

**People's Democratic Republic of Algeria  
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research  
University of Tlemcen**



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**Investigating the Invariability of Oscar Wild's  
Aestheticism: A comparison between "The Decay of  
Lying" (1889) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).**

Dissertation submitted to the department of English as a partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for Master's degree in Literature and Civilisation

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**2022-2023**

## **Dedications**

*A gracious dedication to my beloved mother, father, my brothers, and little sister  
Farah.*

*To admirers of Art, cherished friends, and esteemed teachers.*

*You have all adorned my learning journey.*

## **Acknowledgements**

In the journey of this scholarly pursuit, my deepest appreciation goes to my supervisor, Dr. Amel RAHMOUNI. From the outset, her belief in my capabilities and support infused me with confidence. The sage advice she shared illuminated my path and emboldened my steps. Her patience and empathetic understanding were essential pillars in the creation of this body of work, for which I am profoundly grateful.

I extend my deepest appreciation to the diligent board of examiners, Dr. Fatiha BELMERABET and Dr. Meryem MENGOUCHI, for their rigorous evaluation of my work. Their insightful feedback enriches my learning journey and inspires further academic endeavors.

My heartfelt gratitude goes also to every teacher of the English Department, whether or not I was their student. Their tireless efforts and invaluable knowledge have guided me to this significant point. I have gained precious things from each one of them, propelling me forward. Every gesture, act, or even a single word has left a lasting impact on me, shaping not just my academic journey, but my character as well. I thank them all without exception.

## Abstract

This dissertation focuses on exploring the consistency of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism, employing a comparative analysis between his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and "The Decay of Lying" (1889). The latter is utilized as a philosophical measure embodying the principles of Aestheticism. The study aims to test the reliability and fidelity of Wilde's Aestheticism or potential distortions of the philosophy throughout his literary work, and offering a comprehensive understanding of the philosophical foundation within his writing. The research is divided into two chapters; the first chapter is theoretical and delves into the *fin de siècle* era, highlighting significant shifts, especially in the realms of art and society as well as introducing the Aesthetic movement. It also explores prominent figures pivotal to nineteenth century Aestheticism in art and literature. A focused study on Oscar Wilde's personal and literary journey, along with the influences shaping his Aesthetic perspectives, is presented to ultimately have an overview of the novel and the essay. As for the second chapter, it analyzes "The Decay of Lying" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* hand in hand, investigating how Oscar Wilde's artistic perspective aligns with the content of the novel. It employs a thematic and comparative approach, detecting and examining each possible detail concerning the presence, or absence, of Aesthetic elements.

**Keywords:** Oscar Wilde, Aestheticism, Invariability.

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# **General Introduction**

## General Introduction

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Oscar Wilde, often regarded as a witty and eloquent writer and artist in the Victorian era, contributed with fresh viewpoints to the prevailing atmosphere of the time. His ideas marked him as a significant figure who left a notable imprint on literary history. Wilde played a pivotal role in initiating Aestheticism, the literary and artistic movement which embraced the memorable motto “Art for art’s sake.” Being an artist and critic whose ideas and artistic practices, mainly literary ones, directly challenged conventional perspectives on art and its functionality within the context of Victorian England, Wilde turned into an iconic figure with a degree of distinctiveness that marked him as not only an independent, but also as a daring personality who fiercely sought to defend and spread his artistic principles throughout England, a place that he perceived as the cradle of hypocrisy, not only art-wise, but also in daily social practices. Mostly, Wilde stood firmly for his ideas, and aimed at reflecting them in his literary works.

The interplay between an author’s philosophical beliefs and the tapestry of their literary creations has been a subject of enduring fascination. In Wilde’s case, it is claimed that one of his notable works that reflects his Aesthetic philosophy is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891); his only novel. This novel, Wilde claims in its preface, is an example of Aestheticism in use, for the reason that it embraces in its plot and characters all the principles defended in his Aesthetic philosophy; mainly his ideas that were reflected in his essay “The Decay of Lying” (1889). By diving deeper into both works, i.e. “The Decay of Lying” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the primary focus of this dissertation is on determining whether Oscar Wilde’s Aestheticism maintains a consistent and faithful presence throughout the novel or not, prompting the following questions:

- Is Oscar Wilde’s Aestheticism faithfully reflected in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)?



## General Introduction

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- What are the literary elements that make Oscar Wilde's novel an embodiment of Aestheticism?

As an attempt to answer these questions, a comparative approach is to be applied by juxtaposing the above mentioned novel with Wilde's essay "The Decay of Lying" (1889) that is served as a representative guidebook of his Aestheticism. By doing so, the essay is going to be a measurement to draw meaningful conclusion, discerning whether Wilde's fictional work applies, or rather contradicts his own philosophical stance or not.

This dissertation is divided into two chapters; the first chapter provides a comprehensive exploration of Aestheticism in England. It begins by delving into *fin de siècle* Victorian society, introducing the movement, and a selection of its practitioners to ultimately, having a focused examination of Oscar Wilde and his literary career and Aesthetic creations. As for the second chapter, the focus lies on investigating the invariability of his belief. This entails extracting Wilde's four key Aesthetic beliefs presented in the essay and meticulously examining their presence, or absence, within the fictional work.

**Chapter One:**

**The Aesthetic Movement in**

**England**

*“Art should be something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.”*

*- Henri Matisse*

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### 1.1. Introduction

The nineteenth century is marked as a significant era during which several philosophies found avenues to be expressed. In the realm of Literature, it is undeniably evident that this period stimulated a mixture of viewpoints that happened to be broadening swiftly via literary movements. This process is, by its very nature, a sequence of reactions that cleared the way to innovative movements that came one after the other, each with its own ideas, sometimes sharing certain ideas and ideals while standing firmly against one another during other times. Going along with this growing tendency of actions and reactions, ideas and counter-ideas, the Aesthetic movement forced itself into the world of literature and art towards the last decades of the nineteenth century, putting forward critical considerations while introducing fresh perspectives.

The following chapter intends to introduce the Aesthetic movement in England. It encompasses an insight into the last period of Victorian England that is known as *fin de siècle* era while highlighting the significant shifts that occurred at that moment, particularly the artistic and social ones. Following that, one will provide a thorough introduction to the movement in its entirety through defining it and numerating the historical and literary antecedents that led to its emergence. Furthermore, the chapter will explore pioneering individuals whose names are top-listed as far as nineteenth-century Aestheticism in art and literature is concerned. What will come later in this chapter is a more précised and focused study of Oscar Wilde's personal and literary careers and the influences that shaped his Aesthetic perspectives. This is mainly to be done for the purpose of introducing such literary man as well as for the reason of drawing a clear image of Wilde's life and the way which its details are reflected in his art to pave the way for an overview of each selected work; *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and "The Decay of Lying" (1889).

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### *1.2. Fin de Siècle*

The categorization of different epochs and intervals has been essential to understand the evolution of culture. Each of these periods exhibits a unique collection of cultural riches. Among these, the term “*Fin de Siècle*” emerged to stand for one of the most distinctive periods; one marked by its literary and artistic treasures that could not be found in any other era.

For the aim of providing the most accurate image of the era mentioned above, a definition should be provided first. According to *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, in its meaning “*Fin de Siècle*”, is a direct translation to end of the century, especially the nineteenth century, originated from French. It is commonly used to describe a cultural, artistic, and intellectual phenomenon that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. (Pearsall 530)

The term “*Fin de Siècle*” not only serves as a descriptor for this period but also encompasses specific concepts that emerged solely during this time, and the literature that originated during this period commonly referred to by this term, displaying distinctly contrasting perspectives compared to the earlier and middle parts of the nineteenth century. As Mathew Potolsky states:

Fin de siècle was first used in Britain in 1890, having been borrowed, accent and all, from France, where it had an earlier popular debut as the title of an 1888 play. Most obviously, it is a period term, but like so many other terms, it also stands in for a characteristic style, set of affects, and dominant literary or artistic forms. (697)

Potolsky considers the term “*Fin de siècle*” to be a bit complicated and “messy”, which can be used to describe a wide range of things, making it almost confusing. However, it plays an important role in the study of the Victorian era, by challenging the idea that the period was solely

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defined by the reign of a monarch. He also asserts that this term represents a sense of crisis and opposition, referring to those things that were not fully embraced during the high-Victorian era. (697)

The researcher Ruth Livesey claims in her piece of writing entitled “Fin de Siècle” that referring to something as a “fin de siècle phenomenon” encompasses the idea of the traditional establishment coming to an end, and the emergence of innovative and groundbreaking transformation. By using the French term instead of the English equivalent “end of the century”, it becomes possible to trace its critical significance; it has been historically linked to writers and artists who were influenced by French thinkers.

As a matter of fact, the historian John F. Wukovits agreed in his book *The Victorian Era* that “the high Victorian” era was “proved to be one of the most exciting and revolutionary times in British history” (8). Various significant changings affected the working and wealth collecting methods in the country. Not only that, such rapid changes of life also shaped the lifestyle of the British people, introduced the modern comforts they cherished, elevated the nation’s military and scientific achievements on global scale, and started the process of breaking down a long-standing class that originated from the rule of medieval kings and barons. All of these happenings denote that the era was characterized by a deep sense of confidence to the extent that made the mid-years of Queen Victoria’s reign known as the period when everything appeared achievable as there was also a belief that no problem was too difficult to solve. (Wukovits 8)

Michael Timko in his book *New Literary History*, precisely in “The Victorianism of Victorian Literature” chapter considers the *fin de siècle* period was characterized by an extreme shift when “the Victorians [were] in danger of losing their identity and becoming known only as

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“mid-nineteenth century” or “pre-modern” people” (607). Significant transformations led to the appearance of a new term: “Degeneration”. The latter was coined in 1892 by Max Nordau, the social critic, as title of a work of social criticism which examines the relationship between art and society in late nineteenth century Europe. Nordau criticized the modern society that was experiencing a decline, specifically in morality and sanity. According to him, the term “degeneration” is considered as “a morbid deviation from an original type” (16). He believed that some people in modern society were displaying characteristics that deviated from what he considered the “norm” or the ideal type of human behavior, intellect, or physicality. It shows itself in the fashion of men, women, and children where he perceived the characteristics and traits of the time as indicators of “degeneration” (degeneracy), presenting a list of symptoms, encompassing both physical and psychological aspects.

Among women, there are different hairstyles and headwear. One woman would have her hair combed smoothly back and down, resembling a painting by Rafael<sup>1</sup>. Another woman would wear her hair high over the temples, similar to the style of historical figures like Julia or Plotina, while a third could have short hair in front and long hair at the back, waved and slightly puffed. Some women wore huge, heavy felt hats, while others decorated their hair with emerald-green or ruby-red birettas like medieval students. The clothing choices also matched the unusual hairstyles. For instance, one woman wore a waist-length mantle with a side slit, draping over her chest like a curtain and adorned with little silken bells that made continuous clicking sounds, which could mesmerize or startle an observant viewer. Next to the stiff and formal clothing styles of historical figures like Catherine de Medicis and Mary Queen of Scots, the flowing white

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<sup>1</sup>Raphael, an Italian artist in the Renaissance, was great at making paintings and buildings. People like his art because it's clear, easy to understand, and shows the beauty of humans in a special way according to ancient ideas.

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robes of angels in painting by Memling were seen. On the other hand, there is the opposition extreme of caricatured masculine fashion with modern tailored coats, open lapels, a stiff shirt-fronts. The majority of people preferred a style that is unimaginative and inconspicuous, characterized by complex and confusing designs with irregular lines, puffy parts, and unclear shapes. These designs caused women's bodies to look like various objects, such as beasts, armchairs, or artworks (Nordau 7-8). Diversity and creativity was the rule at that time.

Children walking alongside their mothers, dressed in such extravagant and peculiar ways resembled the drawings of an artist named Kate Greenaway who had a love for children but portrayed them in an affected and unnatural style. This style of drawing takes away the true essence of childhood and presents them in strange and absurd disguises. For example, there was a child dressed like a medieval executioner in red, another wearing an old-fashioned bonnet and a colorful velvet mantle, even a little one wearing a long dress with puffed sleeves from the time of First Empire (Nordau 8-9). All of that was reflected in art, no detail was left without being pictured through artistic lenses. People of that time lived one life, a life that was, and is still seen in that time's special type of art that aimed at mirroring the diversity in Victorian England, and Europe.

Men completed the picture, and most of them avoided looking too unusual because they feared being laughed at by ordinary people known as "philistines", or because they still have some sense of what looks good. Apart from a few exceptions, they mostly followed current fashion for men's clothing. However, they became more creative with their hairstyles. Some had curls and a wavy beard like Lucius Verus, while others resembled a whiskered cat in a Japanese artwork. One man had a beard like Henry IV, another had a fierce mustache like a soldier in old



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painting by F. Berun, and some have a small tuft of hair on their chin like the city-watch characters in Rembrandt's painting called "Ronde de Nuit." (Nordau 9)

The researcher Greg Buzwell states in the article of "Daughters of Decadence: The New Woman in the Victorian Fin de Siècle." That those times were indeed a period when different and innovative things started to be introduced amidst British community and more bizarre looks and artistic "out-of-the-box" ideas started not only to appear, but to be hugely celebrated and spreading in a rushing pace. The common started to gradually fade away while new unusual trends were breaking their paths through the British society. The events and innovative ideas discussed here led to the appearance of novel terms; the "New Woman" was used to refer to women who "undermined the traditional view of the feminine" and the "Dandy" referred to any man who seemed to threaten "the accepted view of masculinity" that Max Nordau expressed strong disapproval and outrage at the radical shifts in behaviors, criticizing the rejection of traditional values, the feminization of men and the increasing masculinity in women.

It is notable that Nordau's depiction of modern individuals highlights a tense connection between their appearances and art, be it painting or literature. Society has been influenced by art, while art has responded to the shifts in society. If one takes a look at the concern of sexuality and the decline in morality in this period and their impact on art, the relationship persists, especially when considering their association with the concept of "degeneration". In this sense, the researcher Richard A. Kaye, in a summary of chapter three entitled "Sexual Identity" from the book *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin De Siècle*, states that "degeneration, [...and] hysteria, these would seem metaphors by which many late-Victorian thought about sexuality and the erotic self" which is affirmed by Greg Buzwell when he said that in the *fin de siècle* period,

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there was a growing sense of sensual freedom, and the pursuit of new sensations, unavoidably, led to an emphasis on sex and sexuality in the search for new experiences. This mood led to the emergence of new artistic and literary movements, amongst them is the Decadent movement.

The professor Carolyn Burdett claims in “Aestheticism and Decadence” that the term “Decadence” originally means a process of decline or “falling away”. When referring to art, it encompasses several interconnected qualities. These include intense refinement, favoring artificiality over nature, a sense of *ennui* or dissatisfaction instead of moral earnestness or hard work, an interest in unconventional and paradoxical ideas, and exploring transgressive aspects of sexuality. Arthur Symons, a poet, was a key figure in explaining “decadence”. In his essay *The Decadent Movement in Literature* (1893), he described it as a “new and beautiful and interesting disease”. For Symons and other critics, “Decadence” represented the literature of modern society that had become overly “luxurious” and “sophisticated.” (qtd in Burdett)

According to Matthew Bradley who states in his article “Decadence” that amongst the significant works produced in this period within the realm of literature is, *À Rebours* (1884). As a symbol of that movement, it delves into themes of individualism, the rejection of conventional norms and values, and the pursuit of sensation. That was a decadent work that can be ranked with other works such as *Jude the obscure* (1895) and *Easter Waters* (1894) by Thomas Hardy, *Songs of a Coward* (1891) by John Barlas, *The Yellow Book* (1894-1897), the magazine which “was seen as a chief organs for decadent writing.”

After the Victorians rejected the controversial viewpoint, “Decadence had spread into many other European countries as an Aesthetic term” (Bradley), this occurred especially when the purpose of art came into question, for during the Victorian era, literature and art played

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crucial ethical roles. Yet, by the late nineteenth century, there was a shift towards an aesthetic purpose of art, emphasizing the conveyance of beauty. This shift was represented by the emergence of “Aestheticism” which overlaps with the Decadent movement in several aspects, including the belief that art should be detached from moral considerations (Burdett). The name of this movement changes, going by Aesthetic movement, Aesthetic Decadence, and also Art for Art’s sake movement.

### 1.3.Introducing Aestheticism

Aestheticism emerged as a notable artistic and intellectual movement during late Victorian era. Understanding it and its broader historical backdrop helps in comprehending its significance and impact, grasping how Aestheticism responded to and challenged prevailing attitudes towards art, beauty, and the role of creativity in society. The following paragraphs will also contribute to a better understanding of the motivations, inspirations, of Aestheticism’s proponents and the ways in which it contributed to wider artistic and intellectual developments of the period.

#### 1.3.1. Aestheticism Defined

In *The Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, J.A. Cuddon defines it as “a complex term”, a term that is “pregnant” with various meanings. Its origins can be traced back to the Greek word *aisthēta* which refers to “the things that are perceptible by the senses” (11), while *aisthētēs* means the “one who perceives” (11). In 1750, A.T. Baumgarten’s work was published, *Aesthetica*, that is a study on the criticism of taste which is a philosophical theory, then over time the term “aesthetic” has evolved to signify anything related to the critique of beauty or the theory of taste (11). For the critic R.V. Johnson, the term “Aesthetic” or “Esthetic” is vague and often denotes the “beautiful” (as in aesthetic adventure), or referring to the study of the beauty and arts

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(as in (Hegel's aesthetic that is Hegel's philosophy of beauty). "Aesthetics" is a philosophical domain where questions like what does beauty entail? How does form relate to matter in literature and art? What are the things different forms of art share? are asked and termed as aesthetic questions. (4)

However, when referring to Aestheticism, the meaning of the term "aesthetic" changes. Johnson puts it as follow:

When the word refers to aestheticism, it refers not merely to the beautiful, not merely to the philosophical study of the beautiful (from whatever point of view or whatever results), but to a set of particular convictions about art and beauty and their place in life. (4)

In this sense, Aestheticism is a term used to describe a cultural and artistic movement or a form of sensibility, how things are looked at and felt about, that emerged in the late nineteenth century in England. At its core, it held the belief that art is "self-sufficient" and requires no purpose beyond its existence. In plain words, art is an end in itself and should not serve didactic, political, propagandist, moral, or any external purposes. It should exist purely for its own sake, without being obliged to convey any particular message or meaning (Cuddon 11). Thereby, as Catie Cullen writes in "Art for Art's Sake: Your Guide to the Aesthetic Movement" article that embracing the philosophy of "Art for Art's sake" is about valuing aesthetic beauty in artistic creations above any societal, political, or moral agenda. Art and literature were appreciated solely for their beauty and did not require a deeper meaning. Although the movement's existence was somehow short, yet its impact lasts on the sphere of art history and literature.

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Moreover, the movement could be seen as a response to the utilitarianism and capitalism prevalent in the later Victorian period, as well as a rejection of the “bourgeois ethos” embodied by the Philistines. At its best, Aestheticism served as a renewing force in an era marked by ugliness, brutality, inequality, oppression, complacency, hypocrisy, and philistinism. It represented a genuine quest for beauty and an acknowledgment of the independent value of the beautiful (Cuddon 12). Therefore, Anita J. Holden in her research titled *Baudelaire and Gautier: Some Aspects of a Literary Relationship* considers that art does not seek to advocate any specific argument or make explicit moral statement. Its purpose is to embody beauty. Moral reflections in art are not suitable because reality does not have an equivalent in art. (50)

Walter Hamilton states in his book *The Aesthetic Movement in England* that one of the fundamental principles of Aestheticism is the close interconnection between all fine arts. This is evident as their poets have also been painters, and their artists often draw inspiration from the poems of their time to create their masterpieces in paintings and sculptures (98). Noteworthy, while the term “Aesthetic movement” is commonly used, it is claimed that there was no single cohesive or organized movement with that specific name. There is ongoing disagreement among critics regarding its origins and the individuals who should be categorized under this label (Burdett). Yet, In response to those who considered Aestheticism only a “myth”, Johnson claims that it is a “mental concept”, treated as if it were something real, arguing that in the later nineteenth century there was indeed an existing group of people who shared similar opinions, thoughts, writing, and actions, and they collectively identified as followers of Aestheticism (5); the Aesthetes.

### 1.3.2. The Aesthete

An Aesthete is “one who pursues and is devoted to the beautiful in art, music and literature” (Cuddon 11). While the “Aesthetes” emerged first as a distinctive group of people, they distinguished themselves by their strong emphasis on literature, the fine arts, and beauty in general. These individuals were often met with disapproval from their fellow citizens. The British cartoonist and writer George Du Maurier used to portray and provide an example of Aesthetes as elegant young gentlemen with long hair, velveteen jackets, and knickerbockers, accompanied by admiring and angelic young ladies. (Johnson 9)

Geoffrey Newman writes in *The Burlington Magazine* that in an introduction to the writings of John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Adrian Stokes, David Carrier poses a fundamental question: “what truly defines an aesthete?” While the term “aesthetics” remains relatively neutral and descriptive, the label “aesthete” often carries associations of exceptionally refined sensitivity and an air of elegant taste. Art historians and some people criticized Aesthetes for not looking at the bigger picture of art in terms of how it is made, what it means, and how history affects it. They say Aesthetes only care about how things look, and they do not understand art’s deep meaning. Yet, Aesthetes believe that art is connected to life itself. They do not separate art from life like others do and for them art is a symbol of life and the artworks show the most important thoughts and feeling people have. (627)

Thereby, being an Aesthete is a way of life besides being an art critic, aiming at overcoming what they saw as the “ugliness” of middle-class Victorian society. Meanwhile, they

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endeavored to embellish their own surroundings and approach life with an artistic mindset. (Mambrol)

### 1.3.3. Historical and Literary Influences

In the late nineteenth century, the Aesthetic movement was a big deal in art and culture. It got its style and ideas from history and stories from Germany and France. The Pre-Raphaelites, a group of artists who admired the art before Raphael's time, also played a major role in shaping the Aesthetic movement.

#### 1.3.3.1. German and French Influences

The beginnings of this movement or culture can be traced back to the contributions of various German writers during the era, particularly Kant, Schelling, Goethe, and Scheller. These writers shared the belief that art should be independent, having the right to self-governance. As a natural consequence, they advocated artists to be free from any external authority or influence. (Cuddon 11)

The impact of the mentioned German writers, particularly Goethe, had a significant influence, spreading to various countries. In Britain, their ideas were diffused by figures like Coleridge and Carlyle. In America, Edgar Allan Poe and Ralph Waldo Emerson played a role in popularizing these ideas. In France, individuals known as "culture vultures" such as Madame de Stael, Victor Cousin, and Théophile Jouffroy, were instrumental in introducing and promoting these concepts (Cuddon 11). The opted slogan of the Aesthetic movement was in fact raised in France as "*L'art pour l'art*" (art for art's sake), coined with Victor Cousin who was as a teacher of the Aesthetic philosophy, using it as way to convey the Aesthetic message, used interchangeably with several concepts such as aesthetics, the new German philosophy, pure art, pure beauty, disinterestedness, and freedom in art, yet the former phrase gained prominence

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later. After Cousin's influence was diminished, his former student Théophile Jouffroy began teaching philosophy at *École Normale*. When the school was closed in 1822, Jouffroy started offering private courses in Aesthetics, attracting notable attendees such as Saint-Beuve, Vitet, Duchatel, and others from the elite. He introduced sympathy as part of the experience of beauty, and freely employed the term "Aesthetic", passing on the doctrine of *L'art pour l'art*, for before 1830, the term was rarely used. (Wilcox 369)

This shows that Aestheticism in England was "the result of French influence and native ideas" (Cuddon 12). Charles Baudelaire, a French poet, who is widely regarded as a precursor to the French Symbolists, a movement that shared many similarities with British Aestheticism. Baudelaire's poetry showcased various qualities that the Aesthetes later embraced. Notably he was among the first writers to incorporate sexually explicit themes in his poems; the collection of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) that gathers all of them, exploring subjects such as lesbianism and vampirism. Therefore, the Aesthetes, inspired by his boldness, also challenged societal boundaries in their own works and drew from him a profound appreciation for sensuality and a desire to explore the connection between art and life. (Laws)

Another French figure is Théophile Gautier who developed the idea of Art for Art's Sake and did not adhere to the traditional rules or norms of literary competitions (Shanks 169). From the time Gautier began introducing his first collections of work, he consistently emphasized the independence of the artist, although he also strangely reflected his own feelings of insecurity. Before the *Emaux et Cammées* (1852) collection, Gautier's work was marked by inner division and uncertainty, which was evident in the way he separated the arts from society. However *Emaux et Cammées* (1852) represents a rejection of this conflict. It withdraws from the struggle,



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just like the entire movement of Art's for Art's sake, which holds the fundamental belief in the complete autonomy of art, where aesthetics replace moral considerations. (Holden 50)

In this sense Gautier states:

Nous croyons à l'autonomie de l'art; l'art pour nous n'est pas le moyen, mais le but; tout artiste qui propose autre chose que le beau n'est pas un artiste à nos yeux; nous n'avons jamais pu prendre la séparation de l'idée et de la forme... Une belle idée car que serait-ce qu'une forme qui n'exprimerait rien. (qtd. in Holden 50)

Through these lines he expresses a belief of the independence of art, considering it as an end in itself rather than a mere means. The artist who pursues anything other than beauty is not regarded as a genuine artist. Gautier challenges the notion of separating the idea from the form in art, emphasizing that a beautiful form is fundamentally connected to a beautiful idea, as a form can express nothing without that idea.

On the other hand, Matthew Potolsky states that "the challenge arguably begins in 1848 with first meeting of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, whose theoretically driven artworks set the tone for all of the movements that followed" (698). That is to say, The Pre-Raphaelites Brotherhood's establishment laid a groundwork for a series of artistic developments, and Aestheticism emerged as one of the movements that drew inspiration from their theoretical-driven approach.

### 1.3.3.2. The Pre-Raphaelites:

In 1848, four young men, Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Thomas Woolner, were studying together at the art school of the Royal Academy. Holman Hunt,

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John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were painters, while Thomas Woolner was a sculptor. These talented individuals possessed a unique and innovative genius, along with dedication to their craft. Together, they had a bold idea to revolutionize painting and sculpture in England by introducing something completely new and original. These young artists were deeply inspired by early Italian art and the medieval Pre-Raphaelite painters. They decided to call themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. During the movement, they even signed their works with the initials “P.R.B” (Hamilton 1). According to the article titled “The Pre-Raphaelites” written by Dinah Roe, they chose a name that hinted at their fondness for art from the late medieval and early Renaissance period that existed before Raphael.

The term “Pre-Raphaelite” itself was initially associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood which applies to both art and literature. It can be perplexing because it actually represents two distinct and nearly contrasting movements (Roe). The first, “the brothers believed that the artists must observe a scrupulous fidelity to nature” (Al-Farsy 20). The second emerged as a development of the first and is known as Aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism under the guidance of D.G Rossetti (Landow “Pre-Raphaelites: An Introduction”) that challenged the prevailing utilitarian values that dominated the mid-century, and played a significant role in popularizing the concept of “Art for Art’s Sake.” (Roe)

Rossetti and his follower Edward Burne-Jones emphasized themes of medievalism infused with eroticism and utilized pictorial techniques to create a moody atmosphere. Being extremely fearful of criticism, Rossetti decided against exhibiting his artworks. As a result, Burne-Jones took on the responsibility of championing Aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism for a long time. It was only after Rossetti’s death that his collected works were exhibited, allowing the

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European and British public to become more familiar with his paintings. (Landow “Aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism”)

While the Aesthetes focused less on philosophical themes, Rossetti’s life and art were significant sources of inspiration for them because of his reclusive and Bohemian<sup>2</sup> lifestyle at Cheyne Walk. He believed that human love originates in physical beauty along with Modern Philistine Urban culture. Rossetti’s early short story *Hand and Soul* (1849) also served a manifesto for Aesthetes, it narrates the story of a fictional early Renaissance painter who, demotivated by the lack of impact his art has on the world, experiences a vision where his soul appears as a beautiful woman that instructs him to paint her. This declaration, which sets the foundation for all of Rossetti’s subsequent paintings of women, embodies the refined Romanticism that defines the Aesthetic movement. (Landow “Aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism”)

The enduring consequence of Romantic subjectivism and self-culture was the emergence of the cult of the individual ego and sensibility. In Aesthetic poetry, similar to its expression in art, exhibits an inclination towards solitude or avoidance (Cuddon 11-12), which means that Aestheticism in poetry tends to lean towards or show a preference for being isolated or avoiding certain aspects. In this context, it suggests that poets who embrace Aestheticism may seek solitude and distance themselves from conventional ideas, themes, or approaches in their poetry. They might be drawn to a more individualistic artistic path, focusing on Beauty, artistry, and aesthetic expression rather than conforming to societal norms or engaging in direct social or political commentary in their work. During this period of Pre-Raphaelitism, numerous poets focused on creating beautiful musical effects in their verses rather than emphasizing the message or meaning. They aimed at a sense of sensuousness and pursued what is recognized as “pure

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<sup>2</sup>It refers to a person who lives an unconventional, often artistic and free-spirited lifestyle. The Bohemian is known for rejecting traditional social norms and pursuing creative pursuits.

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poetry” (Cuddon 12). What should also be said about this group is that they revived old-fashioned styles and language influenced by Spenser and Keats. They also used Classical Mythology extensively to express their ideas. The fascination with medievalism, chivalry, and romance was important to the aesthetic movement. Tennyson’s poem *The Lotos-Eaters* captures many of the feelings associated with the aesthetic ideal (Cuddon 13) besides others such as Charles Algernon Swinburne, James McNeill Whistler, and Walter Pater.

### 1.3.4. Pioneering Figures (Aesthetes)

Charles Algernon Swinburne, James McNeill Whistler, and Walter Pater were notable figures of the nineteenth century known for their significant contributions to the world of art, literature, and aesthetics. They played a pivotal role in shaping the philosophy of Aestheticism, advocating the pursuit of beauty and the elevation of art in everyday life.

#### 1.3.4.1. Charles Algernon Swinburne

“There are probably few literary men who would hesitate for a moment in assigning to Swinburne the title of king of the Aesthetic poets” (Hamilton 47). In *The Journal of Education* a section titled “Algernon Charles Swinburne”, it is declared that Swinburne was a notable poet of his time; he stood out among other famous poets. He was the last one of his group and his death marked the end of an era of great poets. Born in 1837 to a cultured family, he had excellent opportunities for education at Eton and Oxford, where he studied alongside notable friends such as William Morris, D.G. Rossetti, and Burne-Jones. Swinburne was a bit unpredictable as a student but had a fondness for studying Greek. His first published work *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) was a huge success and was considered his best achievement. Critics hailed him as a rising genius as he quickly became well-known in the literary world. (488)

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in Swinburne could have been content with the fame he gained from *Atalanta*, but he did not stop there. In his next work *Poems and Ballads* (1873) he took a different direction that caused controversy. While people admired the beauty of the writing, some were disturbed by the lack of moral values in his poems; they were too erotic and contained references that were considered inappropriate in polite society. (488)

Influenced by French writers Baudelaire and Gautier, Swinburne believed that poetry should not teach moral lessons. He strongly believed that if a poem had a beautiful form and was skillfully crafted, it would make any subject praiseworthy. Like Baudelaire, he mixed lyrical language with complex rhythms and explored themes like sexuality, violence, and cruelty, considered shocking by Victorians. He challenged the idea that art should not always promote goodness and self-improvement, putting the Aesthetic beauty above, and presenting moral ambiguity and discomforting readers with unsettling ideas. (Burdett)

### 1.3.4.2. James McNeill Whistler

Layla Abd Al-Salam Al-Farsy in her research paper *Whistler and His Revolutionary Esthetics*, sees James Abbott McNeill Whistler as cosmopolitan figure. After living in different places and being expelled in 1854 from West point due to his deficiency in Chemistry, he spent much time in Europe. During that period he attended the Art Treasures Exhibition in Manchester, England in 1857. While residing there he was exposed to the works of well-known artists like Velasquez and contemporary English Pre-Raphaelites to become later one of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's close mates. (16)

While the first stage of the Pre-Raphaelites focused on realism and the impulse toward reality, whistler distanced himself from this movement. In art circle, the moralizing aspects of

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the Pre-Raphaelites had lost popularity, leading to a rise of Aestheticism tendency. Whistler played a significant role in influencing this new artistic direction, particularly with his *Ten O'Clock Lecture* (1885) (Al-Farsy 20) that was first delivered at Princes Hall, wherein he set forth the Aesthetic perspective:

Alas! Ladies and gentlemen, Art has been maligned [...] people have acquired the habit of looking, as who should say, not at a picture, but through it, at some human facts, that shall, or shall not, from a social point of view, better their mental or moral state. [Art] is, withal, selfishly occupied with her own perfection only-having no desire to teach- seeking and finding the beautiful in all conditions and in all time. (Whistler 212)

Despite his influence on the Aesthetic movement, Whistler did not fully embrace the unconventional cult that emerged later, which reacted against Victorian morality, instead, he asserted the principles of Aestheticism through his innovative tastes and continuous search for beauty, such as painting nighttime's scenes or using abundant gold or black colors. (Al-Farsy 21)

Between 1868 and 1878, Whistler resided in England. During this period, his paintings represented a systematic departure from the values his contemporaries sought in art. He developed an art style that moved towards abstraction, where the outlines of the visible world began to dissolve, and the language of painting itself took prominence. His landscapes and seascapes from period lacked recognizable elements, eschewing traditional subject matter. Instead, Whistler focused on the interplay of light, shade, color, and texture on the canvas, asking his audience to appreciate these visual elements as the essence of his art (Al-Farsy 25). Overall, one of Whistler's most remarkable achievements in the Aesthetic movement was the creation of

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*The Peacock Room*, painted in the house of his patron, Frederick Leyland, between 1876 and 1877. (Al-Farsy 21)

### 1.3.4.3. Walter Pater

Paul Barolsky in chapter titled “WALTER PATER’S RENAISSANCE.” In the book *The Virginia Quarterly Review* declares that few writers like Pater led lives as transparent as his. From his birth in 1839 to his death 55 years later, he lived in a serene world surrounded by books and artworks, trying to understand the enchanting powers of beauty, quietly wandering through sensations and thoughts, seeking the indescribable core of their essence. Oxford was the heart of his private life, where he resided for 20 years as a scholar and writer, carefully exploring the delicate subtleties of aesthetic experiences in exquisitely refined prose. (208)

As for W. Bowen states that Walter Pater dedicated much of his intellectual energy to refining and perfecting his work, rather than focusing on productive output. Pater’s writing process involved great labor due to his exacting critical nature, always striving for utmost artistic refinement. He was a disciplined prose artist, sparing no effort to achieve the highest standard of literary charm, gradually getting closer to his admirable ideal. (272)

Under the influence of French ideas, his work *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* published in 1873 as a first edition is commonly seen as the foundational text of Aestheticism in England. During a time when the Middle Ages were celebrated, he, instead, praised Renaissance culture, highlighting the artist’s individualism and their understanding of hidden desires. Going against Victorian beliefs in objective reality and eternal truth, Pater emphasized the fleeting nature of impressions. (Burdett)

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Pater mainly encouraged people to focus on the pleasure of sensory experiences and lovely things, which some saw as self-indulgence but others viewed as a radical rejection of Victorian Moralism and Christian doctrine in favor of art (Burdett). Walter Pater establishes a correlation between the success of a work of art, whatever it can be, and its beauty in terms of the degree of pleasure it evokes in the spectator, even the human's life should be lived "in the spirit of art" (Pater *Appreciations* 62) that is to say, living a life of pleasure or as work of art, to clarify his beliefs, he states:

The objects, with which Aesthetic criticism deals, music, poetry, artistic accomplished forms of human life, are indeed receptacles of so many powers or forces; they possess, like natural elements, so many virtues or qualities. What is this song or picture, this engaging personality in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? And if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence and under its influence? To answer to these questions are the original facts with which the Aesthetic critic has to do. (Pater VIII)

Furthermore, within the conclusion, Walter Pater included certain lines that encapsulate his Aesthetic perspective. In these lines, he summarized the essence of the Aesthetic concern as follow:

Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they passed, and simply for those moments' sake. (Pater 252)



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Four years later he published a revised edition entitled *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* wherein, Pater chose not to include the “Conclusion” because he believed it might potentially mislead some young readers who come across it. While there is much to discuss regarding this decision, it is worth mentioning that Pater, despite concerns from critics, does not intend to guide or lead the young men who read his work in any particular direction (Wallen 1036). Yet, regardless his fear about the negative impact, his work had a significant influence on the next generation, including well-known figures such as Oscar Wilde.

### 1.4. Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde, a prominent figure in Aestheticism, stood as a leading voice for art's sake. His eloquent writing and dapper persona embodied the movement's ideals, challenging societal norms with wit and elegance. Wilde's influence and legacy in the Aesthetic movement remain profound and enduring.

#### 1.4.1. Personal Background

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1856. He received an exceptional education supervised by his highly intelligent parents; the father William Wilde who authored pieces like *The Beauties of the Boyne* (1849), a lecture entitled *Ireland, past and Present; the Land and the People* (1864) and an account of the final years of Jonathan Swift, the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. As for the mother Jane Francesca Elgee known as Lady Wilde that wrote some poems which were published in the *Nation* newspaper during the political Turmoil of 1848, using the names of “Speranza” and “John Fanshaw Ellis”. Her poems were published together as a book entitled *Poems by Speranza* in 1864 that had the motto of “Fidanza, Speranza, Costanza”. Their son traveled extensively to historical and significant places. Those places helped him to

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grow in a house and atmosphere that appreciated the writings of ancient authors. Consequently, he became exceptionally skilled in their works during his college years (Hamilton 86-87).

After spending almost a year at Portora Royal School, which is often called the “Eton of Ireland”, Oscar Wilde went on to study at Trinity College in his hometown before heading to Oxford University. He spent a year at Trinity College and managed to win the Gold Medal for Greek as well as a scholarship. Then, in 1874, he began his studies at Magdalen College in Oxford. During that time, he earned a first scholarship. Over the course of four years at Oxford, he achieved two first-class distinctions. In 1876, he earned a first class distinction in the subject of “Greats”. (Hamilton 87)

Wilde was the father of the Aesthetic movement and a true symbol of an Aesthete. He dressed in a unique way that annoyed other artists who were not as famous as him. He tried to fit into the Victorian style by wearing formal clothes, yet he ended up creating a new fashion style. He often wore fancy clothes like soft jackets, short pants, black stocking, a big collar shirt, a green scarf, and a flower-shaped pin. The lily flower, which he mentioned in many of his works, became a symbol of his cool fashion. People were eager to see him in such outfits, by which he chose to challenge the rules of dressing, calling himself the “Professor of Aestheticism” (qtd in Gustafsson 15). At that time, both Wilde and his contemporaries knew that he was different, sometimes even rebellious culturally.

In plain words, Wilde had an attractive appearance. He would often carry an orchid with him, and he had an incredibly lively and light-hearted personality. It seemed that he was an exceptionally captivating companion, leaving everyone who met him enchanted by his charm, wit, and friendly nature (Allitt). According to the researcher Alexander Grinstein in chapter titled “OSCAR WILDE.” in *American Imago* book, he mentioned that in 1891, Wilde encountered

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Lord Alfred Douglas, who happened to be the Marquess of Queensberry's son. This meeting led to a strong romantic connection between the two men. Their relationship was marked by both friendship and a passionate homosexual love. Despite the Marquess of Queensberry's anger and attempts to stop them from seeing each other, Wilde and Douglas stood firm and persisted in maintaining their connection. (127)

Consequently, Oscar Wilde was arrested for engaging in homosexuality, which was considered unlawful within his society. That was based on the rules in Section 11 of the *Criminal Law Amendment Act* of 1885, which explicitly outlined the prohibition of such activities, indicating that:

Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour. (6)

That was the case, and despite the efforts to reduce his sentence, nothing worked. Oscar Wilde's trial ended after six days with a guilty verdict from the jury. Sir Alfred Wills, the Justice, gave him a harsh punishment, ordering his imprisonment and doing hard labor for two years. (Grinstein 128)

Wilde had limited contact with the outside world, hardly receiving letter nor seeing visitors. During his last months in prison, he wrote a long letter called *De Profundis* to Douglas, talking about their tragic relationship, and when he was released from prison on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1897, he had planned to go to a Roman Catholic retreat for six months. He tried to tell the priests at

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Jesuit Church about his plan, but his demands were refused. Thus, to avoid more embarrassment, he left England for France as he and his friends had planned, changing his name to Sebastian Melmoth, one that he kept until he passed away. (Grinstein 128)

### 1.4.2. Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism

Oscar Wilde's sharp humor, wit and unique attire, portrayed him as "the Apostle of Aestheticism", catching quickly the notice of writers and illustrators (Grinstein 126). He placed a significant emphasis on the concept of the *flâneur*, a person whose primary pursuits revolve around the appreciation of the beauty and the stimulation of the senses. That person held the distinctive role of leading the way in fashion or ideas, influencing not solely the scope of literature but also extending to art, fashion, and cultural trends. Wilde, renowned for his theatrical and prose works, gained popularity for his original writing style, literary critiques, and his unconventional lifestyle that positioned him as a leading literary "trendsetter" within London society. (Bowen)

Throughout his writings, such as the plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde masterfully incorporated the attributes and the characterizations of the Aesthetic movement's *flâneur* figure. This served as a means of reflecting his own ideology and reinforcing the notion of Art for Art's sake and exploring themes of beauty, indulgence, and the pursuit of pleasure in a world that was increasingly preoccupied with societal norms and conventions. (Bowen)

#### 1.4.2.1. Literary Influences

Oscar Wilde found a significant literary companion in Walter Pater when they met each other during Wilde's final year at Magdalen College in 1877. Using his finely-toned ability to promote

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himself, Wilde introduced himself by sending Pater a copy of his first article where he expressed deep admiration for Pater's *The Renaissance*. While Pater's confidence was fragile by then, he felt flattered and sent to invite Wilde to visit upon his return to Oxford. Throughout that academic year, the two met frequently, sharing tea and having walks together, and even after leaving Oxford, their encounters continued. (Hext)

Undoubtedly, Pater left a mark on Wilde's Aesthetic sensibilities, evident on every page of Wilde's writing when he turned Pater's complex thoughts on Aesthetics into witty sayings and statements, showcasing his unique voice. Wilde's ability to convey Pater's dense prose in a more accessible manner highlighted his gift for effective communication. However, the only clear difference between them was that Pater avoided strongly stating artistic opinions, whereas Wilde enjoyed the spotlight he received from the media. That extensive much attention made him appear like a character, representing the public exaggerated idea of Pater (Hext). This idea embraced living in the moment which was supported by Wilde via living a Bohemian life and profiteering to enjoy every pleasurable moment, precisely when this influence was fueled by Huysmans' *À Rebours* which emphasized on desire, pleasure, and lust which are modes in Wilde's Aesthetic life. (Gustafsson 16)

*À Rebours* is a novel written by the French Joris-Karl Huysmans, published in 1884, to be considered as a seminal work of the decadent literary movement that influenced the English Literature particularly after translating it to become *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain* by Robert Baldick in the same year. The novel follows the life of its protagonist, Jean des Esseintes, a wealthy aristocrat who retreats from society to lead a reclusive and highly artificial life. Filled with *ennui* and disillusionment with the world, Des Esseintes seeks to create an ideal life through sensory indulgence and art. He believed that committing beautiful sins were necessary for life's

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improvement and a journey towards personal growth rather than striving to follow the saint, he believed that the sinner is the example that should be followed. (Gustafsson 15)

During his time at Oxford, Wilde participated in the art critic Mr. Ruskin's Lecture on Florentine Art. He even followed Ruskin's unique approach by engaging in road-making work to enhance both physical and mental well-being (Hamilton 13). When talking about Ruskin's connection with the Aesthetes, the focus is on Ruskin of the 1880s, but before that, in his earlier days around 1846, Ruskin had some ideas that supported the Aesthetic movement. Back then, he believed that the main goal of art was to show beauty. Being a Romantic and religious man, he thought that beautiful things in nature and art were like symbols of God's special qualities. Enjoying the balanced and harmonious aspects of art and nature according to Ruskin was more spiritually important than trying to teach moral lessons (Landow "Ruskin and the Aesthetic movement"). Unlike Ruskin, Wilde did not have similar philosophy of spiritualizing art. The common point between both thinkers was the theory of the beautiful which Wilde developed based on Ruskin's ideas to have only an Aesthetic purpose of art.

In an audio version of an interview titled *The Science of the Beautiful* (1882), Marland Rob, the historian, reads how Oscar Wilde discussed the development of the theory he learned from Ruskin. A reporter visited Wilde in his new home on 28<sup>th</sup> street, where he explained his perspective. According to Wilde, true beauty cannot be taught directly; it must gradually unfold and be revealed. While scientific truth can be learned from a teacher, understanding beauty comes from being surrounded by beautiful things (0:46-1:11). During 1873 at Mordlin College, Oscar Wilde said "it was at this time that this theory of the effect of beautiful associations began to manifest itself in my mind" (1:53). He found a particularly beautiful town, and the presence of Ruskin, along with his teaching, further influenced his ideas (2:23); "Very many of my theories

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are, if I may say so, Ruskin's theories developed. He was at that time giving a course of lectures upon Florentine art, and had all the youth of the colleges after him.” (2:39). In 1876, Mr. Wilde visited Italy and explored its churches, gaining a deeper appreciation of art’s beauty, after this journey he said that:

I came back to Oxford more confirmed than ever in the correctness of my theories, and it was then that I began to write my poetry, and gradually gathered around me a group of young men—an aesthetic clique, if you will [...] I had a beautiful house by the riverside which I fitted up in consonance with my peculiar ideas. We were very enthusiastic young men, and insensibly, as it were, we became extravagant in our expressions as compared with the common manner or converse. (3:24 - 41)

In short, Oscar Wilde’s Aestheticism is a culmination of various ideas inherited from his predecessors, encompassing concepts of beauty, the pursuit of pleasure, and the notion of living life in its moment and as a work of art. Through a synthesis of literary influences, Wilde crafts a similar yet unique aesthetic philosophy that is distinctly his own. This philosophy serves as the foundation of his literary creations, notably exemplified in works such as the critical essay “The Decay of Lying” (1889) and the fictitious text titled *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

### 1.4.2.2. “The Decay of Lying”

“The Decay of Lying” is one essay written by Oscar Wilde, first published in 1889 then it was included amongst a collection of essays entitled *Intentions* in 1891. It can be seen as Wilde’s artistic and philosophical manifesto for the Aesthetic movement. Through his eloquent arguments, he listed key principles of Aestheticism when realism was a dominant trend in Art.

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The arguments are provided through a conversation between two characters that are named after his children, Vivian and Cyril, discussing the importance of lying in Art and the decay of modern society's appreciation of Art and beauty. He champions the idea that art should not merely imitate life and nature, but rather transcend them to levels of beauty and idealism, suggesting that art, when fueled with imagination, it can show deeper truths that go beyond everyday world, arguing that lying in art can be a means of capturing profound emotions and universal experiences that may elude factual representations.

In its core essence, the essay delves into a thorough exploration of the interconnection between art, life, and nature and questions the interpretations of these components, urging to understand them from a different perspective. In this case he names his Aesthetic belief as a collection of four Aesthetic doctrines where he sets forth what attributes art should hold; art is best when it is not trying to be exactly like life. It speaks for itself and often, life learns from art. The real goal of art is to tell amazing, beautiful stories, even if they are not entirely true.

### *1.4.2.3. The Picture of Dorian Gray*

According to the historian Donald L. Lawler and based on his piece of research "Oscar Wilde's First Manuscript of 'The Picture of Dorian Gray.'" From the book *Studies in Bibliography* claims that there is evidence suggesting that Wilde commenced work on *Dorian Gray* prior to October 1889. The manuscript, believed to be the original, underwent extensive revisions by Wilde, impacting characterization, setting, action, and theme, alongside minor linguistic adjustments. After revising the holograph manuscript, Wilde had a typed copy created, which also underwent substantial revisions. The typescript, with its extensive changes, served as the basis for the published version in Lippincott's. (127)



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The *Picture of Dorian Gray* is Oscar Wilde's only novel. Its first public appearance was in 1890 by the *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, and the novel is deemed to be one of his prominent fictional works and a crucial example of the Aesthetic movement. It introduces a captivating plot that explores the intertwining of themes, particularly beauty and morality. The first version of the work was initially deemed to be a serial publication. However, it evolved into a full-length novel in 1891, undergoing modifications in terms of tone, content, and moral implications that urged the removal of certain scenes. (Lawler 127)

Alternations to the original version stemmed from the criticism Oscar Wilde received from the conservative audience who found the content explicit and morally questionable, particularly the concerns that were centered around the main character's relationships and behaviors. In the initial version, certain scenes and interactions were depicted in a more provocative and unrestrained manner. The characters themselves were imbued with a heightened sense of moral ambiguity and decadence, and their actions often took an extreme and controversial tone, shedding lights on the heightened degree of overt sensuality and intensity. (Lawler 128)

In response to these concerns, the editor of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* undertook significant editorial changes to the first version, all without Wilde's consent. This process involved censoring or altering content that was deemed too scandalous or offensive. The primary objective of these edits was to temper the more provocative elements and align the text with the magazine's prevailing standards. (Lawler 128)

After reviewing the edited version, Wilde expressed his discontent with the alterations, perceiving it as a distortion of his original ideas and his artistic vision. To address these concerns, Wilde embarked on a revision process. He expanded the novel, incorporating his initial

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intentions while also moderating some of the more explicit elements. The version that was eventually published, which is now widely recognized, represents Wilde's endeavor to retrain greater creative control over the narrative, and reflects his refined vision with serving a balance between his artistic ideals and the expectations of both the public and the publishers. (Lawler 128)

Wilde's masterful prose, rich symbolism, and complex characters contribute to make this novel a timeless work that continues to resonate with readers as it challenges conventional notions of art, beauty, and the human conditions. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) revolves around Dorian Gray, a young and handsome man who becomes the subject of a portrait painted by his friend Basil Hallward. Dorian expresses a desire to remain youthful and beautiful forever, while his portrait ages and reflects his moral decay. That wish was realized in the presence of a mysterious figure named Lord Henry Wotton, and had the effect that Dorian's portrait bears the marks of his sins and immoral acts, while his outward appearance remains untouched throughout time.

### 1.5. Conclusion

Despite its short life span, the Aesthetic movement left its print on the spheres of both art and literature. Its influence extended beyond its temporal boundaries, shaping the creative landscape and contributing to the evolution of aesthetic sensibilities. The movement's ideas, innovations, and the work of its proponents continued to reverberate through subsequent generations, underscoring its significance and enduring legacy in the world of artistic expression and literary exploration.

Oscar Wilde, distinguished as a foremost writer and champion of the Aesthetic movement, presents an intriguing case study and make any person with interest in literature and

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criticism wonder whether Oscar's ideas that are set forth in "The Decay of Lying" (1889) resonate consistently within the fictional narrative in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). This problematic probes into the potential alignment between Wilde's articulated beliefs and the thematic currents within his literary creations.

## **Chapter Two:**

# **Investigating the Invariability of Oscar**

## **Wilde's Aestheticism**

*"The more you look at other people's art and read about it, the more you'll learn about your own art."*

*- William S. Burroughs*

### 2.1. Introduction

Influenced by earlier Aesthetes and following their path regarding the function of Art within Victorian society- asserting that Art must solely be an end in itself - Oscar Wilde crafted a plethora of literary works that exemplify his Aesthetic vision. This perspective was mainly expressed in Wilde's essay under the title "The Decay of Lying". Presented in the frame of a Socratic dialogue, the essay reflects Wilde's long-lasting view on art as a type of human expression where reality should rather be placed in second position, or be even totally diminished, while granting total priority to imagination, Aestheticism, and beauty of language. In this specific essay, Wilde asserts, art, including literature, should deviate from the usual obligatory task of expressing ethical or moral lessons. In the same vein, Oscar Wilde authored a novel with the title of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) a novel that he claims it embodied the principles of the Aesthetic movement in the folds of its actions and the actions of its characters. However, the question of whether the mentioned novel authentically encapsulates the entire Aesthetic mind-set and principles remains a subject of debate that needs deep analysis and investigation.

To answer the problematic mentioned above, this chapter aims at digging deep into both works i.e. "The Decay of Lying" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. By launching a thematic and comparative analysis this research will explore whether Wilde's artistic perspective mentioned in his essay aligns with the content of the novel. The examination starts by listing each Aesthetic perspective and then explaining it to move then to spotting its presence or absence in the novel. It should be noted here that all of the plot, characters, symbols, and language elements will be scanned as possible guises through which Wilde reflects his own artistic views. More than that, the analysis will also spot certain episodes of Wilde's life and biography as a possible tool that

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would either confirm or deny the degree of similarity and authenticity between Wilde's non-critical fictional opinions and his imaginative productions. By the end of this chapter, one will show the degree of affinity between Wilde's criticism and his fiction by means of deciphering each possible message in both works.

### **2.2. Investigating the Invariability of Wilde's Aestheticism**

#### **2.2.1. All Bad Art Comes From Returning to Life and Nature**

While criticizing realism in artistic creation, Oscar Wilde considers that "All bad Art comes from returning to Life and Nature" ("The Decay of Lying" 16). This action, according to him, stifles the imaginative faculties of an artist by for the reason that it compels him to be precise and exact in copying details of already existing objects. Not only this, Wilde also thinks that imitating existing arts also diminishes the value of the artist who becomes a mere echo of older and knowledgeable individuals who were for the utility of art. Both of these methods, Wilde argues, are detrimental to an individual's imagination, leading him then to develop "a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth-telling" ("The Decay of Lying" 3). In this sense, Wilde is cautioning against the danger of overemphasizing facts, urging that "if something cannot be done to check, or at least to modify, [the] monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile and Beauty will pass away from the land" ("The Decay of Lying" 3). The word "sterile" here means that art will lose its vitality, freshness, and ability to provoke emotions. Both of beauty and the Aesthetic value that art brings to life will diminish, because the beauty that art conveys is not mere superficial quality, but rather has the power to inspire and uplift those evoked emotions. In this sense, by excessively prioritizing factual accuracy, society risks losing the transformative and enchanting effects of art's beauty. Balance between accuracy and imagination becomes then a

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necessity to preserve the vibrancy of art and the enduring impact of beauty, which is at risk if the scale tips too far in favor of facts and realism.

Termed by Wilde as a “modern vice”, this phenomenon takes shape when it becomes associated with matters related to Life therefore the work produced is ugly and not artistic. As Wilde asserts, the only beautiful things:

[...] are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art. To art's subject-matter we should be more or less indifferent. We should at any rate, have no preferences, no prejudices, no partisan feeling of any kind. (“The Decay of Lying” 5-6)

Moreover, he deems “modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter as entirely and absolutely wrong” (“The Decay of Lying” 6). That is to say, the domain of art is distinct from the realm of everyday life. He posits that art thrives when it departs from immediate concerns of human existence. To Wilde, true beauty is found in objects or concepts that exist beyond the cult of human utility, pain, or pleasure. The artist's detachment from practical concerns enables him to create content in a unique way. Wilde's view challenges the conventional view on the connection between art and reality.

Furthermore, Wilde showcases a strong disapproval of returning to Nature and Life to create Art, for he considers Life as “the solvent that breaks up Art, the enemy that lays waste her house” (“The Decay of Lying” 6) and as for Nature, it “is always behind the age [...] and] will destroy any work of Art” (“The Decay of Lying” 6).



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Utilizing his character Vivian as a tool for expressing his view that Nature is no more a means of joy and that Art is the actual thing that leads people to loving and appreciating. Not only this, Wilde always reminds his readers that Nature reveals its secrets through art rather than the other way around. One example he uses is that after looking at paintings by artists like Corot and Constable, new things are noticed in Nature, because “what Art really reveals [...] is Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished conditions” (“The Decay of Lying” 1). Overall, and in plain words Wilde sees that Life as:

part of [Art’s] rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between [Art] and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment [...] Art itself is really a form of exaggeration; and selection, which is the very spirit of Art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of overemphasis. (“The Decay of Lying” 7)

Wilde acknowledges the success of Art that translates visible aspects of life into artistic conventions, and further suggests that Art can create things that life lacks for Aesthetic pleasure. However, he cautions that when artists restrict themselves to faithfully representing Life and Nature, their work tends to lose its beauty, becoming ordinary and unexciting. This underscores Wilde’s belief that Art’s strength lies in its departure from literary reality, allowing room for creativity and imaginative interpretation. In this context, he claims that “realism is a big failure [...] and] wherever we have returned to Life and Nature, our work has always become vulgar, common, and uninteresting” (Wilde “The Decay of Lying” 7-8). Indeed, this first doctrine could be easily spotted in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It is mainly represented through

Sybil Vane, one of the characters and Dorian's first love, as it is also portrayed in the way Dorian's portrait is depicted.

### 2.2.1.1. Sybil Vane

Sybil Vane, Dorian's first love in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), is a significant character that draws perfectly the Aesthetic vision of Art. She is a young and talented actress who performs in a small theatre where she captivates audiences with her performances, often taking on roles in Shakespearean plays. Gradually, she becomes romantically involved with the novel's protagonist, Dorian Gray who becomes infatuated with her acting and falls in love with her, perceiving her as the embodiment of all what is beautiful and virtuous.

Sybil is portrayed as a delicate, artistic beauty whose physical appearance and spiritual essence encapsulate the themes of innocence, purity, passion, idealization, and vulnerability. In plain words, she is not only serving an artistic show, but she is rather presented by Wilde as a piece of art. Many details in Sybil's character are imagined by Oscar Wilde to serve as means of exploring the interplay between art and life, as well as beauty and reality, but with major focus and glory granted to the "beautiful" and "artistic" side of the character. Presented this way, the Aesthetic element "all bad Art comes from returning to Life and Nature" proves itself as being a focal component of the story through the character of Sybil with all of her details, actions, and personality traits.

In fact, the beginning of Sybil's reflection as an embodiment of artistic beauty starts even before her appearance, when Dorian Gray commences his Aesthetic journey, being curious to try some pleasure of whatever kind to step later into the theatre where she is performing. This could be seen when Dorian describes his walk in the city saying:

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As I lounged in the park, or strolled down Piccadilly, I used to look at everyone who passed me, and I wonder, with a mad curiosity, what sort of lives they led. Some of them fascinated me [...] I had a passion for sensations... Well, one evening about seven o'clock I determined to go out in search of some adventure. (Wilde *PDG* 40-41)

Around half past eight, Dorian encounters a peculiar small theatre illuminated by garish gas lamps and adorned with flashy posters. A rather unattractive Jewish man, wearing an extravagant waistcoat that astounded him, stood by the entrance, leisurely smoking a distasteful cigar. He offers him a box seat with the question "Have a box my Lord?" (Wilde *PDG* 41) finding himself inexplicably drawn. He eventually purchases a stage-box for an entire guinea without comprehending his impulse, nevertheless, if he has not, Dorian reflects, he should have "missed the greatest romance of [his] life." (Wilde *PDG* 41)

The play being performed is *Romeo and Juliet*; one of the Shakespeare's greatest works of romance. As the play begins, every actor seems to Dorian boring and unprofessional until his eyes spot Juliet. Eagerly talking about her with his friend Henry Wotton, Dorian uses the most artistic description of Sybil, making her seem as an actual piece of art:

Harry, imagine a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with little flower-like face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose. She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life [...] that beauty, mere beauty, could fill your eyes with tears. (Wilde *PDG* 42)

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Upon seeing Sybil's performance on stage, Dorian is not only impressed by her acting but also captivated by the emotions she evokes and her melodious voice, a matter that makes him say that he "never heard such a voice [...] sounded like a flute or a distant hautbois [...] it had all the tremulous ecstasy that one hears just before dawn when nightingales are singing" (Wilde *PDG* 42). He cannot help falling in love with her and she becomes "everything to [him] in life" (Wilde *PDG* 43).

In fact, it is apparent that Dorian's affection is not directed toward Sybil Vane herself, but rather toward the artistry she bestows upon her performance, clearly toward Juliet and other artistic figures she undertakes. He is in love with an actress that is "the only thing worth loving" (Wilde *PDG* 43), and admits that this kind of love is different from loving ordinary women, for "there is no mystery in any of them" (Wilde *PDG* 43). Longing to see her performance, he says that he "can't help going to see her play" (Wilde *PDG* 43). Oscar Wilde's deliberate choice of the name "Vane" is notable as well, evoking the concept of a "wind vane" that shifts with changing winds and weather conditions. Symbolism here is omnipresent. In similar manner, Sybil Vane, as an actress, changes accordingly in her plays and Dorian's affection follows the shifts and transformations of artistic interpretation that Sybil delivers:

One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. I have seen her die in the gloom of an Italian tomb, sucking the poison from her lover's lips. I have watched her wandering through the Forest of Arden, disguised as a pretty boy in a hose and doublet and dainty cap. She has been mad, and has come into the presence of a guilty king, and given him rue to wear, and bitter herbs to taste of. She has been innocent, and the black hands of jealousy have crushed her reed-like throat. I have seen her in every age and in every costume. (Wilde *PDG* 43)

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When Dorian is asked when Sybil Vane is being herself, his answer is “Never” (Wilde *PDG* 43). To him she is like a chameleon, changing color and personality in accordance to what stage needs to the extent that she totally turned into a serial theatrical innovation that keeps changing, never becoming herself again. Sybil Vane, or rather, the actress is placed as “pedestal of gold” (Wilde *PDG* 63), a sacred thing, an Art. She is beautiful as long as she is acting, doing what does not concern her and fills Dorian with a pleasure that he needs as an Aesthete, “she can create the sense of beauty in people whose lives have been sordid and ugly [...] she is worthy of all [...] adoration” (Wilde *PDG* 66). The intense emotions evoked by her, aligns with the Aesthetic emphasis on sensory experiences in the same way in which Art triggers emotional responses without the need for moral justification.

Nevertheless, this artistic creation transforms into what could be considered as a “bad” form of art when Sybil opted to express her true self instead of embodying the character of Juliet. At that night while she is on stage, Dorian felt something unusual about her; the next verses were spoken in a fake way. While the voice was undeniably exquisite, the tone was entirely insincere. The color of the voice was inaccurate, stripping the verse of its vitality and making the passion artificial (Wilde *PDG* 67), which makes Dorian grow “pale as he watched her” (Wilde *PDG* 68).

However, Dorian and his friends believe that the real measure of any Juliet's talent is the balcony scene in the second act. Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward were eagerly anticipating that part. If she fails during that scene, then she would not be considered successful in the role. When she appears in the moonlight, she looks lovely, yet her performance is uncomfortably theatrical, and it only becomes worse as she continues. Her gestures seems overly staged and artificial. She puts too much stress on every sentence, saying them like a schoolgirl who had practiced a lot, but

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with a bad instructor who focuses on words without paying attention to feelings. (Wilde *PDG* 68)

What is important here is that Sybil purposefully wanted to be bad. This is apparent when she says: "I was so bad tonight [...] I shall always be bad [...] I shall never act well again [with] an ecstasy of happiness dominated her" (Wilde *PDG* 70). But for Dorian, "it was dreadful" (Wilde *PDG* 69). When he inquires what had happened to her, her reason was her desire to be more real than ever:

Acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true. I was Rosalind one night, and Portia the other. The joy of Beatrice was my joy, and the sorrows of Cordelia were mine also. I believed in everything [...] You came-oh, my beautiful love!-and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is [...] To-night, for the first time, I became conscious that the Romeo was hideous, and old, and painted, that the moonlight in the orchard was false, that the scenery was vulgar, and that the words I had to speak were unreal, were not my words, were not what I wanted to say. You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is. (Wilde *PDG* 70)

One may interpret the above scene to mean that Sybil Vane decided to be herself through her art. She chooses to stop giving Romeo love, but instead gives her heart to Dorian even when she is acting, justifying her action by telling him: "you are more to me than all art can ever be" (Wilde *PDG* 70). This choice sacrifices the sacred purpose of Art for him. "I heard them hissing, and I smiled. What could they know of love such ours? ", she comments (Wilde *PDG* 70). This

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means that she is stepping away from the perfect imaginative and artistic image for which he loved her once by choosing to rather copy “real” life, which is considered by Wilde as a “bad art”, therefore, her acting turns to “simply a big failure” (Wilde *PDG* 68). In this case, it is interesting that Oscar Wilde opted to make his character utter the word “bad” with joy, if one substituted the sentence “I was bad” that is said by Sybil while taking into account what she means by that, it would sound like “I was real” because for Wilde reality and being bad have parallel meanings, especially in Art.

Another indication of her fading beauty upon returning to reality is seen in Dorian's abandonment of her and his subsequent shocked reaction after noticing her changing attitude. He once viewed her as a changeable, pleasurable, and untrue thing, but she “[had] thrown it all away” (Wilde *PDG* 71). Dorian, inherently drawn to artistic beauty, finds it impossible to engage with anything lacking artistic sense. For all of this, he abandons Sybil, telling her that she is “nothing to me now. I will never see you again. I will never think of you. I will never mention your name [...] you have spoiled the romance of my life” (Wilde *PDG* 71). Not only that, Dorian even adds: “you killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity” (Wilde *PDG* 71). Thus, that love comes to an end the same moment Sybil decides to give up her aesthetic side by sticking firmly into reality, which is to both of Dorian and Wilde nothing more than a “bad” undesirable thing.

As the girl's story comes to an end, remorse fills her heart, and her voice is shaking when she begs Dorian not to abandon her. At this point she tells him that she is “sorry I didn't act well. I was thinking of you all the time. But I will try - indeed, I will try [...] Oh! Don't go away from me [...] don't leave me” (Wilde *PDG* 71). Yet, for Dorian, she deserves no second chance; she has become nothing but a mere “real” lady whom he leaves with disappointment (Wilde *PDG*

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72). The following day, Henry Wotton comes along with news about her death saying: "My letter – don't be frightened – was to tell you that Sybil Vane is dead" (Wilde *PDG* 79). Here, it sounds as if Wilde is telling the reader that no artist deserves life as soon as they decide to imitate life or go back to dull, usual, and spiritless reality. Thus, one of the most important pillars of his essay "The Decay of Lying" seems to be repeated through this fictional character. Reading about Sybil's death reminds one of Wilde's words when he writes that "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (17). If one decides to go back to reality, death would be a much better option for them.

Despite the narrative's subsequent development, Oscar Wilde has a clear and important message concerning the first doctrine "All bad Art comes from returning to Life and Nature", which is that the marriage of Art and Life leads to the death of the former, rendering it "sterile" and lacking vitality. This concept is exemplified through Sybil Vane's tragic story. In one hand her bad acting, symbolizing the fusion of Art and Life, resulted in her career downfall, and on the other hand, Dorian's perception of her as an embodiment of art which ultimately was unable to fulfill his expectations destined her towards a tragic end. Wilde's thematic exploration emphasizes that breaking the boundaries between Art and Life can have detrimental consequences, for "The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything" (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 16) as depicted through Sybil's tragic fate. Similar to her situation which revolves around acting, the next accordance with the doctrine is around the art of painting which is seen in Dorian's portrait.

### 2.2.1.2. Dorian's Portrait

The portrait is a painted representation of Dorian Gray, a handsome and youthful man who is the protagonist of the story. The uniqueness that the portrait has is that it ages and



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changes in a more grotesque and distorted manner, while Dorian remains physically youthful and untouched by the passage of time, which plays a central and symbolic role in the novel wherein Wilde expresses for the second time the ugliness of Art when it is mirroring people's concerns and being mingled with real Life.

Noteworthy, the novel highlights the stark reality as the portrait undergoes a change. This change is triggered by Dorian's wish after he admires his own beauty when he first saw himself in the portrait painted by Basil Hallward:

A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he recognised himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscience that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like revelation. He had never felt it before. (Wilde *PDG* 23)

The apprehension of the impending loss of this beauty was profoundly distressing to Dorian. He expressed his dismay, stating "how sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But the picture will remain always young" (Wilde *PDG* 24). However, he did not consider that his wish would be fulfilled. Unknowingly, he utters words that significantly alter his fate:

If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that! (Wilde *PDG* 24)

After the transformation takes place, the portrait reveals Dorian's concealed truth and holds "the secret of his life" (Wilde *PDG* 74), "its gold would wither into grey. Its red and white roses would die. For every sin that he committed" (Wilde *PDG* 74). In this case, the portrait is a reflection of Dorian's Life which illustrates the modern approach that values the use of factual

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elements in art and an inclination towards realism that is criticized by Oscar Wilde as it results a production of art that becomes “vulgar”.

The first touch of that vulgarity in art appears when Dorian returns home after the conflict with Sybil, notably after she commits suicide which was caused initially by Dorian. At this point, Dorian's face “appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth” (Wilde *PDG* 73). This signifies the consequence of blending Art with Life and Nature, showcasing their intertwining with vulgarity.

The portrait grows gradually worse as long as it reflects his attitudes and immoral actions. This reaches a peak when Dorian determines to show Basil Hallward his reality: “you are the one man in the world who is entitled to know everything about me” (Wilde *PDG* 123). By saying this, one may argue that the work of art is a realistic, modern work that holds between its details Dorian's life that is exposed when one has the first glance at it, reading and decoding the accurate reflection. Once the curtain is drawn back, Basil is able to see that reflection and “An exclamation of horror broke from [his] lips as he saw [...] the hideous face on the canvas grinning at him. There was something in its expressing that filled him with disgust and loathing” (Wilde *PDG* 123). Oscar Wilde employs a compelling simile to deliver his critique of modern art, highlighting its inclination towards ugliness when it prioritizes factual representation over pure beauty. This sentiment is vividly captured when Basil reflects on the portrait's earlier beauty, only to witness its almost erosion. “The horror, whatever it was, had not yet entirely spoiled that marvelous beauty” (Wilde *PDG* 123).

The portrait's transformation is taken to a new level of degradation as the ultimate act of cruelty occurs: Dorian's savage slaying of Basil, driven by a consuming rage. “He rushed at him,

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and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man's head down on the table, and stabbing again and again" (Wilde *PDG* 126). This scene unfolds with vivid symbolism as blood stains emerge from the painted hand that killed the man, and "the painted feet, as though the thing tripped- blood even on the hand that had not hold the knife" (Wilde *PDG* 176) which illustrates a profound notion; the closer one veers towards life, the more the artistic creation deteriorates.

To emphasize the failure of modern art, Dorian's decision to destroy the portrait serves a powerful symbol; "he looked round, and saw the knife that had stabbed Basil Hallward [...] It would kill this monstrous soul-life [...] he seized the thing, and stabbed the picture with it" (Wilde *PDG* 177). Astonishingly, the portrait's original magnificence is restored; it regains its "splendid" and beautiful appearance while Dorian falls dead holding the grotesque malformation of the portrait. This act can be viewed as a representation of art's true essence, liberated from the constraints of reality. It suggests that art's primary purpose should be aesthetic beauty, free from the ugliness associated with Life and Nature. And rather, it expresses nothing but itself.

### 2.2.2. Art Never Expresses Anything but Itself

Wilde expounds upon his ideas about art's independence and its relationship with the prevailing trends of its time. In "The Decay of Lying" (1889), Wilde believes that art exists for its own sake, free from the constraints of realism or spiritualism, and how it often stands in opposition to the tendency of its time.

Wilde boldly states, "Art never expresses anything but itself" ("The Decay of Lying" 16). This assertion underscores his belief that art is an entity with its own life and purpose. It is not a

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mere reflection of reality, it exists primarily to manifest itself and be “independent” rather than to convey external messages.

In the same scope, Wilde considers that “Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror” (“The Decay of Lying” 9). By emphasizing the saying “Art finds her own perfection within” he means that art achieves its highest form when it adheres to its own principles and aesthetics, without relying on external standards or trying to replicate something from real world.

By using metaphor, he deems art a “veil” and not a “mirror” which reflects external objects and shows them as they are, whereas the former conceals and adds a layer of mystery far from reproducing faithfully external reality, instead being a “veil” obscures the real world to some extent and allows imagination in artistic expression.

Wilde goes on to argue that art is not bound by the norms of its time and asserts that it is not obliged to be realistic for the mere reason of living in an age dominated by realism. He contends also that art often opposes the prevailing trends of its day and challenges conventional expectations and resists assimilation to the spirit of its age. Wilde posits that art keeps a record of its own evolution. It does not represent historical context it emerges from; rather, it charts its unique path and development (“The Decay of Lying” 16).

In essence, Wilde emphasizing that art's true beauty and value comes from its ability to express itself in its unique way, rather than attempting to mimic or mirror external reality. This doctrine is prominently conveyed in the novel, where Wilde expounds upon this viewpoint through the preface and the character Basil Hallward.

### 2.2.2.1. The Preface

It is important to note that the inclusion of the preface in the revised version of the novel served a specific purpose. Prior to its publication, the novel had caused quite a stir, particularly within British society, due to its perceived immorality. To address these concerns and provide clarity, Oscar Wilde added the preface when releasing the modified second version of the novel which serves as a defense of his literary work and helps readers understand his intentions.

In this sense, the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) serves as a captivating introduction to the novel's core themes. It showcases Wilde's distinctive and daring literary style while establishing the philosophical and Aesthetic framework for the story. Within this preface and as way of defense, Wilde notably conveys his belief that "Art never expresses anything but itself" ("The Decay of Lying" 16), laying the foundation for a deeper exploration of the novel's artistic and moral aspects.

The opening sentence of the preface "THE ARTIST is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" (Wilde *PDG* 3), reflects Wilde's Aesthetic doctrine, suggesting that the primary focus of art should be on art itself, the beautiful creation, rather than on the personality or identity of the artist who should not overshadow the work produced, that is to say, being concerned only with creating "beautiful things" which means separating his life from the creations.

As he is convinced that "Literature is a fine art" (Wilde "In defense of Dorian Gray" 334), the novel he wrote naturally has no other purpose but to provide pleasure and be beautiful as "it gave [him] pleasure to write it" (Wilde "In defense of Dorian Gray" 334). In this context, the notion of the autonomy of art particularly in literature is apparent. While in the preface, he considers that the book should be "well written, or badly written. That is all" (Wilde *PDG* 3), for

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Wilde, the book should be judged based on its literary merits such as style, structure, and the effectiveness of its storytelling, rather than its moral or ethical content. He argues that “there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book” (Wilde *PDG* 3).

Wilde firmly asserts that any artist's primary duty is to ensure that their work of art is inherently beautiful. He contends that artists do not create with the aim of conveying specific messages or proving particular points. In this context, he declares that “No artist desires to prove anything [...] no artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style” (Wilde *PDG* 3). In this statement, Oscar Wilde expresses the idea that artists, particularly those dedicated to the Aesthetic movement, do not seek to convey moral lessons or make ethical judgments through their art. They have no interest in trying to prove a moral point or elicit ethical sympathies from their audience. In fact, Wilde views any attempt to inject ethical messages into art as a flaw in an artist's style. To him, the introduction to ethical sympathies into art is seen as an undesirable and unnecessary artistic choice.

Furthermore, Wilde suggests that art has two aspects; “All art is at once surface and symbol” (*PDG* 3). The surface is the visible and immediate appearance of artwork while the symbol is the deeper meaning or message that artwork may convey. In this sense, Wilde with a cautioning tone warns those who delve beneath the surface or try to read too much into the symbolism of art: “those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril” (*PDG* 3) which implies that interpreting art in complex or moralizing ways can lead to misunderstanding or misinterpreting it, therefore, losing its essential role. Overly, Wilde argues that “it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (*PDG* 3), that is to say, the audience who truly gives meaning to art. Art reflects the viewer's perception and emotions through, triggering them, rather than representing objective reality or moral lessons

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which also relies on whether the viewer understands art's primer role, knowing how to perceive the work of art without too much judgment.

At the end, he is making a provocative and paradoxical statement about the nature and the purpose of art stating that "all art is quite useless" (Wilde *PDG* 3). Wilde is not saying here that art has no values or that it serves no purpose; rather, he is challenging conventional notions of art's utility. He argues that art should not be judged based on its practical or moral usefulness. Instead, the true value of art lies in its ability to exist for its own sake, to be beautiful and thought-provoking without serving a utilitarian function.

Overall, the preface functions as a manifesto reinforcing the concept that art solely expresses itself, a notion previously explored in "The Decay of Lying" (1889). In addition, to introducing the artist's role in the preface, Oscar Wilde incorporates an Aesthetic artist into his narrative, who aligns with the motto "Art never expresses anything but itself" (*PDG* 16).

### 2.2.2.2. Basil Hallward

Basil Hallward is a character in Oscar Wilde's novel, a talented and dedicated artist known for his exquisite portraits. Basil is the one who paints the portrait of Dorian Gray. His character is pivotal to the story as he is responsible for capturing Dorian's youthful and idealized beauty on canvas.

As for the investigation, Basil is portrayed as an Aesthete who believes in the power and importance of art. He is driven by his appreciation for beautiful things and admires Dorian, not only for his physical beauty but also for the sense of innocence he perceives in him, serving as a symbol of the artist's idealization of beauty and art's potential to transcend the limitations for

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reality and being aware of art's aesthetic role. In this sense, his relationship with the portrait plays a significant role in the novel's exploration of Aestheticism, mainly the autonomy of art.

The notion is portrayed when Basil Hallward is asked when to exhibit the portrait, he answered "I don't think I shall send it anywhere [...] No, I won't send it anywhere [...] I have put too much of myself in it!" (Wilde *PDG* 6). Here, Basil is infatuated with Dorian and has invested a significant part of his own emotions, feelings, and artistic sensibilities into the portrait. Essentially, he has poured his heart and soul into the creation of the portrait which suggests that the portrait is not just a mere representation of Dorian's physical appearance but also a reflection of Basil's own emotions and artistic identity.

Basil's refusal to exhibit the portrait serves a concrete demonstration of Wilde's belief that artists should not impose their personal selves into their creations. He illustrates the practical application of the idea: if the portrait was exhibited, it would deviate from the essence of art, which is to embody beauty. With that in mind, Basil, or rather, Wilde argues that "every portrait that is painted with feeling is the portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself" (Wilde *PDG* 8). The quote is given as an outcome of the deviation from the Aesthetic principle because of self-revelation, which is contrary to the idea that art should remain independent. It also underscores in a paradoxical manner the importance of artists restraining themselves from imposing their feelings or personalities onto their creations, in line with the notion that "Art never expresses anything but itself".



### 2.2.3. Life Imitates Art More Than Art Imitates Life

Oscar Wilde argues that “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life” (“The Decay of Lying” 10). To prove this, he provides examples of how artists, through their creations, have influenced and shaped people’s perceptions of beauty. For instance, he mentions how the paintings of certain artists such as *Dante’s Dreams* (1871) by Gabriel Rossetti and *The Golden Stair* (1876) by Edward Burne-Jones who have defined and popularized particular ideals of beauty, and people have attempted to emulate these ideals in their own lives.

For Wilde, “a great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher.” (“The Decay of Lying” 10) Wilde emphasizes that artists can invent certain types of beauty, and life then tries to replicate these ideals in various forms. He cites historical examples, such as Hans Holbein the Younger and Anthony Van Dyck, who brought their artistic representations to England and did not find those in it “and Life, with her keen imitative faculty, set herself to supply the master with models.” (Wilde “The Decay of Lying” 10) which means people started modeling themselves after these artistic standards.

By saying that Life imitates art, Wilde means that art influences life, and that is in desperate need for it. Being deeply influenced by Greek philosophy, particularly in matters of art and beauty, he draws on this influence to reinforce his perspective, specifically highlighting the Greek objection to realism, as they believed it made people ugly. They preferred art to influence life positively in terms of aesthetics. They thought that art, whether in form of sculpture or painting, had the power to make life more beautiful. In essence, Wilde argues that life benefits from art, not just spiritually or emotionally but also aesthetically (“The Decay of Lying” 10). In this regard, he states:

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We try to improve the conditions of the race by means of good air, free sunlight, wholesome water, and hideous bare buildings for the better housing of the lower orders. But these things merely produce health; they do not produce beauty. For this, Art is required. (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 10)

For him, achieving beauty in life and society requires the presence and influence of art. Art in his view adds a dimension of aesthetic and cultural value that goes beyond mere physical health and practicality. It enriches life with beauty, elevating it to a higher level of appreciation and cultural refinement.

He considers that those who truly learn from great artists do not merely copy their works but become like their works of art (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 10). In other words, the impact of art on life goes beyond mere imitation; it shapes people's identities and elevates life itself, thus "Life is Art's best, Art's only pupil" (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 10) because it learns from art how to be beautiful, both in form and spirit.

To strengthen his standpoint, he mentions incidents that has happened in his life, which proves the notion of life as imitating art. In 1879, shortly after leaving Oxford, Oscar Wilde met a woman of exotic beauty who had a remarkably changeable character. She would shift from art to horseracing, religion to mesmerism, politics to philanthropy, resembling a chameleon in her transformations. One day, Wilde noticed a serial story in a French magazine that depicted a character strikingly similar to his friend who as well recognized the resemblance and was captivated by it. Later, while in Venice, Wilde found the magazine again and read how the heroine in the story made poor life choices. He wrote to his friend about his views on Venice but also mentioned that the story's character had acted foolishly. Not long after, his friend indeed made a similar choice, running away with a man who abandoned her in six months. When Wilde

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met her in Paris in 1884, she confessed that she had felt an irresistible urge to mimic the story's character and saw her own life mirrored in the narrative, leading to a tragic outcome (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 12). This incident exemplified the imitative instinct discussed earlier and served as a poignant illustration of it.

"Life holds the mirror up to Art" (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 12) he states, and suggests that when people encounter art, whether it is a painting of a unique character or a story with imaginative elements, these artistic representations can leave a lasting impression on their minds. As a result, individuals might be inspired or influenced by these artistic depictions in their own lives. They may either act in ways that resemble the characters or scenes from art, or they may strive to turn artistic fantasies into real-life experiences.

Moreover, Wilde proposes that even external Nature imitates Art. Nature can only show people effects and scenes that they encountered through artistic representations like poetry and paintings. Wilde believes that this is what makes Nature enchanting, but also highlights its limitations compared to Art, which has the power to inspire and shape the way the world is perceived ("The Decay of Lying" 17). He suggests that people do not merely see things; they see them in a way that reflects their beauty, and this beauty is often conveyed by artists:

At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them. That white quivering sunlight that one sees now in France, with its strange blotches of mauve, and its restless violet shadows, is her latest fancy, and,

on the whole, Nature reproduces it quite admirable. (Wilde "The Decay of Lying"  
12)

Wilde contends that the effects of art on how Nature is perceived are so profound that, in some cases, certain natural phenomena may have not been noticed or appreciated until artists brought attention to them; he beautifully gives appreciation to the Impressionists that through their art, they gave meaning and beauty to Nature:

If not from the impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to this particular school of Art. (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 12)

Following the presented arguments, Oscar Wilde believed that life often takes inspiration from art. He thought that things artists create can influence how people see and interact with the world. However, when one looks deeper into his writings mainly *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, some contradictions in this idea are found in sense that Wilde through his work of art imitates life by making his fictional characters function as a reflection of his own living.

### 2.2.3.1. The Depiction of Wilde's Life

Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), it is not simply a case of life imitating art, but rather, art imitating life. This work of art is inspired, if not directly emulating, aspects of Wilde's own life. Within the narrative, elements of his literary pleasures, personal experiences

like his homosexual affection, and dual personalities which find expression through the characters of Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward, represent a deviation from his beliefs.

### 2.2.3.1.1. Duality

The theme of duality is a prominent element in both Oscar Wilde's own life and the novel that is the creation of his rich fertile imagination. In this novel, Wilde skillfully portrays his dual personalities, which are consisted of a carefully cultivated public persona that adhered to social norms and a hedonistic private life that champions the pursuit of sensory pleasure. The novel itself shows an imitation of this life; the duality is embodied by the character of Dorian Gray to be deemed as one of the most prominent reflections of Wilde's life; thus, presenting one of many contradicting things to which he previously talked.

Publicly, much like Wilde himself, Dorian is initially introduced as a strikingly handsome and charismatic young man. He is charming and admired by those around him. Lord Henry Wotton expresses that "he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity" (Wilde *PDG* 16). Sybil Vane names him "Prince Charming" for his captivating beauty and gentleness. Much like Wilde was in the social circle of his time when people found it hard to believe that such a charming gentleman could engage in decadent and morally questionable behavior behind closed doors, Wilde wrote a passage about Dorian that parallels this situation, highlighting their both stark contrast between public images and private actions:

Even those who had heard the most evil things against him, and from time to time strange rumours about his mode of life crept through London and became the

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chatter of the clubs, could not believe anything to his dishonour when they saw him. He had always the look of one who had kept himself unspotted from the world. Men who talked grossly became silent when Dorian Gray entered the room. (Wilde *PDG* 102)

The passage describes how Dorian Gray's external appearance and charm makes it difficult to believe the rumors and allegations against him; ones that are printed in the hidden portrait. Similarly, in real life, Oscar Wilde was known for his wit and charming persona that concealed his private life and the scandals around him, claiming that "Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him" (Wilde *PDG* 125), particularly homosexuality that is a significant element that shows how Wilde made his art imitate his own life.

A further example of duality within the narrative manifests in Dorian's relationship with Alan Campbell, suggesting a deeper, intimate connection that extends beyond mere friendship which is shown when Dorian reminds him of their profound bond. But Alan refuses with regret to mention those days, begging Dorian not to "speak about those days, they are dead" (Wilde *PDG* 135). Even though their friendship takes a turn approximately five years after their initial encounter, leading to a period of silence and avoidance, their paths cross again when Dorian compels to assist in disposing of Basil Hallward's body after killing him. Alan hesitates initially, but accepted after hearing a threat from Dorian, fearing the exposure of their undisclosed relationship, "a horrible sickness came over him. He felt as if his heart was beating itself to death in some empty hollow" (Wilde *PDG* 135). This fear highlights the dualism that Oscar Wilde also grappled with, compelled to conceal his homosexuality to protect his standing in Victorian society, echoing the theme of duality prevalent in the novel.

### 2.2.3.1.2. Homosexuality

Certainly, Aestheticism does use sensuality and sexuality in creating beautiful art, prioritizing aesthetics over moralistic themes and at the same time abhorring turning to reality and imitating realistic events, particularly those of the artist. Yet, in the novel, the theme of homosexuality is undertaken as a contradictory element to what Aestheticism targets. It has been discussed that Wilde, in real life had homosexual desires, specifically towards Alfred Douglas. Hence, the contradiction here is that homosexuality is reflected in the novel in a sense that makes it a mixture of imagination and a reflection of reality, specifically, the homosexual practices experienced by Wilde. Thus, Wilde's rule that Art should not be imitating Life is broken, by the creator of the rule himself. Wilde uses part of his life as a subject-matter of his art that is characterized in Basil Hallward.

Basil Hallward and Oscar Wilde grapple with hidden desires and passions. The romantic love shared between Wilde and Alfred Douglas finds an implicit reflection within the novel, to make Basil's fondness for Dorian Gray go beyond the admiration of his physical beauty, which is initially meant to serve an inspiration for Basil's art. Instead, Basil's sentiments delve deeper than artistic admiration, evolving into emotional obsession with him.

This affection, though not exposed, could be tangible in how Basil passionately talks about Dorian Gray, particularly when he first meets Dorian. He experiences intense emotions that he cannot easily explain, describing Dorian's personality as it "was so fascinating that, if [he] allowed it to do so, it would absorb [his] whole nature, [his] whole soul, [his] very art itself" (Wilde *PDG* 9). Basil, who is proud of being independent, feels a strong desire to maintain his autonomy and not be influenced by external forces: "I have always been my own master; had at

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least always been so, till I met Dorian Gray" (Wilde *PDG* 9). This suggests that his feelings for Dorian are powerful and form a potential cause that might lead him to change the course of his life.

Basil explicitly mentions that "his personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art" (Wilde *PDG* 12) expressing how Dorian Gray's presence and character have profoundly influenced his artistic style and approach. Yet, within the same passage, Basil's words reveal the depth of his feelings for Dorian, highlighting the personal attachment he has developed. Dorian has evolved into an indispensable part of Basil's life, as conveyed when he passionately exclaims, "Harry! If you only knew what Dorian is to me!" (Wilde *PDG* 12). This expression underscores the profound emotional connection Basil has formed.

To emphasize this transition, Basil even praises one of his landscape paintings, deeming it "one of the best things [he has] ever done" (Wilde *PDG* 12). He attributes this achievement to the presence of Dorian while he was working on it, stating, "because while I was painting it, Dorian Gray sat beside me" (Wilde *PDG* 12). Importantly, a passage following "beside me" was cut in the 1891 version, and after checking *The Original Manuscript of The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the cut passage further illuminates the depth of their relationship where he continues "and has leaned across to look at it, his illegible hair just brushed my cheek, touched my hand. The world becomes young to me when I hold his hand, as when I see him, the centuries yield all up their secrets" (Wilde 20) suggesting a level of intimacy and companionship far beyond the conventional artist and muse.

Basil's deep admiration and affection for Dorian Gray are evident in his words: "He likes me [...] I know he likes me. Of course, I flatter him dreadfully. I find a strange pleasure in



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saying things to him that I know I shall be sorry for having said.” (Wilde *PDG* 13) These words reveal not only Basil's awareness of Dorian's affection, but also his own inner conflict. He acknowledges the pleasure he takes in complimenting Dorian, even though it may lead to unforeseen consequences. This internal struggle underscores the intensity of Basil's feelings for Dorian.

When Basil says, “because, without intending it, I have put into it some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry, of which, of course, I have never cared to speak to him” (Wilde *PDG* 13), he means that his feelings of deep admiration and love for Dorian have unintentionally found their way into his artwork. He has subtly infused his romantic and artistic sentiments into the portrait of Dorian Gray, even though he has never explicitly discussed these emotions with Dorian himself.

From another angle, Basil's reluctance to publicly exhibit the portrait of Dorian claiming that “there is too much of [himself] in the thing” (Wilde *PDG* 12), therefore “the world might guess it; and it will not bare my soul to their shallow prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope” (Wilde *PDG* 13), which can be seen as symbolic of the societal repression faced by homosexuals during the Victorian era. Basil is aware that revealing the true nature of his relationship with Dorian through the portrait could lead to scandal, ruin his reputation, and even result in legal consequences, portraying an imitative picture of Wilde's erotic love.

To demonstrate that the novel serves as a reflection of his life, Alexander Grinstein points out that the primary evidence that could have been used against Wilde during his trial consists of certain passages from his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, mainly those concerned with the

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character of Basil Hallward. Consequently, when the case went to court in early April, several men testified about Wilde and his homosexual relationships with Douglas, which led the prosecution to withdraw from the case (127). With the exception of Basil Hallward, Dorian Gray also indulged into a world of sensual excesses that ultimately led to his tragic fate, mirroring and predicting Oscar Wilde's own downfall and imprisonment. What is particularly intriguing is that the common thread linking both Wilde and Dorian's tragic destinies is the enigmatic influence of *The Yellow Book*.

### 2.2.3.1.3. The Yellow Book

One well-known thing about Oscar Wilde is that Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* held a commanding influence over him, shaping Wilde into an Aesthete and molding his decadent principles. It instilled in him the desire for a hedonistic lifestyle, where life itself became a form of art, centered on pleasure and beauty. Interestingly, Wilde mirrored this angle of his life in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, creating a reflection of himself within the novel. Here, he seemingly contradicts his own doctrine that discourages art's imitation of life. This is seen through the character of Dorian, who becomes captivated by a book referred to as "the yellow book". The latter, much like the role of *À Rebours* in Wilde's life, profoundly influences Dorian, propelling him further into a realm of hedonism and moral decay.

To confirm this connection, Wilde sets forth in his novel the characteristics of "the yellow book" that closely align with Huysmans'. Beginning with the content of the novel, he asserts that

It was a novel without a plot, and with one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to

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realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own. (Wilde *PDG* 100)

This brief passage illustrates the story of a young French man who pursues pleasure with no consideration of societal norms, mirroring the central theme of Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours*. In this novel, the character Jean des Esseintes, an aristocrat disillusioned with contemporary society, strives to construct a world of decadence on his terms. *À Rebours* is known for its psychological exploration of the pursuit of pleasure, much like the theme found in the "yellow book" in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Both narratives delve into the idea of defying societal conventions to embrace hedonistic pursuits. Once more, one notices the aspect of "mirroring" certain episodes from the author's life repeated in the novel. Thus, breaking another rule of Wilde's own creation.

For a more in-depth exploration, it becomes evident that the novel not only mirrors what Wilde admired in real life but it, in fact, uses the very same book that he has used and loved. John M. L. Drew's research reveals that in a letter from 1894, sent to Alfred Douglas, Wilde confessed that the book was a pure fancy of his own. Yet, during the infamous libel trial in 1895, Wilde, under cross-examination, openly acknowledged that the book was Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* (xxii). This revelation firmly establishes the direct connection between Wilde's life, his literary influences, and the content of his novel. However, this is not the only similar incident in the novel. Lord Henry Wotton is another character who also confirms the existence of a link between the "Life" and "Art" of Wilde.

### 2.2.3.1.4. Lord Henry Wotton

Within this narrative, the character of Lord Henry Wotton emerges as a striking reflection of Wilde himself. Lord Henry epitomizes Wilde's doctrine of Aestheticism and "the worship of the senses" (Wilde *PDG* 104) which is a philosophy representing a new form of Hedonism:

Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely Puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival. It was to have its service of intellect, certainly; yet, it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim indeed, was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be of asceticism that deadens the senses, as of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it was to know nothing. But it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon moments of a life that is itself but a moment. (Wilde *PDG* 105)

This new Hedonism, as described by Lord Henry, values intellect but rejects any theory or system that restricts passionate experiences. It advocates for fully embracing life's pleasures and pains without holding back. The focus is not on the outcomes of these experiences but on the experiences themselves. This Hedonism encourages immersing oneself entirely in the present, in the fleeting moments of life. It rejects extremes, such as asceticism<sup>3</sup>. Instead, it encourages a balanced approach, savoring life's moments to the fullest.

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<sup>3</sup> **Asceticism:** a harsh self-control in order to avoid all types of indulgence, particularly for religious purposes.

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Wilde's famed wit and eloquence are echoed in Lord Henry's character who is known for his clever quips and the sharp memorable phrases he uses in his dialogues. This specific character is incredibly skilled with words, crafting dialogues filled with paradoxes. "He played with the idea, and grew willful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox" (Wilde *PDG* 35). These are the words used in the novel to describe Lord Henry's character and skills in communication and the art of speech that enables him to control any debate.

Lord Henry's manipulative influence over Dorian Gray mirrors Wilde's influence over his readers and the public through his writings and ideas. Wilde, like Lord Henry, possessed a captivating ability to shape thoughts and actions, using his intellectualism which is another shared trait between Lord Henry and Wilde. Lord Henry, portrayed as an intellectual and philosopher within the novel, engages in thought-provoking discussions. This mirrors Wilde's own love for intellectual discourse and his role as a prominent intellectual figure of his time.

In a nutshell, Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* serves as a literary embodiment of Oscar Wilde's beliefs, wit, and intellectualism. Through this character, Wilde effectively communicates his views on Aesthetics and its connection with New Hedonism. Lord Henry stands as a mirror, reflecting Wilde's persona, and making a profound statement on life. Overall, the third doctrine asserting that "Life imitates art more than art imitates life" (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 17) is notably absent within an Aesthetic creation such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Instead, a paradoxical interpretation arises, where art mirrors life, contradicting Wilde's initial notion. One can discern how Wilde's own life affected his artistic work, reflecting his personality, preferences, and literary "favorites" as central elements in his literary creation.

### 2.2.4. Lying, the Telling of Beautiful Untrue Things, Is the Proper Aim of Art

In addition to what has been mentioned, and by further scanning Wilde's studied novel and his essay "The Decay of Lying", another contradiction comes to light regarding the final doctrine that advocates the notion that "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" ("The Decay of Lying" 17). In this doctrine, Wilde underscores the idea that art's purpose is not bound by factual accuracy; and that it instead thrives in the realm of imaginative beauty and emotional resonance.

Wilde considers that "The only form of Lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is Lying for its own sake, and the highest development of this is [...] Lying in Art" ("The Decay of Lying" 16) by which, he delves into his Aesthetic philosophy and suggests that lying for the sheer pleasure of it, especially when it is manifest in art, can be viewed as a form of artistic expression. Furthermore, he expresses the idea that an artist who dares to break away from the strict confines of realism and embraces the freedom of imagination will be celebrated and recognized by art itself and be appreciated by the general public but will also receive acclaim and admiration from the artistic community. (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 9)

When Wilde speaks of art that "will run to greet [the artist] and will kiss his false, beautiful lips" ("The Decay of Lying" 9) he is alluding to the embrace of creativity and the celebration of art that deviates from the mundane or ordinary. The term "false" here does not imply deception but rather the departure from strict representation, embracing artistic interpretation and embellishment to create something beautiful and imaginative. Art acknowledges and celebrates such imaginative interpretation as a profound and cherished secret.

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Moreover, Wilde argues that “those who do not love Beauty more than Truth” will never “know the inmost shrine of Art.” (“The Decay of Lying” 16) In this statement, Oscar Wilde is expressing a fundamental aspect of his Aesthetic philosophy, emphasizing the primacy of Beauty over Truth in the realm of Art. Wilde argues that to truly understand and appreciate art, one must prioritize Beauty over factual accuracy or truthfulness. He contends that art is not merely about representing reality as it is, but about transforming it into something beautiful, enchanting, and aesthetically pleasing. Beauty, in Wilde's view, is a higher ideal and a more important objective for art than strict adherence to factual truth.

Wilde emphasizes the notion of imagination stating that “when Art surrenders her imaginative medium she surrenders everything” (“The Decay of Lying” 7). This, he explains, happens because Imagination allows the creation of new ideas, perspectives, and interpretations that make art exciting, impactful, and unique. Thus, when art surrenders its imaginative medium, it loses its ability to inspire, provoke thought, and evoke emotions. It becomes dull, predictable, and devoid of the creative spark that makes it compelling. Essentially, without imagination, art loses its power to move and captivate the audience.

In essence, Wilde is urging artists to embrace and nurture their imaginative capabilities, as it is through this imaginative medium that art can reach its fullest potential and have a profound impact on both the creator and the audience. Yet, While he initially champions the notion of “lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things is the proper aim of art,” a deeper exploration of the novel reveals that Wilde is not entirely embracing falsehood for its own sake. Rather, he utilizes art as a medium to convey realistic messages, criticize his society, and impart moral lessons. This departure from pure imagination to a more critical and reflective approach showcases a contradiction within Wilde's artistic philosophy.

### 2.2.4.1. Social Criticism

Oscar Wilde, in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, utilizes the characters and themes to highlight the hypocrisy that underlies Victorian society. This hypocrisy is seen in the theme of the portrait, where a stark contrast is drawn between outward appearances and the inner moral decay that hides behind a façade of respectability. Dorian Gray's character symbolizes this hidden corruption, a result of conforming to societal norms and suppressing individuality to maintain an image of virtue and beauty.

The hypocrisy is also seen in the superficiality of the Victorian obsession with beauty and youth. Dorian's obsession with maintaining his youthful appearance portrays the shallowness of valuing only external appearances while overlooking inner character and morality. It is a commentary on the society's fixation on physical beauty, revealing the dangers of prioritizing appearance over substance that is well portrayed through Lord Henry Wotton. One notable quote that delves into hypocrisy is, "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Wilde *PDG* 18). This phrase reflects Lord Henry's hypocritical philosophy, suggesting that indulging in temptations is the solution while presenting himself as a morally conflicting character throughout the novel.

Lord Henry Wotton, a character in the story, talks in a tricky way about love and faithfulness:

Those who are faithful know only the trivial side of love, it is the faithless who know love's tragedies "What a fuss people make about fidelity! Why, even in love it is purely a question for physiology. It has nothing to do with our own will. Young men want to be faithful, and are not; old men want to be faithless, and cannot, that is all one can say. (Wilde *PDG* 27)



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Lord Henry himself is married but often talks cynically about faithful love. This cynicism is actually a way of mocking the supposed pure and devoted love celebrated by the upper class during the Victorian Age. In that era, the wealthy would often pretend to have pure love while their marriages were based on money and power. Wilde, the author, uses Lord Henry's paradoxical words to criticize this hypocrisy in love.

Here, for another time, a social commentary is included and the author falls once more into a paradox. The mere comment on the hypocrisy of Victorian society here turns Wilde into a preacher, and thus, makes him an author who writes for the purpose of commenting on something that is taking place in society; and that thing is one that he genuinely abhors. Consequently, Wilde proves himself to go against his advice that Art should never be based on a specific aim or purpose or that "Art is useless". In one way or another this comes as another incident that proves contradiction in Wilde's fiction and criticism, mainly in *The Decay of Lying* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. A double contradiction occurs here: first one being the reflection of "reality" and the other is a commentary against that reality, meaning that the author does indeed have an "aim" behind writing the novel that goes behind the original purpose of art according to Wilde, which is basically the creation of beauty, aimless beauty.

### **2.2.4.2. Moral Implications and the Notion of Regret:**

Wilde's perspective on art emphasizes imagination and the communication of aesthetically pleasing untruths. However, within his novel, he unveils an opposing viewpoint wherein art can also encompass aspects of immorality. Moreover, by analyzing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it becomes apparent that the novel as an artistic creation carries moral implications, contradicting the idea that it should purely be about beauty and imagination. Wilde's exploration of morality

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through art in his novel challenges the notion that art's purpose is solely imaginative and devoid of moral dimensions.

Wilde's assertion regarding art's role in evoking pleasant emotions, commonly perceived as a positive influence. However, in the novel, Wilde challenges this notion through Lord Henry, stating, "There is no such good influence [...] all influence is immoral" (*PDG* 17). This philosophical stance, articulated by Lord Henry, posits that influencing "a person is to give him one's soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed" (Wilde *PDG* 18).

This perspective categorizes all influences as inherently immoral, extending to the realm of art. An illustrative example is the "yellow book" that Lord Henry recommends to Dorian. It is described as a "poisonous book" (Wilde *PDG* 101), emphasizing its negative effect from which Dorian is unable to liberate himself (Wilde *PDG* 102). This influence, much like other societal influences, leads to Dorian Gray's moral degradation and death, a parallel that reflects the societal rejection the novel faced in Victorian society, considering its immoral influence. Hence, Wilde, through his characters and narrative challenges conventional beliefs about art and influence, shedding light on the complex interplay between society, art, and morality.

On the other hand, known for his fondness of paradoxes, Wilde views the novel as potentially moralistic. He suggests that it holds a moral lesson, serving as a cautionary tale to prevent others from facing a fate similar to Dorian's. This moral reflection delves into critiquing a philosophy that advocates pursuing a life filled with pleasure and a constant admiration of beauty. It is like a message telling not to chase excessive joys to avoid future regrets. The regret, here, is visible at the story's end when Dorian grows weary of maintaining his youthful

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appearance, "he loathed his own beauty [...] it was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth he had prayed for" (Wilde *PDG* 175) which hides the darker aspects of his character. He starts missing the pure and innocent days of his youth, symbolized by the mention of his "rose-white boyhood." (Wilde *PDG* 175) This contemplation pushes him towards wanting a fresh start, a chance to be a good person and break free from the chains of his past actions, he wanted a "new life! [...] he would be good" (Wilde *PDG* 175).

This regret embodies a paradox within Wilde's beliefs on beauty. It is a contradiction, highlighting how Wilde had mixed feelings about beauty. He loved beauty but saw its downsides too. This mix of feelings is a big part of the moral message in the book. It shows that going after beauty without thinking can lead to problems and that is an important lesson in the story.

Wilde, in a revealing moment, while writing letters defending Dorian Gray, acknowledges the moral dimension of the story. He writes:

It is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. The painter, Basil Hallward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity. Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it. Yes; there is a terrible moral in Dorian Gray – a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. (Wilde "In Defense of Dorian Gray" 337-338)

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The lesson in the quote is about finding the right balance in life. It says that going to extremes, either by indulging too much or denying everything, leads to problems. The characters in the story show this. Basil, obsessed with beauty, meets a terrible end. Dorian, chasing only pleasure, ruins himself. Lord Henry, staying away from life's challenges, realizes this is not fulfilling. Therefore, the quote teaches one to find a middle ground, not going to extremes. It is about understanding that being too obsessed with something or avoiding everything can cause harm.

To summarize what has been said throughout the previous pages, it is safe to say that Wilde, in crafting his art, went from a total belief in "lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things" (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 17) to a divergence from this stance. He employs his artwork to spotlight societal hypocrisy and deliver moral messages. One of these messages sheds light on the adverse impact of art, criticizing the pursuit of pleasure. This serves as a moral lesson communicated through the novel, revealing the danger of unrestrained pleasure-seeking.

### 2.3. Conclusion

Being an Aesthete, like Wilde, with cleverness and intelligence, enables the formation of captivating thoughts about life and contemplation on how to live it. Wilde, in particular, opted to lead a life influenced by art, appreciating the present moment and honoring beautiful artistic works. One could argue that he dedicated his life to this approach, resulting in the creation of his own art and based on his own philosophy. In his essay "The Decay of Lying", he illustrated how art should be according to his philosophy.

However, for those keen to delve into Wilde's life, there is a natural curiosity about whether his creations truly embodied his beliefs. This curiosity intensifies, especially when one considers the contradictions in his life and actions. Consequently, by delving deeply into two of

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his works in a comparative approach, and after investigating the extent to which Wilde sticks to his critical principles about art and artists, the research came out with a doubled result.

Comparing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with "The Decay of Lying" started with the focal aim of unraveling the mystery: Did his literary work honor Aestheticism or not? This comparative analysis aimed to elucidate the contradictions and agreements within the works, leading to a clearer understanding. One has found that while many elements in the plotline of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* paid homage to the Wilde's Aestheticism, other elements have proven to go against the Aesthetic principle.

# **General Conclusion**

## General Conclusion

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Literature is an artistic tapestry of language, emotions, and imagination. Just as a painter uses brushes and colors to create, a writer employs words and narratives to craft a unique world within the reader's mind. It conveys messages and themes through stories, characters, symbols, and narrative techniques, covering a broad array of topics that might be interpreted by different readers in numerous ways based on their experiences and beliefs. However, some authors, like Oscar Wilde, advocate perceiving their works through a specific "beauty-based" lens, emphasizing aestheticism and purposelessness in art, particularly in literature. Wilde's profound passion for literary aestheticism is undeniable that celebrates beauty and aesthetic experiences, prioritizing art's intrinsic value in life. It rejects constraints like morals or politics, focusing on evoking pleasure and contemplation. Aestheticism encourages embracing beauty in the world and infusing life with artistic grace.

In his pursuit to convey the essence of Aestheticism, Oscar Wilde wrote "The Decay of Lying". This essay acts as a philosophical manifesto, advocating for the prioritization of beauty and art in life and literature. Wilde, through witty dialogues and paradoxes, challenges conventional ideas about truth, reality, and creativity, suggesting that artistic creations should be elevated above mundane reality. Wilde's clever discourse within this essay encapsulates the Aesthetic ethos, emphasizing the transformative and enriching power of art while questioning traditional norms and emphasizing the importance of imagination and beauty in the human experience.

A year later, Oscar Wilde wrote a very famous book called *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. People often say it is a perfect example of Aestheticism. thus, investigating this was needed, comparing what Wilde said in his essay with what he showed in his novel to see if he stayed true to his ideas and answering these questions: Does *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) truly

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embody Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism, and if so, what specific literary elements within the novel illustrate this artistic movement?

When the investigation took place, two core doctrines emerged in alignment with the novel's Aesthetic content. First, the notion that returning to Life and Nature makes a bad art, symbolized by characters like Sybil Vane and Dorian's portrait. Sybil is portrayed as a work of art and an artist through her acting, aligning with Wilde's aesthetic belief. The second doctrine that surfaced in the novel is the idea that "Art never expresses anything but itself." (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 16) This is supported by the preface and epitomized through the character of Basil Hallward, embodying the essence of the artist who comprehends the aesthetic purpose of art. However, while this holds true, Wilde's inclusion of such themes in his work contradicts his fundamental belief that art should only express itself, for by showing them that way he is making his work a tool to convey messages even though these messages are about the Aesthetic movement. When one says about a work Aesthetic, it should be merely beautiful.

Nevertheless, as the investigation delved deeper, contradictions within Wilde's adherence to Aesthetic doctrines became more pronounced. The third doctrine, asserting that "Life imitates art more than art imitates life" (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 17), is not only absent but rather distorted. In the novel, Wilde unmistakably reveals himself into his work—an action deemed inexcusable for an Aesthete. This was evident in the parallelism between Wilde and Dorian in terms of having both of them private and public lives, besides the reflection of the book that shaped his aesthetic inclinations, and the creation of a character, Lord Henry Wotton, resembling himself to convey his hedonistic philosophy and wit, and notably, the portrayal of his homosexual life. The last doctrine, emphasizing that "Lying, the telling of Beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art," (Wilde "The Decay of Lying" 17) was also challenged in the



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novel. Wilde did not resort to mere “lying” but instead conveyed truths about the hypocritical society by subjecting it to criticism. Moreover, he embedded moral lessons within the novel, thus steering his work away from a purely Aesthetic realm.

In response to the posed questions, it is clear that Oscar Wilde’s genuine embodiment of Aestheticism was not completely reflected in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when compared to the ideas expressed in his essay. The presence, absence, and even contradiction of certain Aesthetic notions indicate a variability in Wilde’s portrayal of Aestheticism within the literary context.

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