, hedonistic ideal leads to corruption of soul and will lead Dorian to his own demise.

Wilde's essay is the evidence that Wilde's support to the aestheticism movement. The clearest defence of his artistic ideals are declared in the Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This

passage functions as an answer to those who criticize him and call the book immoral and subject to unfaithful desires. *“There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all”* (Wilde 3). In this passage Wilde rejects that art should uphold moral values. In his essay ‘The Decay of Lying’ (1889) the aesthetic ideal of art for art’s sake is upheld by saying “Art never expresses anything but itself. This states that art is independent from ethics and shouldn’t be interpreted together. Another essay of his is “The Critic as Artist” (1891), A critic looks at art to understand and enjoy it, just as a scholar studies people. That means criticism and interpretation is creative acts themselves and separated from obligation to be moral or true. These writings reinforce the idea that Wilde’s view of ethics, art and morality.

The Conflict Between Beauty and Morality in Victorian Era

To entirely comprehend Wilde’s ideas, one must also consider the Victorian era and social/moral codes of that era. The values that are critically important to Victorian society are reputation, fame, respectability and morals. “The Victorian obsession with self-control and moral restraint made any open challenge to these values appear scandalous” (Gagnier 1986)

The novel not only provoke controversy but also intentionally dramatizes the dangers of aesthetic philosophy. The novel reflects moral tension through character interaction and narrative structure. Lord Henry promotes an aesthetic ideal that detaches goodness and ethics by claiming that “to be good is to be in harmony with oneself” (Wilde 58). In the novel such thinking allows Dorian to reinterpret selfishness and cruelty. Wilde thus express aestheticism is not a conceptual theory but an influential philosophy.

The portrait is the most important symbol in the novel because it reveals the truth that Dorian tries to hide. While Dorian remains young and beautiful the portrait becomes ugly and old.

This separation shows the contradiction of outer beauty and inner corruption. Dorian believes he can escape the consequences of his actions but the Portrait clearly display his soul. The Portrait proves that moral decay cannot be escaped.

Even though Wilde writes in the Preface that art should not be judged by moral standards the story suggests something more complex. In the end Dorian tries to destroy his portrait to free himself from the guilt but instead accidentally kills himself. The ending shows that living only for aesthetic beauty and ignoring moral standard ultimately leads to self-destruction.

Chapter2: Characters as Embodiment of Aestheticism, Morality, and Corruption

The purpose of chapter 2 is to emphasize that the three main characters represents three main ideas of the novel. Lord Henry as aestheticism, morality as Basil and purity at risk of corruption as Dorian Gray.

Dorian Gray:

Dorian as the main character of the novel is described intensely and in detail. The passages that describe Dorian Gray are “unspotted from the world” (Wilde 19) indicates his unspoiled nature in the beginning of the book. According to Lord Henry’s description “he was certainly wonderfully handsome” (Wilde 19) also, in the 1891 version Henry’s reaction to the view of Dorian was “No wonder Basil worshipped him.” However, in the 1890 version it was “He was made to be worshipped.” (Wilde 19) This passage was deleted after many criticisms that Wilde received. Dorian Gray was ‘portrayed’ as his physical beauty reflects his pure and untarnished soul. Dorian as a figure of innocence, purity and beauty who is in danger of corruption and fraud. The danger had come from Lord Henry from the second they met. Dorian “blushes” while talking to Lord Henry and that indicates he is inclined to influence. Yet he bears intense curiosity to another world which Lord Henry is so willing to show.

Dorian's change towards immorality and darkness is starting with the first encounter of Lord Henry. While Hallward was painting Dorian, Lord Henry was imposing his philosophy to Dorian. He is making him anxious of losing his beauty by saying "Time is jealous of you, and wars against your lilies and your roses." (Wilde 24)

When Dorian first recognizes his own beauty, he also begins to be afraid of losing it. His first reaction after looking at the painting is to wish "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old!". (Wilde 28) From that moment it is appearing that he has chosen his side between beauty and morality. Beauty is now even more essential than his own soul therefore morality. His attitude from that moment starts to change. The young man who had once characterized purity and sincerity now feels attracted to danger from the outside world. Abandoning Sibyl Vane after her confession of love and committing Basil Hallward's murder are the peak evidence that he surrenders to Lord Henry's philosophy and become a slave of beauty and sensation. The term "Narcissus" is used to describe Dorian, as he adores his own painting. Narcissus is an important symbol of narcissism and an attribution the self-loved Greek mythology character Narcissus. Like Dorian his death is caused by his extreme love of himself. This is an indication of perception of beauty leads to a terrible end. From the outside world he was so beautiful and majestic nobody can believe he could do such terrible acts. He was protected by his own beauty, but it was just a mask. Hiding corruption and secrets under a pretty face. This contradiction suggest that Wilde described Dorian as almost the most beautiful boy in the world with his sins masked by his beauty. Wilde's aim is to display the moral corruption under the pursuit of beauty by doing so. He both critiques and encourages aestheticism, revealing its dangers only when detached from morality, and avoiding rejecting it entirely.

Lord Henry:

In the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry whose full name is Lord Henry Wotton is the representant of Hedonistic ideal. He was introduced as a charming and influential character. He claims that “All influence is immoral” but he is influencing Dorian deeply. His voice is seductive and “musical” and his words that work like “magic” upon Dorian. Those qualities he possesses make him the embodiment of influence itself. Paradoxes are his favorite tools to play with. He even addressed by Dorian as “Prince Paradox” (Wilde 186). Through paradoxes Wilde makes aestheticism sound irresistible and logical. Henry believes that “it is better to be beautiful than to be good.” (Wilde 186) This quote clearly indicates his perception of beauty has corrupted him and aestheticism is more important than moral values. He consistently tries to win Dorian and affecting him badly. His persuasive philosophy can be summarized as: Life’s only true purpose is to seek pleasure and experience without restraint, for morality and convention only suppress individuality and beauty.

Lord Henry in the novel is functions as more than a humorous aristocrat. He used as the main figure to show allure and risk of aesthetic philosophy. Even though he never committed a crime himself his influence over Dorian makes him commit multiple crimes and mostly get away with it. Even Lord Henry didn’t believe Dorian when he confessed Basil’s murder. Henry claims that Dorian is “posing for a character that doesn’t suit (him)”. Wilde does not make Henry commit any crimes but show that he corrupts through language and reflecting moral collapse can began rhetorically. Through Henry, Wilde shows that how charm and influence over beauty can corrupt and distort more than actions. Through this, Wilde exposes dangers of aestheticism without moral codes. Yet Wilde also preserves doubt. Lord Henry who fully follow those codes remains socially untouched and exposes his philosophies’ alluring side but also Victorian society’s complicated structure in admiring wit and elegance when in reality they hide moral corruption.

Basil Hallward:

Basil Hallward functions as the representant of morality in the novel. In this way they are representants of opposite sites with Lord Henry. Henry in one hand symbolizes beauty as a pursuit above all and on the other hand Basil whose morals are pure and sincere. Basils claims that he has put “the secret of his own soul” in the Portrait. Art, he makes is carrying pursuits of his own soul. So, art and sincerity are shown through Basil Hallward. Basil is being afraid of Henry influencing Dorian and corrupt him. It was foreshadowed in the book by the quote “Don’t spoil him. Don’t try to influence him. Your influence would be bad.” (Wilde 16). Basil’s admiration for Dorian is both physical and emotional. He admires his pure soul and his appearance. Even though Basil tries to stop Henry from influencing Dorian, in the end, his friendship and sincerity couldn’t be a match for Henry’s alluring philosophy.

Basil’s murder is a great symbol for destruction of morality and conscience in Dorian’s life. It is the best indicator that uncontrolled pursuit of beauty can lead moral corruption at its peak. Dorian in the end of the book show Basil his true self. The Portrait of himself which has become far from beautiful but “bad and corrupt and shameful”. (Wilde 147) quote demonstrates his ugly soul. His art has remained true to the soul of the person whose drawing he had on it. Art remains sincere unlike his model. Basil shows morality’s fragility dominated by beauty and corruption. Desires are more important than moral values in this world. His downfall demonstrates how easily truth and conscience can be muted when desire dominates the soul.

In The Picture of Dorian Gray three main characters symbolizes three main themes. Henry as aestheticism, Basil as morality and Dorian as innocence. Wilde through these three characters emphasize that pursuit of beauty without limits leads moral corruption. Dorian in the beginning innocent and pure through Henry’s influence become dark and “ugly” despite

Basil's attempts to prevent it. Morality loses this war to alluring desires and dark vices at the end.

Chapter 3: Portrait, Mirrors and Secret Vices

The Portrait of Dorian is centred as the main symbol of the book. It functions to show the reader that art can be beautiful and aesthetic but at the same time dangerous. True art can change the world. As Wilde stated in his first sentence of the introduction of the book "artist is the creator of beautiful things."

Wilde as a 'professor of aesthetics' gives great importance to the artist himself. So, when, as the creator, Basil first interpreted his work, it is not surprising that his words claim great importance. As announced, he believes that the portrait of Dorian Gray reveals more about himself than the sitter. "I have put too much of myself into it." Basil even didn't want to exhibit it because "the secret of (his) own soul" would be revealed to the world. Dorian's approach is like Basil's. When he encounters the yellow book that was given to him by Henry he saw his life in it. In the same way that when he attended an opera in Waner's he realizes that 'the great work of art a presentation of his own soul' Dorian clearly confirms that art reveals more about the spectator than the artist.

In this context, works of art are individual mirrors that show the viewer more than they are.

In the case of Dorian, it is obvious and expectable that his lifelike portrait is a mirror.

However, it is a mirror in a moral sense rather than a physical one. As Dorian went further from the path of light the portrait is there to remind him of consequences of his actions towards his soul. Dorian, who is prone to interpret art subjectively, is foremost a 'critic' of his own portrait. "His own soul was looking out at him from the canvas and calling him to judgment." (Wilde 115) His interpretation of the work lead him to realize his own condition

and inner state. For this “(he) want to be good. (he) can’t bear the idea of (his) soul being hideous.” Unfortunately, in the end portrait couldn’t help to change his ill behaviour.

Wilde’s *The Decay of Lying* emphasizes his philosophy that art should be ‘a veil, rather than a mirror’. So, the Portrait of Dorian does what mirrors don’t reveal his sins. Dorian’s vices are now visible to the human eye. Sibyl’s cruel rejection creates a ‘cruel smile’ in the Portrait as the first change in the Portrait. As his sins pile up the portrait functions as record of corruption of Dorian’s soul. “It is the face of my soul!” (Wilde 150) Dorian shouts at Basil when he first displays the portrait to his owner. The Portrait both functions as a conscience and temptation. The reason is that Portrait allows Dorian to commit sin without the visible consequences of them. In the novel the term “Narcissus” was used to describe the philosophy of Dorian. Which is beauty above all. Dorian is compared to Narcissus in the bases of his extraordinary beauty and breathtaking perfection. However, it was his own beauty which eventually end Narcissus’s life. Wilde reinforces that pursuit of beauty could be dangerous again. Also, the term Faust also mentions. Faust the name of the doctor who sold his soul to the devil very relevant to Dorians’s own story. He was addressed as “they say he sold his soul to the devil exchange of a pretty face” (Wilde 182) by the women in the tavern. Even though his sins are now visible to bare eye he couldn’t stop return to the mirror which shows his narcissistic worship of beauty and “interest(ed) in corruption of his own soul”. Wilde demonstrates that when beauty becomes the highest value to someone, morality is sacrificed.

Secret Vices is shown as a form of corruption and debauchery. Even though Wilde never clearly addressed them (to avoid more criticism) the vices are clear to the reader. Dorian usually goes to opium dens and taverns where someone from upper class shouldn’t be seen in. Even though people talk behind his back the moment they saw Dorian they immediately change their minds. Beauty of Dorian protects him like a shield from society. Dorian not only

corrupts his soul but drag others with him to the ugliness as well. “Why are your friendship with young man’s so fatal to them?” (Wilde144) beauty was weaponised to corrupt.

The destruction of the Portrait is the last step in Dorian’s corruption. Portrait which is the symbol for conscience and always reminds Dorian hoe ugly his soul become in the end become unbearable to Dorian. By stabbing the Portrait Dorian tries to silence his morality but instead he murders himself. His death brings on his true form. “He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage.” (Wilde 213) and the Portrait also returns to when it was drawn. Art exposes the truth beauty hides. Aestheticism is not rejected completely but shown to be corrupt when pursued without morals.

Conclusion

The Portrait of Dorian Gray is a novel which is still discussed intensely. While the novel reflects the perception of beauty of the period in which it was written, it both criticizes and appreciates aestheticism. Its main philosophy is to display dangers of valuing beauty above all. Wilde opposes that but also appreciates art as a part of human life. Morality and aestheticism were highly valued in Victorian society. However, the eyes only see so little. They are ignorant about secret vices, hiding behind their owner’s reputation. Wilde in the novel critiques the hypocrisy of people in the time. In the novel characters are the main tools to understand author’s perception of beauty and morality. Lord Henry as the seductive voice hedonism clearly underlining alluring aspects of unmoral lifestyle and hedonist beauty values. Basil’s character is almost opposite of Henry’s. He is honest and sincere but couldn’t be strong enough to rescue Dorian from Henry’s philosophy.

Through Dorian’s physical appearance and spiritual decay, Wilde shows how beauty can function as a mask which hides vice rather than a virtue. The portrait happens to be the

novel's most powerful symbol as revealing truths' hidden from the outside world. In the other hand, Wilde does not solely despise aestheticism. Art in the novel (the Portrait) remains sincere and uncorrupted indicating that beauty itself is not the cause of destruction but the quit moral awareness in its pursuit. Aestheticism presented as both seductive and destructive indicating the dangers when art lacks ethical responsibility. Wilde also critiques Victorian moral values which are fixed on appearances. Ultimately, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* expresses beauty as an absolute ideal lead to scarifications of morality and it couldn't be hidden forever under pretty masks. This is evident in the contrast between Dorian's unchanging beautiful appearance and his increasingly corrupted portrait. Victorian society allows this corruption until it inevitably surfaces. Which demonstrates that they prioritize outward beauty over inner morality.

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