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**Research Question:** In what ways is the concept of beauty analyzed in the novel “The Picture of Dorian Gray” by Oscar Wilde?

## **ABSTRACT**

Oscar Wilde's only novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray" includes aesthetic values which reveal Wilde's perspective of beauty and the understanding of life and art. According to him, art has an inherent value which aims to reach beauty thus has no other purpose and also the only aim of life should be to get pleasure and joy. This study explores the concept of beauty in the novel in regard to the research question: "In what ways is the concept of beauty analyzed in the novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray" by Oscar Wilde?"

This research will be done in three main sections emphasizing on the aestheticism and morality, factors influencing Dorian Gray and the beauty of soul versus outer beauty. To start with, the obsession of aestheticism in the novel will be analyzed with its effects on the characters Lord Henry and Dorian Gray. The change in Dorian's perspective of beauty will be evaluated and related to his moral decay and the corruption in his personality. Throughout this essay, the effects of negative influences on Dorian; like Lord Henry and the society, and their consequences will be debated. Continuing with further investigation, the conflict between the importance of inner and outer beauty will be explored and the question "Is having just materialistic values like external beauty enough for a human being?" will be discussed.

At the end, it is shown that the change on Dorian Gray's viewpoint of beauty ruined him considerably. The desire to have the eternal youth caused him to lose his soul and eventually the sins became a burden on him that he paid the price with his life. The novel puts forward an argument against society, which is possessed by aesthetic values, which proves that outer beauty is not sufficient without a beautiful soul.

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## **I. Introduction**

Beauty has always been a significant element for human beings. While one can find the beauty in a glimpse, a melody, a smile, a taste, a touch or in a scent; the other finds it in a soul or in ones personality. In many fields such as fine arts, architecture, literature and design, the aim is to attain beauty. Roberto C.P. Junior, who is a spiritualist, says that beauty is not limited; he defines beauty as *“It is the natural and inevitable effect of all and any phenomenon that is processed in conformity with the laws of Creation. Everything that acts and is molded in accordance with these laws will be beautiful.”* Although the “perfect beauty” is a combination of inner and outer beauty for human beings, we cannot put forth a precise definition for beauty since it is a subjective matter. Beauty differs according to the desires and expectations of people; therefore as it is often said beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The concept of beauty, which can be seen by some people in the bright blue sky or sweet-smelling flowers, can be regarded as much more abstract by others. For instance, beauty can be found in an abstract painting which may be too complex for the majority to understand, but found to be beautiful by a minority. In the pursuit of beauty, sometimes the spiritual beauty becomes a priority while other times concrete beauty does. Taking this issue into consideration, this study will analyze the novel: “The Picture of Dorian Gray” by Oscar Wilde with regard to its main character Dorian Gray.

The concept of beauty was emphasized from various aspects throughout Oscar Wilde’s only novel “The Picture of Dorian Gray” published in 1891. The main character, Dorian Gray, is a young and handsome man seeking for perpetual beauty and youth. Dorian is so fascinated that when he sees his portrait drawn by his friend Basil Hallward, he utters a wish that his portrait gets older instead of himself. His dream comes true and the face on the canvas bears the burden of his sins which he commits during his life.

Dorian, who poisons his soul for the sake of perpetual beauty and youth, questions which is more horrible: the signs of sins or the signs of age. Under the influence of Lord Henry Wotton, whom he met at Basil's house, Dorian perceives that everything that gives pleasure and happiness is the true beauty. On the other hand, he has an inner conflict that whether or not the beauty he possesses is the real one. This brings us to our research question: "In what ways is the concept of beauty analyzed in the novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray" by Oscar Wilde?"

## **II. Aestheticism and Morality**

### **a) Aestheticism**

As a meaning, aestheticism is a theory, which deals with an art or philosophy just for the sake of beauty by excluding from the reality and utility concerns. There were leading art movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as; Aesthetic Movement, Expressionism, Impressionism, Naturalism, Orientalism, Realism and Romanticism. Aestheticism promotes the significance of aesthetic values more than social and political issues for literature, music and other fields of art. Aesthetic experiences focus on doing things for joy. Oscar Wilde's aestheticism understanding was in line with that of Herbert Marcuse, who was a German philosopher, sociologist and political theorist. According to this understanding, the art should not imitate life; on the contrary, life should imitate the art.

Related to the outer beauty, aestheticism is an important motif in the novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray". Oscar Wilde, who was influenced by this art movement, says in the preface: "*The artist is the creator of beautiful things*", which means that the only aim of art is to achieve beauty. Aestheticism motif is generally seen in the expressions and behaviors of Lord Henry Wotton. Beginning from the moment he met Dorian, Lord Henry had great influence on Dorian. According to Lord Henry, the meaning of life is to take pleasure, enjoy life to the

fullest and to carry out the desires and passions without considering the consequences. In addition, the real beauty for Lord Henry is to be young, handsome and perfect. In essence; to be flawless concerning the outward image.

People attach great significance to the outer beauty. In our society, which deeply values beauty, youth and physical appearance are worthy of esteem. The supporting character Lord Henry plays an important role in the reflection of this mentality. Since Lord Henry has a materialist character, his thoughts are focused on visual beauty. He believes that the concepts such as soul and personality are not related with the beauty. Therefore, he gives new perspective to Dorian about the sense of beauty: *"Beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible."* (Wilde, 26) Dorian was amazed with the gifts that he was going to get in return for his soul: *"eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins"* (Wilde, 115). Even though he commits a crime, a sin or he acts irresponsibly, Dorian would remain attractive and charming, while his portrait would pay the price.

The outer beauty can sometimes be deceptive. It can even hide the inner world of the person. In the novel, although Dorian had committed many crimes and sins, it was hard to believe that an ingenuous, nice man like Dorian can commit all these crimes: *"Mind you, I don't believe these rumors at all... Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed...But you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvelous untroubled youth-- I can't believe anything against you."* (Wilde, 161) Dorian Gray's internal moral decay is hidden by his good outward image.

**b) Morality**

Morality is the type of behaviors and thoughts from the perspective of good and bad by complying with the valid rules or traditions whether eagerly or forcibly. Victorian values influenced many people during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the British Empire. Victorianism was in fact an extreme movement that came out in reaction to widespread social disruption. Victorian morality, which believed in the "purity of soul", caused sexual constraint, low tolerance of crime and a hypercritical social code of behavior. Afterwards, the development of new types of values such as individualism brought in changes during the Victorian Era. During this era, art was regarded as a means for education and social activities. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, aestheticism movement, for which Oscar Wilde was a supporter, liberated the concept of art from being an obligation in education. In fact, Oscar Wilde wrote the novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray" in opposition to the traditional Victorian values.

At the beginning of the novel, Dorian was an innocent kindhearted man. After so many external influences such as Lord Henry Wotton and the unnamed yellow book that he gave to him, Dorian's perception of morality changed. Dorian was engaged in hedonistic pleasures and enjoyed his life to the fullest. This caused him to commit a lot of sin. Dorian looks at art from the aesthetic point of view and believes that morality has nothing to do with art. As in the preface: *"There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."* (Wilde, 3)

To say that modern morality comprises accepting the standard of one's age is to point out that human morality alters as time passes by and according to the experiences. Lord Henry tells Dorian that a person should act not in line with the era, but in line with his/her own interests. *"To be good is to be in harmony with one's self. Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One's own life – that is the important thing. Individualism has really the higher aim. Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age. I consider that*

*for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of grossest immorality.”*

(Wilde, 86) He believes that he can reach civilization by being immoral.

Another thought of Lord Henry is; being a good person doesn't guarantee happiness in life. According to him, people should do everything that gives joy to get satisfied. *“Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval. When we are happy we are always good, but when we are good we are not always happy.”* (Wilde, 85)

In addition to Oscar Wilde's understanding of morality, Karl Heinrich Marx, who was a German philosopher and economist, believes that the world is disrupted and because of its corruption man has become alienated from himself and incapable of being human, which means incapable of evaluating beauty through the aesthetic experience: *“The less you eat, drink, and read books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public-house; the less you think, love theorize, sing, paint, fence etc. the more you save – the greater becomes your treasure....the less you are.....”*. If a person gives great importance to materialistic joys and ignores spiritual values, he may be pleased with his life but his moral values will decay.

### **III. Factors Influencing Dorian Gray**

#### **a) Lord Henry Wotton and the Yellow Book**

Dorian Gray was a decent man with good manners till he met Lord Henry Wotton, who is a convincing character and obsessed with materialistic joys such as beauty. Dorian was influenced by his thoughts which mislead him. According to Lord Henry, nothing matters but being young and beautiful, he also defines art as a sickness and love as a fantasy. He believes that being good is not appreciated in this world. A person should aim to live with pleasure and ignore details. Lord Henry who is of the opinion that ugliness is one of the seven deadly sins admits that being beautiful is better than being virtuous.



Dorian was amused by the fact that when he sells his soul he will get eternal youth and beauty in return. He started doing things which give him pleasure without considering the consequences. He destroyed many lives and committed sins therefore his portrait, which was actually a reflection of his soul, started to get corrupted.

The yellow book which Lord Henry gave to Dorian had also a negative influence on him which was unavoidable and hard to resist. The novel was about a young man from Paris, who devoted his life to rejuvenate the passions and life styles of all centuries except his own. Dorian thought that it was a very bizarre and dangerous book which was confusing since it was not clear whether it was based on spiritual enthusiasm of the middle age mysticism or the confessions of a sinner: *“The life of the senses was described in the terms of mystical philosophy. One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some medieval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner. It was a poisonous book.”*(Wilde, 136) Dorian thought that the book was a story of his own life which was written before he had experienced it.

Although Lord Henry had a bad influence on him, Dorian took his decisions on his own and made many irreversible mistakes. Even though Dorian committed numerous crimes, Lord Henry didn't believe that he was able to murder his close friend: *“It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder. I am sorry if I hurt your vanity by saying so, but I assure you it is true. Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders.”*(Wilde, 231) While struggling with his own inner conflict, Dorian accused Lord Henry of poisoning him with the unnamed yellow book: *“Yet you poisoned me with a book once. I should not forgive that.”* (Wilde, 236)

## **b) Dorian's Childhood and the Society**

Dorian's childhood memories left some negative effects on his growth as an adult. Especially his grandfather acted tough on him. When his portrait began to get ruined, he realized that it was turning into his grandfather's image. He decided to hide this hideous picture so that no one would see it and he could get it out of his mind: "*There would be the wrinkled throat, the cold, blue-veined hands, the twisted body that he remembered in the grandfather who had been so stern to him in his boyhood. The picture had to be concealed.*" (Wilde, 133)

In terms of his childhood, he was lonely and treated badly but on the other hand he realized that he lost that innocence which he had as a child and now he became a man whose life was full of mistakes and regrets: "*Every moment of his lonely childhood came back to him as he looked around. He recalled the stainless purity of his boyish life, and it seemed horrible to him that it was here the fatal portrait was to be hidden away.*" (Wilde, 132)

Just as many societies, people in Britain also attached great importance to outer beauty. The society's influence is very high on Dorian; we see this in Dorian being obsessed with youth and beauty. Those which give joy and pleasure have always been attractive for people; therefore they act in line with their selfish interests. According to Dorian, the history of humanity only consists of his life. He thought as if he knew all the wonderful people who lived in the past and made sin so irresistible and mysterious.

Duplicity is one of the significant concepts frequently pointed out in the novel. Dorian complains about the people for being two-faced, since they show themselves as moral people and defame the others. In addition, Dorian believes that Britain is the homeland of the hypocrite; middle class members, who denounce upper class and pose as if they are ethical and reliable, actually are all duplicitous.

**c) Basil Hallward and the Art**

Basil Hallward was a talented painter whose art was influenced by his close and not yet corrupted friend Dorian. When Dorian first saw his fascinating full-length portrait drawn by Basil, he was channeled towards the concepts such as the importance of outward image. Dorian was a source of inspiration and an idol for Basil whom changed his understanding of art.

Basil thinks that friends influence each other. After Dorian met Lord Henry and committed many crimes, Basil no longer knew Dorian who turned out to be a devil-faced man. Dorian's evil characteristic led his friends to lose their goodness and honesty so that they started to madly seek for the pleasure. After a while he had a bad influence on others which gave him a marvelous joy.

Dorian avoids from every displeasing occasion by turning his alertness to other things. Dorian thought it was enough to kill Basil to save himself from all the pains he had experienced. Reluctant to admit that his behaviors have moral innuendos, he is channeled towards art. He ascertains that life should only be observed from an aesthetic dimension. He expresses: "*Form is absolutely essential to it. It should have the dignity of a ceremony, as well as its unreality, and should combine the insincere character of a romantic play with the wit and beauty that makes such plays delightful to us.*" (Wilde, 142)

Basil didn't want to believe the vicious rumors about Dorian. He thought that a man like Dorian should not harm anyone; on the contrary, one should reveal his inner goodness and work for the benefit of mankind: "*I want you to lead such a life as will make the world respect you. I want you to have a clean name and a fair record. I want you to get rid of the dreadful people you associate with. You have a wonderful influence. Let it be for good, not for evil.*" (Wilde, 164)

Art is a person's style to express his thoughts, feelings and living by unifying his creativity and originality. Art, which aims to reach beauty, has a significant role in this novel. The understanding of art in this novel is art for art's sake. According to this understanding, a work of art created by the person cannot appeal to the society. Because, the society limits the artist and these restrictions demolish the originality of the work of art. The main point for the artist is freedom; he does not create the work of art for anybody but himself. When the art is made for people's sake, it loses its significance. Art should be for art's sake, not for the money or anything else. Art is one of the best ways to reflect ones own soul. As it was mentioned in the preface of the novel that artists don't have to prove anything and they can express anything they desire.

In this novel, Lord Henry pointed out that art is special to the individual and should not be shared with the society. According to him, art is the life and soul of a person and if he reflects it to the outer world, it decreases in value: *"I am so glad that you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture, or produced anything outside of yourself! Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets."* (Wilde, 180)

Art for art's sake means that art needs no justification. In other words, it does not have political, didactic or other objectives. Oscar Wilde argued for the doctrine of art for art's sake. The statement in the novel which says: "All art is quite useless" is meant to be conforming to the slogan of art for art's sake. According to this understanding; "Art is useless", because everyone has an understanding of art, which is particular to him. Art cannot be made with the aim of informing or affecting anyone. The pleasure that art gives is also original. Nobody should criticize art, since every work of art reflects the own impression of the artist. People can get pleasure only by observing them.

#### **IV. The Beauty of Soul vs. The Outer Beauty**

In this novel, the change in Dorian Gray's perception of beauty was one of the main themes. In the beginning of the novel, Dorian attached importance to outer beauty and did everything for his pleasure. Dorian wanted to reach perfection by worshipping outer beauty. His only aim in life was to get joy, he never searched for happiness. Dorian thought that "*The search for beauty is the real secret of life*". (Wilde, 54) However, his awareness of his faults led him to have an inner conflict till the end of the novel. This guilty conscience came to conclusion with his death in the end.

In the beginning, Dorian's ideal world was a place, where everything had new colors and was shaped for the delightfulness; there were no regrets nor responsibilities originating from the past. According to Lord Henry's ideas, Dorian would never feel regret for his mistakes and enjoy his life without suffering the consequences. Lord Henry considered that outer beauty was above all the qualifications: "*Beauty is a form of Genius, is higher indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation. It is the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or springtime, or the reflection in dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It cannot be questioned. It has its divine right of sovereignty.*"(Wilde, 26)

Dorian was not concerned that he was losing the purity of his soul. Throughout the process during which Dorian gave significance to his outward image, he committed many sins and ruined the lives of many people. Dorian decided to leave Sybil, his actress lover, because he wanted her to remain pure but Sibyl could not bear living without Dorian so she committed suicide when he abandoned her. At first, Dorian was not adversely affected by Sibyl's death and he even compared this unpleasant event with the Greek tragedy. Later on, this incident raised Dorian's consciousness and he deemed himself responsible for her death. Dorian felt

remorse as he thought about Sibyl's childishness and purity. He believed that the only thing which could purify those sins that seemed to be penetrated in his soul was love.

As time passed, his thoughts and memories became burden on him and he was drowned by the dark days: "*He was prisoned in thought. Memory, like a horrible malady was eating his soul away.*" (Wilde, 203) To escape from this situation, he wanted to go to a place where no one knew him, but actually he wanted to run away from himself.

At the end of the novel, life became too awful for him to bear. There was no resemblance between the young beautiful Dorian and the portrait which carried his sins and his soul's corruption. Humanitarian feelings and qualms of conscience were so hard to overcome that Dorian was no longer satisfied with his eternal beauty. He's killing of Basil was the final straw. Every time Dorian looked at the portrait, it was torturing him. Therefore, to end this persecution and to relieve his conscience, Dorian wanted to get rid of the portrait. When the portrait which represented his soul was removed, he liberated his soul and by destroying the portrait, he killed himself. He gave up everything he possessed in order to purify his soul. Since Dorian overpriced outer beauty and ignored the innocence of his soul, he paid the price with his own life.

## **V. Conclusion**

In this study while studying the research question, it became clear that Oscar Wilde reflected the concept of beauty from different aspects effectively. With the analysis of his novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray", we can come to a conclusion that the definition of true beauty may differ from person to person; even an individual's perspective may change with time. The conflict between inner and outer beauty was mainly covered throughout the novel. The aesthetic values have great importance since they changed Dorian's sense of beauty and disrupted his moral values. With the negative effect of many external influences, like Lord

Henry, Dorian overpriced beauty and lived his life just to get pleasure. Although Dorian was pleased with his fame at the beginning, later on he got tired of it. He had everything he wished for but he was no longer satisfied with them and began to disguise himself because of the sins he had committed. Dorian seems punished by his characteristic of impressibility: If the new social order praises individualism, as Lord Henry claims, Dorian hesitates because he is unsuccessful to establish and live by his own moral rules.

The obsession of beauty and eternal youth ruined all his life. His soul was shattered and his beauty was just a mask to hide his hideous soul. As he stabbed the portrait, the evilness in his soul was cleared away from the canvas and reflected on his dead body. When he was a young innocent man, he considered the signs of age as the worst which led him to sell his soul in order to have eternal beauty. Dorian's biggest fear was death; he believed that everything has a solution except death but in the end, it became clear that the signs of sin were the worst and to let his soul be relieved, the only solution was his death.

All in all, through this study, the concept of beauty which Wilde put forward in the novel is investigated. It is been seen that; there is no precise definition of true beauty since it is a nominative matter. The beauty of one's soul is so precious that it gives a new meaning to the concept of beauty. When defining the beauty, outward image is not lasting; without inner beauty it loses its significance. As Francis Bacon, an English philosopher says: "*The best part of beauty is that which no picture can express.*"

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