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## BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Aspects of Victorian Decadence in the Picture of Dorian Gray

Prvky viktoránské dekadence v Obrazu Doriana Graye

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I hereby declare that I have written this bachelor thesis titled "Aspects of Victorian Decadence in the Picture of Dorian Gray" by myself and that all the sources used during writing were properly cited. I further declare that this thesis was not used to obtain another academic title.

Prague, July 10, 2023

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato práce si klade za cíl prozkoumat různé aspekty dekadence přítomné v románu Oscara Wilda *Obraz Doriana Graye* a prozkoumat, jak jsou propojeny v historickém kontextu a dalších dekadentních literárních dílech. Teoretická část práce se ponoří do společenského a literárního pozadí *Obrazu Doriana Graye* a poskytuje kontextuální pochopení viktoriánské společnosti a jejích přísných společenských norem. Zkoumá estetické hnutí a jeho vztah s dekadencí, stejně jako původ a základní principy dekadentního hnutí.

Praktická část práce se zaměřuje na aspekty dekadence v samotném románu *Obraz Doriana Graye*. Okruhy, do kterých je praktická část rozdělena, jsou téma krásy, její význam a jak je popisována v knize, dále jsou analyzovány motivy korupce, hedonismu a nemorálnosti a jaký vliv tyto prvky měly na vývin postav v knize. Je také věnována jedna kapitola zkoumání toho, jakou roli hrála *Žlutá kniha* v korupci hlavní postavy Doriana Graye a jaké existují paralely mezi Dorianem a hlavní postavou románu *Á Rebours* od J.K. Huysmanse. Následující kapitoly se věnují tématu sexuality v knize, konkrétně narážky na homosexualitu a (v té době) velice pobuřující názory hlavních postav, týkající se manželství. Poslední kapitoly analyzují postavy a jejich chování z pohledu dandysmu a dále jakou roli hrálo užívání drog v knize.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

Obraz Doriana Graye, Dekadence, Estetismus, Viktoriánská společnost

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis aims to investigate the different aspects of Decadence present in Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and explore how they are interconnected within the historical context and other Decadent literary works. The theoretical section of the thesis delves into the societal and literary background of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, providing a contextual understanding of Victorian society and its strict social norms. It explores the Aesthetic movement and its relationship with Decadence, as well as the origins and fundamental principles of the Decadent movement.

The practical part of the thesis analyzes the theme of beauty and its significance in the Decadent movement and how it is expressed in the book. It explores the corruption, hedonism, and immorality of the characters and one chapter is also devoted to exploring what role the Yellow Book played in the corruption of the main character Dorian Gray and what parallels there are between Dorian and the main character of the novel *À Rebours* by J.K. Huysmans. The following chapters examine how homosexuality and promiscuity are portrayed in the novel. There is also a chapter dedicated to addressing the censorship of certain parts in the original manuscript of the novel. Lastly, the thesis analyzes the characters in the novel through the lens of dandyism and places a particular focus on the role of drug use in the novel.

## **KEYWORDS**

The Picture of Dorian Gray, Decadence, Aestheticism, Victorian society

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## Introduction

Within the realms of literature and art, certain works possess an irresistible charm, captivating us with their words and brushstrokes, transcending time and space. As a student of Art and English, my quest for such a captivating masterpiece led me to the enchanting world of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The fusion of literature and art within this novel immediately intrigued me. Its central theme explores the pursuit of beauty and pleasure as the ultimate purpose of life, shedding light on the dangers and allure of unrestrained indulgence. As someone passionate about fashion and beauty, I was captivated by the concept of art for art's sake and the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure—a notion deeply ingrained in the artistic subculture of Victorian England. This profound connection between the novel's themes and my personal interests inspired me to delve deeper into the decadent movement and its portrayal in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The aim of my thesis is to examine the various aspects of Decadence found within the novel, exploring their interconnectedness based on historical context and other Decadent literary works. Through this exploration, I hope to unravel the hidden meanings and nuances skillfully woven by Wilde. Additionally, this investigation will not only provide insight into the enduring appeal of the novel but also shed light on the broader cultural and artistic context of the late 19th century.

In the theoretical part of my thesis, I will delve into the societal and literary background of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as it is crucial to understanding the book as a whole. This will involve providing context on Victorian society, with its rigid social customs, class divisions, gender roles, and hypocrisy. I will also explore the Aesthetic movement and its relationship with Decadence, as these two movements are closely intertwined. Furthermore, I will delve into the Decadent movement itself, examining its origins and core principles. A comparison between French and Victorian Decadence will be included, along with a focus on elements considered Decadent at the time, such as homosexuality, dandyism, drug use, and the significant literary influence of J.K. Huysmans' novel *À Rebours*, which profoundly impacted both the Decadent movement and Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Lastly, there will be an overview of Oscar Wilde, his works, and his philosophies, with a dedicated chapter on the censorship of the novel.



The practical part of my thesis will consist of six main chapters, each examining a different aspect of Decadence within the novel. Firstly, I will analyze the pervasive theme of beauty and its role in the book, as it is a vital aspect of the Decadent movement. Next, I will focus on the corruption, hedonism, and immorality exhibited by the Decadent characters, Lord Henry and Dorian Gray. Subsequently, I will explore the topic of sexuality in the novel, particularly the homosexual attitudes portrayed between the characters and the various allusions to promiscuity. A chapter will also be dedicated to comparing the parts of the novel that were censored or altered in the original manuscript due to societal pressures. A following chapter will analyze the characters of the novel through the lens of dandyism, examining the subtle references to this lifestyle. Finally, there will be a chapter exploring the role of drugs in the novel and their impact on the characters' development.

As I embark on this journey, I aim to deepen my understanding of the captivating world of art and literature, paying tribute to the enduring allure of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—a work that remains as captivating and thought-provoking today as when it was first penned by the brilliant hand of Oscar Wilde.

# 1 Theoretical Part

## 1.1 Late Victorian Society

In order to grasp the shock and controversy which *The Picture of Dorian Gray* along with the movements of Aestheticism and Decadence had caused in late Victorian society, it is important to put into context the social customs and prejudices - a rigid system of manners, class, and gender roles that dominated the era.

The majority of people lived in extremely poor living conditions in a lower or working class and comprised 70 - 80% of the population. Violence and substance use flourished amongst them and they were regarded as the “criminal class” (“Social Life in Victorian England”). The people of the lower classes mostly did manual, physically demanding jobs. The middle class, which expanded significantly during the Industrial Revolution, formed about 15 - 20% of the population and occupied positions such as doctors, clerks, lawyers, or merchants, and the very small and wealthy upper class lived in luxury and did not need to work. They owned property and received their main income from rent from their inherited lands and investments (Steinbeck). There was a strong social class hypocrisy within Victorian society and the upper class, who were seen as the epitome of refinement and gentility, often held themselves above others and looked down upon those of lower social status. Yet, there were instances where individuals from the upper class engaged in immoral or unethical behaviour and were often excused while the working class was publicly condemned. (“Morality Of Hypocrisy”).

Victorian people of all classes centred their beliefs around the importance of family, and very strict and rigid rules when it came to the roles of men and women. There was a prevalent ideology of “separate spheres”, meaning that men and women lead very different daily lives and there were various expectations of each of them. Men were the providers for the family and lived in the public sphere. Women were allowed to occupy the private sphere which was the home. The only use for a woman in Victorian society was to submit to a man and become a dutiful wife to her husband; to bear his children and take care of the house. Such a woman then personified the ideal of the “Angel in the House”, which is a phrase that became popular after the 1854 poem of the same name by Coventry Patmore (“The Angel in the House”). The ideal woman had no sexual desire. Men, on the other hand, were “by nature lustful

creatures” and frequented brothels. Prostitutes were meant to serve the needs of the man of the house, both before and during the marriage (Hughes).

Despite these strict moral codes and societal expectations, there were a plethora of instances of hypocrisy and double standards. While Victorian society placed a high value on morality and purity, and there was a strong emphasis on sexual restraint and modesty, with strict expectations of female virtue and there was a double standard when it came to men, who often engaged in extramarital affairs and visited prostitutes. Also, despite the strict moral standards imposed on Victorian society and a prevalent culture of secrecy and denial surrounding sex, there was a paradoxical fascination with sexuality. While public discourse advocated for abstinence and the suppression of sexual desires, there was a thriving underground culture of erotic literature and pornography, catering to the desires and fantasies of both men and women (Furieux).

## **1.2 The Decadent Movement**

### **1.2.1 Aestheticism in Victorian England**

Before we venture into the realms of Decadence, it is necessary to explore and define the movement of Aestheticism, which played a significant role in the artistic and literary world of the 1890s Victorian era. Aestheticism and Decadence were namely two tightly related concepts that shared a lot of overlap and it is almost harder to define the differences between the two than to explain what the movements embodied (Burdett).

Aestheticism originated as a reaction against the rigid and outdated artistic rules that controlled the idea of what art should be. Traditional Victorian art fulfilled a strict, narrow role that art was supposed to deliver in society, which was to educate and provide moral instruction and what Aestheticism proposed, which was the idea that the purpose of art should be rather for pleasure enjoyment or to simply explore the various forms of expression and workmanship was seen as highly scandalous, immoral and, in the latter part of the century, labelled as Decadent. The pivotal characteristic of Aestheticism was the catchphrase *l'art pour l'art* or *Art for Art's sake*, which meant that art should carry no other functions (whether it be for a moral or political purpose) than to simply be art. In Aestheticism, beauty was the most important element of art and life and there was a strong emphasis on an

aesthetic style and form. Vulgarly was the opposite of taste and beauty and it was the enemy of Aestheticism. Aesthetic artists strived to find objective beauty in art and life and thought very highly of their opinions. Those who disagreed with their views were considered outsiders and labelled the Philistines as they were too blind and too unsophisticated to see true beauty in life and art (Hamilton VII).

From the historical perspective, the first artistic rebels of the 19th century were the Pre-Raphaelites who formed in the 1840s under the leadership of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and who gave the first impulse for change in the approach to art (Iser 1). They became inspiring icons to many artists who came decades after them, although they were yet far from true Aestheticism and the embodiment of true “apostles of amorality in art”, as Beckson puts it (XXXVI). The central work that truly launched the movement of Aestheticism in England was the 1873 book *Studies in the History of Renaissance* written by Walter Pater, which his admirers believed to be “an unmistakable manifestation of Decadence”, as Beckson writes (XXXII). The most revolutionary part of the book was the Conclusion, which contained seductive lines such as “To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (Pater 120) and “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” (Pater 119). This book left a lasting impression on Oscar Wilde who became one of Pater's most ardent, albeit quite unwelcome admirers, and in his eyes, the book was “the very flower of decadence” (Beckson XXXII). Pater, however, never intended for his work to leave such a corruptive impact, in fact, he was a proponent of moral functions of art, which the Aesthetes were against, and after the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he publicly rejected the Aestheticism portrayed in the book (Beckson XXXVI). This quote begs the question of what “Aestheticism” really was (and what the difference was between Aestheticism and Decadence in Victorian England) because judging by the outrage and repulsion caused by this aspect, it could be categorized as rather Decadent. In many ways, it could be argued that Decadence in Victorian England manifested under the guise of Aestheticism because any overt expressions of Decadence would be banned, censored, and publicly scrutinised, as will become obvious in the following chapters.

### 1.2.2 The Decadent Movement

The Decadent Movement was an artistic and literary movement that emerged in France in the late 19th century and subsequently spread to Britain. It originated as a response to the various ways in which society was changing such as urbanisation, industrialization and its consequent mass production, or the way aristocracy was losing its power while the middle class was growing larger and larger. There was an overall perceived decline of culture and society, which is also the literal translation of the term “Decadence”. The movement mainly promoted the pursuit of aesthetic refinement, the exaltation of beauty, and the rejection of conventional bourgeois morality within art (Grundmann). These Decadent features are very similar to Aestheticism and it is exactly why the borders between Aestheticism and Decadence are blurry. An important figure that blended the lines between Aestheticism and Decadence and was heavily referenced in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was Théophile Gautier, a devoted Aesthete who said the famous quote that “nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless” (Beckson XXIII), meaning that art and other objects should exist for the sole purpose of being beautiful, but he was also notoriously Decadent as is shown in his most well-known novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* in which he explored his interest in sexual perversion (Beckson XXVI).

Perhaps the biggest difference between Aestheticism and Decadence is that Decadence aimed to go deeper into the soul and into the decay and degeneration (either of the human mind or society), it was concerned with the darker aspects of humanity, such as perversion, sexuality and eroticism, exploration of drug-induced dreams and hallucinations, and finding beauty in all the decay.

Decadent artists and writers were deeply devoted to the concept of artifice and to being as artificial as possible. They sought to create something otherworldly as a form of escapism from the stupefying mundaneness caused by the vulgarity and tastelessness of mass production. In Decadent terms, even beauty is artificial. Decadents also disliked nature because it was the opposite of artifice. An example of this can be observed in the novel *À Rebours*, which will be discussed in the following chapters, whose protagonist Des Esseintes, considers nature inferior and claims that a modern locomotive is far more

beautiful and superior than a woman, a being that up until that point was generally considered as the most beautiful product of nature (Huysmans 23).

Lastly, it is necessary to note that while there were many similarities between French and English Decadence, the main difference was that French Decadence was very characteristic of its hatred of the bourgeois society which often resulted in isolation, whereas in English Decadence this was not the case. Decadence was closely related to the contemporary cultural and societal norms and their rejection, so what was considered Decadent in England was vastly different from what would have been considered Decadent in France because Victorian society was much more moralistic and uptight. This is why there was such hatred of French literature in England and the reason why the reviews called *The Picture of Dorian Gray* “a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French decadents” (Frankel 5).

### **1.3 Literary Influences**

#### **1.3.1 *À Rebours***

*À Rebours*, translated into English as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*, is a Decadent novel written by J.K. Huysmans in 1884 that was so significant that it is often quoted as “the bible of the decadents” (King). It is especially relevant for this thesis because the novel was Wilde’s inspiration for the corruptive Yellow Book that Lord Henry gifts to Dorian Gray in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (“Presentation: Influences on Dorian Gray”).

There is very little plot in the novel and it rather consists of recollections of past life, beliefs, opinions and passions of the main protagonist Des Esseintes who suffers from neurosis. After having explored the fruits of life and indulged in all sorts of pleasures and perversities so intensely that his desire had run out, he retreats into the isolation of his strange home out of boredom and disgust with society. The novel explores many themes of Decadence and Aestheticism that are typical for the movement, such as the pursuit of pleasure, degeneration, perversion, isolation and hatred of society, rejection of societal norms, and experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs. There is a palpable Aesthetic passion for visual pleasure and there are also instances that significantly merge Aestheticism with Decadence, such as when Des Esseintes buys a pompous new oriental rug, of which the only flaw is that its colours are too bright as they have not been worn out by normal use yet. In an attempt to mute the colours,

Des Esseintes buys a large tortoise and places it in the centre of the rug but, unfortunately, the muddy colours of its shell achieve the exact opposite effect, which leads him to have its shell gilded and decorated with precious stones in an intricate pattern, and it works perfectly. Sadly, the tortoise dies shortly after, but its death is poetic:

“Accustomed no doubt to a sedentary life, a modest existence spent in the shelter of this humble carapace, it had not been able to bear the dazzling luxury imposed on it, the glittering cape in which it had been clad, the precious stones which had been used to decorate its shell like a jewelled ciborium” (Huysmans 49).

Ultimately, the tortoise turns into an object of art, it “loses its purpose” of being a live animal and its new purpose is to serve beauty. When the tortoise dies, it does not lose its beauty, on the contrary, its death only makes it more meaningful, which is a Decadent example of finding beauty in decay.

There is a strong theme of eroticism and sexual perversion throughout the novel such as when Des Esseintes gushes over his collection of decadent paintings, especially the painting *The Apparition* by Gustave Moreau<sup>1</sup> which depicts the part of the mythical story, in which princess Salomé receives the severed head of the prophet who rejected her. Des Esseintes worships her eroticism across many pages and this was the passage, which inspired Oscar Wilde to write his play *Salomé*.<sup>2</sup>

Another passage deals with the theme of androgyny and sex changes, which was also a theme in Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin*), when Des Esseintes goes back to a memory of a lover he once had: Miss Urania, an athletic acrobat at the Circus. As he dreams of her strong masculine body, she slowly starts turning into a man in his thoughts, and then, in consequence, Des Essentes starts turning into a woman and begins “yearning for her just as a chlorotic girl will hanker after a clumsy brute whose embrace could squeeze the life out of her” (Huysmans 97).

Another typical decadent feature in the novel was Des Essentes’ anti-social tendencies and his deep hatred for the bourgeoisie society which is revealed when he delves into his

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<sup>1</sup> See Figure 1 in the Appendices section for a visual representation.

<sup>2</sup> See Figure 2 in the Appendices section for a visual representation of A. Beadsley’s illustration of *Salomé*

recollections of attempting to create a murderer by turning a boy into a burglar who would one day kill the owner of the house who would happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“On that day my object will be achieved: I shall have contributed, to the best of my ability, to the making of a scoundrel, one enemy the more for the hideous society which is bleeding us white” (Huysmans 68).

Overall, the contrast between *À Rebours* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* truly illuminates why there was such prudish Victorian hatred for French literature because it only sufficed for the incidents in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to ever be so slightly seductive and controversial for it to cause such hysterical outrage and ultimately become the cause of Oscar Wilde’s imprisonment.

### **1.3.2 The Yellow Book and Aubrey Beardsley**

The Yellow Book was the most popular Aesthetic periodical, which was published from 1894 to 1897. The name “Yellow Book” referred to French lascivious novels that were notoriously wrapped in yellow paper. It was possibly inspired by the corruptive Yellow Book in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* since the novel was published before the magazine even started. The periodical consisted of various contributions by authors and artists such as W.B. Yeats, Max Beerbohm, and John Singer Sargent (“A Yellow Book”). The illustrations on the cover of The Yellow Book were created by Aubrey Beardsley, a young Aesthete and a Decadent artist, who also illustrated Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé*. He had a signature black-and-white style heavily influenced by Japanese art and had a reputation for creating erotic illustrations that caused outrage in Victorian society.

The Yellow Book was controversial but mainly because of its association with Beardsley. In the public space, it provoked hysteria with reviews such as it was “repulsive and insolent” and “a combination of English rowdyism and French lubricity” (Beckson XXI). One review in the American literary journal *The Critic* even called the magazine “the Oscar of periodicals” (Beckson XXII), which was ironic since Wilde had not been invited to contribute to the periodical in any shape or form. He was not pleased that he had been excluded and wrote in a letter to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas: “It is dull and loathsome: A great failure - I am glad” (Beckson XXI). He also later said that it was “not yellow at all”



("A Yellow Book") which was true since the content of the periodical was rather tame ("A Yellow Book"). Oscar Wilde's reputation did bring harm to the periodical and mainly Aubrey Beardsley, though, because in 1895, when he was arrested, Wilde was seen reading a book with a yellow cover, which the public mistakenly assumed was *The Yellow Book*. It resulted in attacks on the periodical and the firing of Aubrey Beardsley as the illustrator because of his previous associations with Oscar Wilde ("A Yellow Book").

#### **1.4 Homosexuality**

Since homosexual romantic love is a prevalent theme in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and also a significant reason for why the novel was publicly scrutinized and shamed, it is important to put into context, how much of a serious matter it was to be homosexual in Victorian England.

By the time the novel came into public, Victorian society had namely already existed in a fearful climate about sexuality for some years. The first impulse which horrified the public was an exposé called "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", which was a series of articles published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885, which reported in graphic detail on the abduction of young girls and them being sold into London brothels as child prostitutes, subsequently. What followed was The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, of which the main aim was to raise the age of consent from 13 to 16 but which also contained the Labouchere Amendment that made homosexuality illegal (Rodliff). This was also the Criminal Act under which Oscar Wilde was prosecuted for "gross indecency". It is unsurprising that there was not much talk of women having any homosexual tendencies since, of course, proper women were too pure and innocent for such vices. There was an attempt later in 1921 to make lesbianism illegal as well, but it was decided against in the end out of "concern that legislation would only draw attention to the "offence" and encourage women to explore their sexuality" ("The Criminal Law Amendment").

It is worthwhile to also note that the term "homosexuality" was not part of the English language until the year 1892 since homosexuality was not acknowledged as a sexual identity at the time. It was rather considered a "perversion" and was referred to as "men indulging in unclean vices", "medico-legal interests", and "unnatural tendencies" (Frankel 6-7).

Especially the press used such coded language, such as in this 1890 review of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by the *Scot's Observer*:

“It is false art - for its interest is medico-legal; it is false to human nature - for its hero is a devil; it is false to morality - for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity. The story - which deals with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department ...” (Frankel 6)

The scandals did not end with the Criminal Act of 1885, however. The most significant scandal became known as the Cleveland Street Affair of 1889-1890 which happened right before *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published. The scandal was related to aristocratic and military men and a brothel of young male prostitutes who were also referred to as “rent boys” as that was their occupation during the day (Frankel 8). Considering this fact, it truly did not help that a major theme of the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian Gray was an older aristocratic man corrupting an innocent youth.

The fatal man who brought Oscar Wilde into his downfall was the poet Lord Alfred Douglas who after the publication of the novel became his lover and initiated Wilde into the London subculture of “rent boys” (Frankel 12). Douglas’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry was aware of their relationship and took various steps to express his contempt. The last drop that spilt the cup came in 1895 when he left a card at Wilde’s club calling him a sodomite, which gave Wilde grounds to press for libel charges as it could be regarded as public defamation. This, however, colossally backfired and Oscar Wilde ended up on trial for gross indecency and was sentenced to two years in prison (Frankel 15). Lord Alfred Douglas barely escaped prison himself (Frankel 3). Douglas’s poem *Two Doves* with the infamous line “love that dare not speak its name”, which later became a clichéd metaphor for gay love, and Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were used as evidence against Oscar Wilde during the trial (Frankel 18).

## **1.5 Dandyism**

Dandyism and Decadence shared a strong connection, not only because numerous Decadent writers embraced dandyism, but also because the fundamental essence of the dandy revolved

around the pursuit of extreme artificiality. Simplistically put, a dandy was a man who placed great importance on his appearance, manners, and refined tastes, oftentimes provoking with flamboyant and extravagant clothing, but the philosophy of the movement goes much deeper than that. Dandyism, as a fashion statement, as a pose, and as a sensation, first came around in the first half of the 19th century and was introduced by a man called George “Beau” Brummel who was known for his wit and charm, impeccable taste, and exceptional conversational skills and whom Barbey d’Aurevilly, a celebrated dandy himself, described as “the greatest dandy of his own or of any time” (D’Aurevilly 14). George Brummel was greatly celebrated in the essay *Of Dandyism and George Brummel* written by Barbey d’Aurevilly, which was one of the three essential essays that helped to define and transform the style into a movement. The other two essays were *The Treatise on Elegant Living* (1833) by Honoré de Balzac and *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) by the decadent icon himself, Charles Baudelaire. These three essays laid down the principles of dandyism based on the authors’ observations or personal experiences and became the most well-known manifestos of the movement (Garelick 14).

Dandies considered themselves superior beings of extraordinary taste and style and the features they treasured the most in themselves were their sense of fashion and uniqueness, their wit and charm, and their ability to shock and intrigue. Although their attire was their weapon for turning heads as well as their veil of beauty, it is crucial to emphasize that a true Dandy would never lower himself to be as shallow as to only focus on his mode of dressing: As d’Aurevilly puts it, “Dandyism is a complete theory of life and its material is not its only side. It is a way of existing (...)” (D’Aurevilly 18). It is a philosophy very close to Aestheticism, especially in the aspect that dandies elevated fashion to the same level of importance as art in life and they essentially made a work of art of themselves through their pose and appearance. Leaving an impression was a joy of utmost importance for the dandy, drawing attention to himself was what gave him his power to influence. Every movement, every pose, and every word uttered was a performance, carefully calculated to shock and excite (D’Aurevilly 79).

As already stated before, many decadent writers were dandies, such as Charles Baudelaire, Theophile Gautier, J.K. Huysmans, and of course, Oscar Wilde was a famous dandy as well (Grundmann). Much of his controversy stemmed from his flamboyant sense of style and the

public persona that he created. The dandy was partly a literary persona, meaning that he was partly a real person and partly a fictional character, for example, in his *Treatise on Elegant Living*, Balzac takes the real persona of Beau Brummell and transforms him into a larger-than-life mythical character of wit, style, and flamboyancy by exaggerating true facts or even making up his own stories about him (Garellick 16). It was common, too, for the real personalities of the dandyist authors to transcend into their works as is also the case with, for example, J.K. Huysmans's protagonist Des Esseintes and Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray. The reason that dandies were so controversial was because, amongst other things, they were a menace to the stability of the moral order of Victorian society. Not only did they shock, dazzle and fascinate the masses, but more importantly, they were seductive, sensual, and independent creatures who threatened gender rules and other social norms and overall behaved however they pleased. They refused to commit to anything (Grundmann). Their greatest sin was their provocative femininity and indulgence in vanity. As much as they amassed crowds of followers, they also ignited rage or aroused jealousy in others. They provoked and offended the moralists and infuriated those who secretly envied their fame and elegance. As d'Aurevilly wrote of Brummell: "Women will never forgive him for having been graceful as they, men for not having been graceful as he" (D'Aurevilly 65). The alluring influence of the concept of the dandy is so powerful that to this day, the dandy remains to be a seductive archetype of controversial androgyny: a man who seduces through a dash of femininity and for a woman the opposite – she seduces through a dash of masculinity (Greene 41).

As already mentioned before, the very essence of the dandy was about being as artificial as possible and thus becoming a personification of artifice, which was a core feature of Decadence. The purpose of the dandy was to embody a work of art as a performance, as an artificial enhancement of beauty. By impersonating a woman, he defied nature. He eluded femininity because it was the most artificial thing to create on a male body. To heighten the illusion of femininity, some dandies even used to wear make-up, accessories, and tight corsets and pads in places such as the breasts and the hips to simulate the hourglass shape of the female body (Grundmann). Again, this can be seen as an attempt for originality and authenticity in a mundane, mediocre world overrun by industrialization and mass production.

## 1.6 Opium

The use of various drugs and the study of their influence on the human mind was an integral part of the Decadent movement. The most popular substances among the Decadents were hashish, opium, and absinthe (Robles; Crane), however, in Victorian England, opium was a significantly widespread substance in society. The use of opium occupied a unique position in Victorian times because of how commonly it was used, while being wildly unregulated. It was sold freely in regular shops without prescriptions or medical supervision. The substance was mostly used for medical purposes, it was essentially considered a cure-all for alleviating all sorts of pains and aches such as toothache, headaches, or stomach cramps, but it was also used to cure depression, sleeplessness, women's hysteria, and it was even given to small children to keep them from crying. It was also sold in pubs and sometimes even added directly into beer to counteract the effects of excessive drinking. Opium was available in many forms but one of the most popular opium products was laudanum, a mixture of opium and alcohol. In the earlier part of the century, opium use was seen as a common medical practice and the recreational use of the drug was not very much spoken of publicly. It was in the literary community that opium and its effects on the human mind and body gained popularity. One of the first authors to publish a work devoted to opium use was Thomas DeQuincey with his 1821 *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* in which he described the highs and the lows that come with the use and addiction to the substance (Edwards 28-49). Opium was popular among the writers of the Romantic circle as well and gave rise, for example, to the work of *Kubla Khan, or, a Vision in a Dream* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Diniejkó). Among Decadent writers, it was, for example, Charles Baudelaire who explored drug use in his works such as *The Poem of Hashish* or in the poem *Poison* from his famous collection *The Flowers of Evil* (Robles). In English literature, it was for example the characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that dealt with opium use, which will be further discussed in the practical part of this thesis.

## 1.7 Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was a complex figure who became a symbol of *fin de siècle* Aestheticism and Decadence, famous for his wit, style, flamboyancy, and controversies. He was born in Dublin to two Irish writers and prominent public figures whom he deeply admired and who

most likely endowed him with his intelligence and great conversational skills (Powell and Raby 9).

In 1882, having finished his studies at Oxford, he undertook an important Aesthetic mission when he travelled to North America to deliver a tour of lectures on Aestheticism, where he caused an explosive sensation (Cooper). Altogether, he wrote three lectures: *The House Beautiful*, *The English Renaissance*, and *The Decorative Arts*, which were heavily inspired by the philosophies of William Morris and John Ruskin. Drawing inspiration from other artists was not unfamiliar to him, in fact, as Karl Beckson writes, “his originality lay in his clever manipulation of other men’s ideas rather than in his personal vision and voice” (Beckson XXXVII). Apart from William Morris and John Ruskin, his main influences were, for example, Walter Pater, A. Swinburne, D.G. Rossetti, James McNeill Whistler, and Théophile Gautier (Powell and Raby 39).

Aside from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote other major works such as *Lady Windemere’s Fan* (1892), or *The Importance of Being Ernest* (1995). His most Decadent works were the poem *The Sphinx* (1894), in which a young man inquires a sphinx about her past erotic adventures, and the play *Salomé* (1891), in which Salomé, the main female character, openly expresses her sexual desires: “I am amorous of thy body, Ikonaan!” (...) “Suffer me to touch thy body” (...) “Suffer my to kiss thy mouth.” (Wilde, *Salomé* 34 – 42), and in the she end kisses the severed head of the prophet who rejected her. Oscar Wilde further wrote an essay on socialism called *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891) and a short book *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (1894) containing a list of what could be called a summary of Oscar Wilde’s life philosophy that includes phrases such as “The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible”, “Pleasure is the only thing one should live for”, “Industry is the root of all ugliness”, and “No crime is vulgar, but all vulgarity is a crime” (Wilde, *Phrases and Philosophies* 5-8) that heavily correspond with the Aesthetic and hedonistic themes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Oscar Wilde largely explored the importance of artifice, in his essay *The Decay of Lying*, in which he articulated his famous quote “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (Wilde, *Intentions: The decay of lying* 32) and argued that the purpose of art is creating a lie (or artifice). “Lying, the

telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.” (Wilde, *Intentions: The decay of lying* 55).

## 1.8 Censorship of the Picture of Dorian Gray

Unsurprisingly, due to the nature of the novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* went through a great deal of censorship. When Oscar Wilde submitted his original typescript to Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine in 1890, J.M. Stoddard, the editor of the magazine, was so horrified at the political and graphic homosexual content of the typescript that he secretly altered the typescript by crossing out words and phrases and then published his version without Wilde’s knowledge (Frankel IX). Despite Stoddard’s censorship, the novel still caused massive public outrage upon publication. The press produced one scornful review after the other such as this infamous review by *The Daily Chronicle*:

“It is a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French decadents - a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which it is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction (...)” (Frankel 5).

The novel was criticized as “vulgar, unclean, and a sham” (Frankel 5) right from the start and Oscar Wilde supposedly received over 200 attacks on the novel in the first two months after publishing (Frankel 5). Despite the hysterical backlash and Wilde’s later imprisonment, however, the novel had a profound effect on Victorian society and forever altered the lens through which Victorians viewed sexuality and the world (Frankel 4).

The original version of the book caused such outrage that one year later, when *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published as a revised stand-alone novel, Oscar Wilde further deleted some parts, prolonged the text by half, and added the preface. The unedited typescript of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had not been published again until 2011 (Frankel 38).

## 2 Practical Part

### 2.1 Portrayal of Beauty in The Picture of Dorian Gray

As has already been discussed in the theoretical part, beauty was a central theme of both the Decadent and Aesthetic movements. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, beauty is the centre point of the novel, especially the darker, decadent aspects of it, such as the deterioration of the beauty of Dorian's portrait. Another Decadent aspect of beauty in the novel is the fact that the pursuit of beauty is portrayed as part of the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, a visual pleasure to be exact. The novel explores the value and importance of beauty in life, its power to corrupt and deceive, and it is also used to portray symbolic undertones in the plot.

Wilde becomes a painter of his own novel and depicts a very specific visual image of the looks of Dorian Gray as well as the material things and the atmosphere of the scenes. Dorian Gray plays the role of the pinnacle of charm, "a young man of extraordinary personal beauty" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 5). His beauty is the centre point of the whole novel with his beautiful blue eyes, chiselled rose-red lips and shiny hair with golden locks. He has precious pale skin, which was a typical Victorian beauty standard. "He looks like he was made of ivory"(...) "You really must not allow yourself to become sunburnt. It would be unbecoming" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 6, 24). Getting sunburnt or having freckles was generally considered ugly in Victorian England and was also a distinct feature of the lower classes since they had to work outside in the sun (Gifford 146). There is an immense emphasis on Dorian's innocence and youth, which Lord Henry describes as "rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 21). Dorian Gray was beautiful throughout his whole being, "with his beautiful face, and his beautiful soul, he was a thing to wonder at" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 57).

The vast majority of musings about beauty in the book are articulated by Lord Henry, and the large part of the novel revolves around Henry's perception of beauty. His stance towards Dorian's beauty is characteristic of his sense of superiority, so in describing Dorian, he likens him to an object.

"He was like one of those gracious figures in a pageant or a play, whose joys seem to be remote from one, but whose sorrows stir one's sense of beauty, and whose wounds are like red roses" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 57).



Lord Henry puts the value of beauty above all else. He views it as a pleasure of the senses but just as it is typical for Decadence (and Aestheticism), Henry elevates beauty into the realms of a life philosophy, he indulges in it as something sacred, as something to be worshipped (or subjugated in the case of Dorian.) He believes that “the search for beauty is the real secret of life” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 48), which is a tamer, less Decadent version of what was originally in the typescript, in which the search for beauty is said to be the “poisonous secret of life” (Frankel 92).

According to Lord Henry, beauty is synonymous with youth and since youth is so fleeting, it is the most precious thing in the world. He uses this theory on Dorian to terrify him and get him under his influence. He also expresses a correlation between beauty and intelligence. He says that “Beauty is a form of Genius” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 24) but “Genius lasts longer than Beauty” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 15), which makes intelligence inferior to beauty because it is not as fleeting. Additionally, Beauty is superior because it doesn’t need an explanation in contrast to Genius. This is why Lord Henry means it as the highest compliment when he calls Dorian a “brainless, beautiful creature” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 7).

Lord Henry’s theory about intellect and beauty is an example of another prominent theme of the novel regarding looks:

“Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face. The moment one sits down to think, one becomes all nose, or all forehead, or something horrid” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 7).

This touches upon the theory of physiognomy which originated in Ancient Greece and was a popular belief that one can tell someone’s character just by the way how they looked. According to this, for example, the uglier someone looked, the more evil they surely had to be (*Britannica* “Physiognomy”). It is the reason, why nobody in the book would truly believe the terrible rumours about Dorian and it emphasized his deteriorated and corrupted nature. “He had always the look of one who had kept himself unspotted from the world” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 124). The character of Basil Hallward was a staunch believer of this, which was why he allowed himself to be blinded Dorian’s beauty and his devotion to Dorian lasted for so long. “Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face. It cannot be concealed” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 143). He even refused to paint someone because he didn’t like the look

of him. "There was something in the shape of his fingers that I hated" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 143).

There is also very subtly hinted at the hierarchy between Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry through their looks - Dorian is obviously the most beautiful and the most worshipped one. Lord Henry was charming as well, and Dorian thinks he has a beautiful voice and his "cool, white, flower-like hands, even, (have) a curious charm" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 23). Basil, on the other hand, was portrayed as the weakest character and his looks corresponded with that. Lord Henry affirms it when he compares him to Dorian:

"I really can't see any resemblance between you, with your rugged strong face and your coal-black hair, and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 2).

Lastly, the very way in which the portrait alters with every sin that Dorian commits is very physiognomic. The first changes are just subtle, a cruel expression around the lips but then later it would be the "hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 124) as signs of evil.

There is another Decadent aspect that regards with the beauty of Dorian's portrait and his subsequent fascination with the portrait's deterioration. With the help of the cursed portrait and Lord Henry's corruptive influence, Dorian embarks on a downward spiral of moral decay and debauchery. He develops a curious relationship between himself and the portrait, which eventually transforms into a narcissistic, Decadent fascination with his own deterioration. Dorian first realizes his beauty after his conversation with Lord Henry when he first sees himself in Basil's portrait. "The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 27). He quickly develops an attachment to the portrait which is revealed by his reaction when Basil decides to destroy the portrait because it puts Dorian in distress. "Don't, Basil, don't!" he cried. "It would be murder!" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 29). After Dorian receives the finished painting he develops a habit of sitting in front of it in awe and admiration of his own beauty. When he first realizes that the portrait is changing instead of him and will suffer the degradation instead of Dorian, he grieves for it. "A sense of infinite pity, not for himself, but for the painted image of himself, came over him" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 89). At first, Dorian is terrified before the portrait and then

realizes that it will be the shameful secret of his soul so he decides that he must hide it. It is at that moment that Dorian's paranoia first creeps into him and later begins to grow stronger after he falls under the influence of the yellow book and starts committing more and more immoral acts. He becomes obsessed with the portrait and frequently stands in front of it comparing in a mirror his perfect beauty with the decaying portrait.

“The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 124).

Dorian develops a strong sense of maliciousness and cruelty in his obsession with the decay of the portrait and he mocks it for its ugliness. In the end, Dorian's paranoia and his consciousness haunt him and he starts to loathe his beauty and youth that had been gifted him in his typical manner of blaming everything around him except for himself and it is, in fact, Dorian's resentment towards the portrait that destroys him rather than Dorian's desire to make amends for what he had done.

Apart from the physical properties of Dorian's beauty, the novel is filled with beauty in other aspects as well, namely through the environment and material things.

“The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 5).

The opening sentence of the novel alludes perfectly to the atmosphere that is portrayed in the first two chapters of the novel. It is a drunken summer ecstasy full of sunshine, beautiful scents of flowers and blossoms in the trees, and the lively sounds of the birds singing, bees flying around and grasshoppers chirping in the grass. Dorian goes out into the garden and “buries his face in the great cool lilac-blossoms, feverishly drinking in their perfume as if it had been wine” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 23). It is in that part of the book when everything seems idyllic and nothing has been spoilt by evil yet and the story is only at its beginning. The reader is enchanted by Dorian's beauty and is allowed to bask in the beautiful tempting words about the soul and the senses uttered by Lord Henry. The reader is seduced into

indulging in the hedonistic mood that is set by the scene without any fear of what is yet to come. “Be always searching for new sensations. ... Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you!” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 25).

There is also a material side of the novel, which adds to the luxurious and beautiful feeling and gives a window into the life of the aristocracy - Persian carpets and saddle-bags, Japanese tables, china dishes, fire breathing silver-dragons for cigarette lighters, lilies and orchids... There is an emphasis on hand-crafted objects, as it was a typical feature of Decadence to combat industrial mass production and mediocrity. For example, the picture frame for Dorian’s portrait which Basil specifically designed himself, or the “large purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold, a splendid piece of late seventeenth-century Venetian work” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 115), which Dorian used to cover the dreaded portrait.

Beauty also serves as a healing agent in the book, in the same way, Lord Henry believed that the soul could be cured by the senses. The obvious instance would be when Dorian smells the cool lilac blossoms in the opening garden scene as he is awakened into life by Lord Henry’s monologue. But another example would be when Dorian spends the entire night walking the streets after he broke Sybil Vane and ends up at the market near Covent Garden and the air is filled with the scent of flowers. “The air was heavy with the perfume of the flowers, and their beauty seemed to bring him an anodyne for his pain” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 86). The atmosphere seems to resemble that of the first two chapters after Dorian decides to make amends and marry Sibyl Vane. “A bee flew in and buzzed round the blue-dragon bowl that, filled with sulphur-yellow roses, stood before him. He felt perfectly happy.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 92).

The symbolism of the weather and the environment is true of the opposite situations as well. There is especially an emphasis on bad weather in scenes regarding the murder of Basil Hallward and the consequences of it: the night Basil goes to visit Dorian before he is murdered, the night is very cold, dark and extremely foggy. Some hours later, right after having stabbed Basil to death, Dorian steps out on the balcony and suddenly the night was clear and bright. “The wind had blown the fog away, and the sky was like a monstrous peacock’s tail, starred with myriads of golden eyes.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 152). It corresponded to the calmness Dorian felt inside of him. Finally, when Dorian is tortured by

his conscience and sets out on his way to the opium then, the night is again dark and it is raining and “the moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 176).

## **2.2 Decadence and Corruption**

### **2.2.1 Lord Henry as a Decadent Character**

The most openly decadent and corruptive aspect of the novel is the philosophy and influence of Lord Henry. His views on beauty as one of life’s pleasures have already been discussed in the previous chapter and now it is time to focus on his opinion on life and the other pleasures it can offer. Lord Henry is essentially the embodiment of Walter Pater’s ideas about life and art taken to the extreme.

Lord Henry believes in the hedonistic approach to life and puts the pursuit of pleasure in life above all else, no matter the cost or harm that it might bring. He believes in living a rich and fulfilled life and indulging in all the fantastic sensations it has to offer. In a society centred around notions of virtue, self-control, and duty, the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure was viewed as extremely sinful, immoral and Decadent. Lord Henry says that “the aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 20). He believes that one should live without restraint because trying to resist a desire only makes one want it more. “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 21). He criticises people for living in fear of themselves. He believes that if everyone lived freely and in tune with their desires, the world would be a much better and more exciting place.

Lord Henry studies life. He studies himself, he studies Dorian, and everything else around him and he does it with perfect indifference, which makes his ideas quite evil and dangerous. “I never approve, or disapprove, of anything now” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 72). He does not judge on the basis of good or evil, he judges on the basis of whether something is interesting to him and gives him pleasure or not. Lord Henry despises boring and ordinary people because, for him, the most important aspect of a person is their authenticity, which is why, when he says that “There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr Gray. All influence is immoral.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 20), it exposes him as an immoral person, since the very next step he makes is to take it upon himself to influence Dorian and make him a creation of

his own. Lord Henry's selfishness and disregard for other people also first shown when he meets Dorian and Basil begs him not to influence him. "Don't take away from me the one person who gives to my art whatever charm it possesses: my life as an artist depends on him. Mind, Harry, I trust you." (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 16).

### **2.2.2 Dorian Gray as a Corrupted Character**

As the story progresses, the character of Dorian Gray undergoes a transformation that blurs the lines between him and Lord Henry. Particularly, after Dorian falls into corruption and succumbs to Decadent vices, he becomes an extension of Lord Henry rather than be his own person, embodying and reflecting many of Henry's views and opinions through his own perspective.

Dorian starts falling under the spell of Lord Henry from the moment they first meet in Basil's studio. As Dorian poses for Basil, he is charmed by Lord Henry's monologue about sin and temptation and by the compliments regarding his youth and beauty. Henry's words cause a shift in Dorian's expression, which helps Basil finish the portrait to perfection. "I don't know what Harry has been saying to you, but he has certainly made you have the most wonderful expression" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 22). As they walk into the garden, however, Lord Henry strategically terrifies Dorian mercilessly by telling him that his youth is the only thing worth having in this world and that he will lose it soon so he must act fast and enjoy life while he can. This aspect also ties in with the theme of beauty from the previous chapter because Dorian's fear of losing his looks and his actions that follow this realization makes beauty another evil and Decadent feature in the book.

"You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you,..." (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 24).

The influence of Henry's words is shown immediately as it leads Dorian to panic, and to lash out against Basil ("How long will you like me? Till I have my first wrinkle, I suppose." (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 28)) and utter the fatal prayer that he would give his soul if only the portrait would age instead of him. As he starts to cry, he is portrayed as moving in the same fashion which is typical of Lord Henry by "flinging himself on the divan" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 28), signalling that Henry's tactics have started to come into effect.

Another milestone in Dorian's transformation into a hedonistic monster takes place after the death of Sibyl Vane. Just as Dorian starts to repent after he sees the changes in the portrait and swears to marry Sibyl Vane and never see Lord Henry again, Lord Henry arrives at the perfect time and delivers him the news of Sibyl's death. He uses Dorian's emotional distress to his advantage and corrupts him further. He latches onto Dorian's impression that Sibyl's death is "simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 78) and spins it around into a poetic and cruel theory that Dorian should, in fact, be grateful and excited that he was fortunate enough for a woman to have killed herself out of love for him.

"You are more fortunate than I am. I assure you, Dorian, that not one of the women I have known would have done for me what Sibyl Vane did for you. Ordinary women always console themselves" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 99).

The final decisive moment in Dorian's corruption is when he receives the dreaded Yellow Book from Lord Henry. Dorian falls under the influence of the Decadent teachings of the book and it is also the turning point when Lord Henry loses his influence over Dorian. The reality of the distance that develops between them is revealed in the final conversation they have with each other before Dorian destroys himself. It becomes obvious how very little Lord Henry truly knows about Dorian and his decadent lifestyle and that he still lives in his self-absorbed belief that he helped Dorian make his life better instead of destroying him. When Dorian tries to suggest that it was him who murdered Basil, Lord Henry merely mocks Dorian.

"I would say, my dear fellow, that you were posing for a character that doesn't suit you. All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is a crime. It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder. I am sorry if I hurt your vanity by saying so, but I assure you it is true" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 203).

This passage reveals how wrong he is about Dorian and that even in his corruption, he still strongly disapproves of crime, which suggests that he never intended nor imagined the type of heinous acts Dorian would go on to commit. Dorian accuses Lord Henry that he poisoned him with a book to which he replies that it is impossible. "As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 208). Yet it really did happen to Dorian and it poses an ironic contradiction with the preface of the novel where Oscar Wilde states

that “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 3). Since the novel reveals that Lord Henry never anticipated nor intended for Dorian to become a monster, the question arises to what extent is Lord Henry to blame for the extreme degradation of Dorian’s character.

Although both Lord Henry and Basil Hallward claim that Dorian is incredibly pure and innocent, there are signs of Dorian’s cruelty at the beginning of the novel already. In the first chapter, Basil says to Lord Henry about Dorian that

“now and then, however, he is horribly thoughtless, and seems to take a real delight in giving me pain. Then I feel, Harry, that I have given away my whole soul to someone who treats it as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity, an ornament for a summer’s day” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 14).

Not only are there first signs of Dorian’s maliciousness in the statement but also in the second sentence, in which Basil likens Dorian to someone who treats him as if he were a mere accessory is suspiciously reminiscent of Lord Henry’s attitude towards the people around him. The first time Dorian behaves in a truly cruel manner is when he breaks up with Sibyl Vane and loses his compassion all at once and acts more heartless than Lord Henry is shown to act throughout the entire novel. “There is always something ridiculous about the emotions of people whom one has ceased to love. (...) Her tears and sobs annoyed him” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 86). Lord Henry taught Dorian to be many things but he never encouraged him to be outright cruel. There is also the matter of Dorian’s grandfather who had Dorian’s father killed and who Dorian has bad memories of. It could be assumed that Dorian was familiar with evil from his early childhood or perhaps even inherited it as Dorian imagines that his portrait is going to age in the same manner as his grandfather. “There would be the wrinkled throat, the cold, blue-veined hands, the twisted body, that he remembered in the grandfather (...)” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 118).

Dorian also blames Basil Hallward for his Decadence. “Years ago, when I was a boy,(...) you met me, flattered me, and taught me to be vain of my good looks” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 149). He also blames him for introducing him to Lord Henry, who poisoned his mind with hedonistic ideas. In a way, Basil could be at fault, too. Basil paints the portrait to reflect his adoration (although it was ultimately Lord Henry who causes Dorian’s face expression to be



so lively...) and thus makes the painting extraordinarily beautiful. He feeds into Dorian's narcissism by worshipping him and showering him with compliments. Basil could also be interpreted as a symbol of morality in the novel. Both Dorian and Lord Henry look down upon him and consider him inferior for his good principles, just as they consider morality to be a weakness. "He seems to me to be just a bit of a Philistine" (...) "Basil was really rather dull. He only interested me once, and that was when he told me, years ago, that he had a wild adoration for you" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 55, 203). Since Basil Hallward is murdered by Dorian Gray, whose attitude was the opposite of moral, Basil's death could be interpreted as a symbolic death of morality as well. Incidentally, James Vane, who symbolized Dorian's punishment for his first crime, ended up dying in the end as well.

Lastly, the object that could bear the blame for Dorian's corruption is the portrait itself since after offering his soul in exchange, Dorian is endowed with eternal youth and beauty. Dorian comes to a similar conclusion and grows to resent the portrait eventually, although he still blames Basil for painting it. "Basil had painted the portrait that had marred his life. He could not forgive him that. It was the portrait that had done everything" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 210). It is important to note that Dorian listens to what the portrait tells him about his own soul. "One thing, however, he felt that it had done for him. It had made him conscious how unjust, how cruel, he had been to Sibyl Vane" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 93). Dorian believes he is evil mostly because the portrait tells him so, however, it is not stated in the novel on what merit it judges Dorian. The portrait could have been an unjust mirror and misrepresented the severity of Dorian's sins. If the novel were to take place in the 21st century, the portrait's judgement would have likely been vastly different since homosexuality and promiscuity are not nearly seen as scandalous in today's age as they used to be before. So, provided that the portrait judges Dorian on the basis of the strict moral codes of Victorian society, which were known to have been unjust and full of double standards, and not on the basis of whether an act was truly good or evil, then the portrait (and by extension Victorian society) was at fault for Dorian's corruption as well.

The true nature of the majority of Dorian's sins in the novel remains hidden. In his pursuit of pleasure without restraint, he lives a sexually promiscuous life, gambles, and indulges in drug use, which will be discussed in chapter Opium. On his quest to satiate "the mad hungers

that grew more ravenous as he fed them” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 124), however, it seems that wherever he goes he brings death and destruction. The characters who die in the novel, either directly or indirectly, is Sibyl Vane, Basil Hallward, James Vane, Allan Campbel, “that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 144) and, finally, Dorian Gray brings his own destruction upon himself as well. The recurring theme of suicide in the novel was controversial, too, because suicide was generally considered a taboo topic in Victorian England and it is the reason why the newspapers wrote that Sibyl Vane’s suicide was an accident (“I have no doubt it was not an accident, Dorian, though it must be put in that way to the public.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 96)) and Basil Hallward became mortified when Dorian swore that “When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 28).

Death was not the only way by which Dorian Gray ended lives, though, because he seduced his victims into immoral activities and destroyed them socially. Men typically lost their careers or fell into debt (in the original typescript it is suggested that Dorian ruined the young men’s reputations through homosexual acts), such as poor Adrian Singleton who Dorian meets in the opium den and women lost their purity and became condemned by society, such as Henry’s sister, Lady Gwendolen, who has an affair with Dorian and becomes so ostracised that “even her children are not allowed to live with her” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 145).

### **2.2.3 The Yellow Book**

Staying on the topic of corruption, we will now discuss the Yellow Book, which played a crucial role in Dorian’s corruption. In the novel, the Yellow Book that Dorian is gifted by Lord Henry plays a crucial role in Dorian’s corruption and moral decline into Hedonism and Decadence as he becomes obsessed with the book and lives like the protagonist. “The Yellow Book” in the original typescript was presented as a fictional novel *Le Secret de Raoul* by Catulle Sarrazzin but the title has been later deleted and only vaguely referred to as The Yellow Book because it was wrapped in yellow paper, which strangely seems even more provocative as it alludes to French literature. Colours were very important in decadent symbolism, especially the colours green and yellow as they symbolized the movement (Ribeyrol). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, colours play a subtle role as well. For example with the colour green, Dorian calls youth “a green, an unripe time, a time of shallow moods,

and sickly thoughts” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 210) towards the end of the book, the waxy substance that Dorian pulls out before he goes to the Docks is green as well, in the opium den, a green curtain hangs in the hall, and when Dorian reads the Yellow Book for the first time, there is a “copper-green sky” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 121) outside. Other colours that often occur in the novel are red and gold, especially red roses, Dorian’s lips and the colour of his hair.

Upon the first reading of the novel, Dorian gives a very specific description of the contents of the Yellow Book that can unmistakably be identified with the contents of *À Rebours*.

“It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own (...)” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 121).

Dorian describes the style that the book was written as that curious jewelled style (...) that characterizes the work of some of the finest artists of the French school of Symbolistes (and was originally the French school of Decadents) and the flowery, lavish language can be found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well. In a way, Oscar Wilde was not shy to admit that Dorian was at least to some extent modelled on Des Esseintes because Dorian expresses that the protagonist “became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 123).

Truly, there are many similarities between Dorian and Des Esseintes: they were both aristocrats, the last living descendants of their family, they both broke societal rules and their purpose in life was the pursuit of the pleasure of the senses.

Chapter 11 in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is very similar to how *À Rebours* is structured. There is a lack of plot and the chapter is rather an account of Dorian’s life under the influence of the book; all the fruits of life that he tasted and the corners of the world that he explored: He joins the Roman Catholic Church because the rituals fascinate him, he studies perfumes, jewellery and gemstones, embroideries and opulent fabrics, he devotes himself to music, he indulges in sin and substances and overall embarks on his insatiable quest for all the beauty

in the world. “There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 140)

There are also some more subtle instances that seem to have similarities, for example, Dorian’s demise could be likened to the way Des Esseintes’ life of pleasure in self-isolation comes to an end. Des Esseintes’ health namely gets so bad that his doctor forces him against his will to return to life society that he despised in order to recover. Similarly, Dorian Gray’s life ends against his will as well, as he does not anticipate that the destruction of his portrait would destroy him instead. In another instance, Lord Henry poeticises Sibyl Vane’s death as a similar metaphor of the tortoise dying because “it had not been able to bear the dazzling luxury imposed on it” (Huysmans 49) in *À Rebours*. Lord Henry says that “The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 100) and in this way, just like the tortoise, Sybil Vane died because she had not been able to bear the reality of pain and it destroyed her.

## **2.3 Sexuality in the Picture of Dorian Gray**

### **2.3.1 Homosexuality**

The aspect that provoked perhaps the most outrage upon the release of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was the depiction, or rather the subtle insinuations, of homosexual love among the characters in the novel. It was precisely this aspect of the book that faced the most severe censorship.

Most of the lines, which were altered or deleted from the original typescript of the novel were related to Basil Hallward and his confessions of love about Dorian but there are some other provocative instances in which Oscar Wilde alludes to homosexual love, for example, when Lady Brandon first introduces Dorian to Basil Hallward in the original typescript. She has a curious slip of the tongue about marriage between two men: “(...) poor dear mother and I quite inseparable—engaged to be married to the same man—I mean married on the same day—how very silly of me!” (Wilde, *Uncensored Dorian Gray* 64), which did not pass the censorship as the idea of two men married to each other was so outrageous for Victorian society that it could not be referred to even in a joking matter.

Next, physical contact between men was deleted completely, for example, in chapter 1 of the original typescript, Lord Henry touches Basil on his shoulder as they are speaking, which has been deleted, and when Basil described how he spends time with Dorian Gray, he said that they would “walk home together from the club arm” (Wilde, *Uncensored Dorian Gray* 68), which paints quite the romantic scene.

There are three main occasions on which Basil talks of Dorian romantically: the first is in chapter 1, when Basil shows Lord Henry the portrait he has been working on, the second is when Basil confesses his secret and ultimately his love to Dorian and the third is when Basil confronts Dorian right before he is murdered. All three parts had to be toned down.

In the opening scene of chapter 1, when Henry questions Basil about Dorian Gray, Basil admits that he sees Dorian every day because he is “absolutely necessary” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 12) to him. In the original, the dialogue goes differently:

“I couldn’t be happy if I didn’t see him every day. Of course sometimes it is only for a few minutes. But a few minutes with somebody one worships mean a great deal. / But you don’t really worship him? / I do.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 9).

When Henry asks Basil why he will never exhibit the picture, Basil responds “Because I have put into it all the extraordinary romance of which, of course, I have ever dared speak to him.” (Wilde, *Uncensored Dorian Gray* 67) which was later changed to “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, *Dorian Gray* 14). Basil masks his homosexual love under the guise of artistic inspiration and his search for an artistic ideal, which is an overarching theme of his relationship with Dorian throughout the novel. Basil also puts an emphasis on Dorian’s “personality”, which is in contrast to Lord Henry, who almost exclusively comments on Dorian’s youth and beauty. Basil’s concern with Dorian’s personality, however, raises doubts as well since he claims that he recognized Dorian’s “personality” just by his looks, without speaking a single word to him first.

Before revealing the secret of his portrait in the original, Basil admires Dorian and thinks to himself, “There was something in his nature that was purely feminine in its tenderness.” (Wilde, *Uncensored Dorian Gray* 140) and then delivers his confession.

“It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow, I had never loved a woman. (...) I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly (...)” (Wilde, *Uncensored Dorian Gray* 144).

All of these lines were later deleted, although Oscar Wilde had retained Basil’s passionate tone and again, romantic adoration is replaced with artistic reasoning.

“Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 110).

In the moments before his death when Basil confronts Dorian about the rumours around him, there were two lines altered. “You know I have always been devoted to you.” (Wilde, *Uncensored Dorian Gray* 185) was replaced by “You know I have always been a staunch friend to you.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 146) and “Dorian, Dorian, your reputation is infamous.” (Wilde, *Uncensored Dorian Gray* 183) was deleted completely because the “infamous reputation” alluded to homosexuality (Gifford 153). Also, the way Basil addressed Dorian by uttering his name twice was the same way that Sibyl Vane addressed Dorian multiple times before he rejected her and broke her heart. “Dorian, Dorian, don’t leave me!” she whispered” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 85).

Apart from the censored lines and the lines, which remained but still carry a substantial amount of erotic undertone, there are also a few other coded references to homosexuality in the novel, the most obvious one being the name Dorian Gray. The first name refers to the Dorians, who were a Hellenic people of Ancient Greece. This was not the only Greek reference in the book as will be further discussed shortly (*Britannica* “Dorian”). The surname Gray also carries meaning as it could be a metaphor for the grey moral area which Dorian occupies or perhaps it could mean that Dorian himself is grey, as in he does not have any distinct personality, but besides this reasoning, the surname Gray was most likely based on one of Oscar Wilde’s lovers whose name was John Gray (Frankel 13). Another hidden homosexual reference is “the villa that he had shared at Trouville with Lord Henry, as well as the little white walled-in house at Algiers where they had more than once spent the winter”

(Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 135) both of which were popular vacation destinations for Victorian homosexual men (Gifford 153).

The character that is clearly infatuated with Dorian Gray the most is Basil Hallward. His worship verges on obsession. He puts himself below Dorian and elevates him to an idol on a pedestal. Lord Henry, on the other hand, puts himself above Dorian and plays with him like his own personal toy. He loves his beauty but he reduces him to a thing (“He is some brainless, beautiful creature, (...)” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 7)) and his homosexual tendencies are rather disguised by his concern with objective beauty. The two older men lust after Dorian, but it is not clear whether Dorian reciprocates the feelings, although he admires Lord Henry and also comments on his appearance. When it comes to Basil and Dorian, Dorian seems to be aware of the power he has over Basil and plays with his feelings out of cruel amusement.

“I find a strange pleasure in saying things to him that I know I shall be sorry for having said. (...) Now and then, however, he is horribly thoughtless, and seems to take a real delight in giving me pain” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 14).

Out of the three characters, however, Dorian Gray is the only one likely to act on his homosexual attraction but it is possible that he would have done it simply as a quest for new sensations. There are cues, though, that Oscar Wilde perhaps intended for all three men to be homosexual, such as the house in Algiers or the deleted line, in which Basil accuses of being “infamous”.

As aforementioned, the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian is strikingly similar to the case of the aristocratic men and the young “rent boys” during the Cleveland Steet Scandal, but as a matter of fact, Oscar Wilde based their relationship dynamic on a much older occurrence stemming from the time of the Ancient Greeks. Hellenism, in fact, was a secret code for homosexuality in the 1890s and Oscar Wilde himself was very knowledgeable of the topic as he studied it at Oxford (Gifford 146). Homosexuality in Ancient Greece was widely accepted and in Sparta, particularly, there was a traditional type of relationship termed “pederasty”, which was similar to the relationship between Dorian and Lord Henry or the “rent boys”: it was a relationship between an older unmarried man who served as a mentor to a much younger man in return for sexual favours (Brinkof).

Besides sexual freedom, the society of Ancient Greece was also appreciated for its democratic freedom and their concern with aesthetics since they are to this day considered to have found the pinnacle of perfection in art and beauty.

“I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream – I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediævalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal – to something finer, richer, than the Hellenic ideal, it may be” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 21).

Overall, Dorian is likened to a Greek idol throughout the book. According to Lord Henry, Dorian moves “with the air of a young Greek martyr” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 20) and his beauty is “such as old Greek marbles” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 37). He likens him to Adonis, a remarkably beautiful young man who becomes a lover of the goddess Aphrodite (*Britannica* “Adonis”), and Narcissus, a stunning, mythical young man who becomes obsessed with his own reflection and dies. Sibyl Vane is as well described as having “a little flower-like face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 50). Another controversial aspect was that Dorian falls in love with Sibyl Vane when she plays Rosalind and comes on stage dressed like a boy. “When she came on in her boy’s clothes she was perfectly wonderful. (...) She had never seemed to me more exquisite” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 74).

Basil Hallward sees in Dorian a Greek artistic ideal, too.

“What the invention of oil-painting was to the Venetians, the face of Antinous was to late Greek sculpture, and the face of Dorian Gray will some day be to me. (...) Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 13).

Dorian Gray himself eventually likens himself to the Greek gods when in his vanity he first realizes that he shall be eternally youthful while his painting was going to age for him. “Like the gods of the Greeks, he would be strong, and fleet, and joyous” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 103).



### **Further Censorship of the Novel**

The 1891 revision of the novel that has been discussed in the theoretical part has caused that there have been created two different versions of the novel so the audiences were met with two completely separate works of literature. This chapter will address the differences between the original 1890 typescript and the 1891 revision of the novel.

The most obvious difference is that due to the shorter nature of the original typescript, the events of the original are much more fast-paced and straightforward than in the widely known 1891 version of the novel. The first two chapters contain the famous scenes of the first encounter between Lord Henry and Dorian, the garden scene and Dorian's fatal wish in front of the finished portrait. Next, in chapter 3, Dorian has already met Sibyl Vane, tells about it to Lord Henry and then almost immediately gets engaged to the girl. In the next two chapters, the events at the theatre and the first changes of the portrait accompanied by Dorian's promise to be good take place. In chapter 6, Henry breaks the news of Sybil's death to Dorian and lures him back on the path of corruption and then in chapter 7 Basil comes with his futile moralistic objections but Dorian has already been changed. Dorian hides the portrait and reads the Yellow Book in chapter 8 and then chapter 9 is a shortened equivalent of chapter 11 of the 1891 novel, which portrays Dorian's wanderings through life under the influence of the Yellow Book. The last four chapters contain Basil's visit and confrontation followed by his murder and Alan Campbell's cleaning of the corpse. The final chapter contains Henry's and Dorian's last conversation and then Dorian destroys the painting and himself.

The expansion of the novel brought greater complexity to the plot and additional characters: the characters of Sibyl's mother and James Vane brought their family background and also the events of Dorian's trip to the opium den and the hunt and murder of James Vane, which magnified Dorian's torture through his conscience. The reader also learns about the family background of Dorian Gray. Apart from that Oscar Wilde also added a large portion of strong social and political commentary, which happened for example at lunch at Lady Agatha's, and there was a lot of extra dialogue, which was especially interesting between Lord Henry and Lady Narborough and later with Lady Gladys.

All of these events surely advanced the plot and added layers to the interpretation of the book but what was lost or at least toned down was the ecstatic and ravishing call to the sensual enrichment of life, which was understandably and most likely the purpose of the revision. The corruptive lines of the text were diluted and scattered throughout the novel, which made it slightly less tempting and served as a distraction from the hedonistic theme of the book.

On the other hand, what was really accentuated and expanded on was first, the seriousness of the consequences of Dorian's selfish and forbidden acts and the heavy emphasis on the fact that Dorian destroyed many, many lives and second, (and this was achieved mainly by the addition of the character of James Vane) the torture and suffering of Dorian's conscience because of his deeds was greatly intensified as well. This has caused the effect that the moralistic theme of the book was much more prominent in the 1891 edition.

Lastly, there are two more interesting examples of lines that were deleted completely from the original typescript. First, instead of "Tell me, what are your relations with Sibyl Vane?" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 51) Lord Henry asks Dorian whether Sybil Vane was his mistress (Wilde, *Uncensored Dorian Gray* 95), which was not allowed to be published as the idea of a woman being a mere mistress and having sexual relations outside of marriage was too offensive. The second line that had to be altered was from "the French school of Decadents" (Wilde, *Uncensored Dorian Gray* 156) to "the French school of Symbolistes" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 121) when Dorian referred to the contents of the Yellow Book. Again, here the mere reference to French Decadence was far too explicit for the Victorian public.

### **2.3.2 Promiscuity**

The other more outrageous aspects of the novel were the various insinuations regarding promiscuity and sexual liberty. As already discussed in the introductory chapter, marriage and the family unit were considered sacred and especially for women, marriage and children were the only matters that they were allowed to strive for in their life if they were to remain pure and proper, which is why the views and opinions of Lord Henry regarding marriage or commitment were extremely controversial.

Lord Henry, speaks from his aristocratic pedestal and considers marriage futile, a burden, or just a game to be played, which to the Victorian society was a highly outrageous opinion to have. Lord Henry, despises women who demand commitment. He says that "women are

wonderfully practical. (...) In situations of that kind we often forget to say anything about marriage, and they always remind us” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 75). He alludes to living a double life and having love affairs. He believes that “the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 8) and he considers there to be “other and more interesting bonds between men and women” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 73) than marriage, alluring to immoral sexual relations outside of marriage. He rejects commitment: “(Women) spoil every romance by trying to make it last for ever” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 26). His despicableness shows when he encourages Dorian to marry Sybil Vane and then replace her when he grows bored of her. “I hope that Dorian Gray will make this girl his wife, passionately adore her for six months, and then suddenly become fascinated by some one else” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 73). “After all, no man can love a woman and be happily married to her at the same time” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 171). Lord Henry also tries to discard women as useless, boring and stupid (“Women have no appreciation of good looks; at least, good women have not.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 16)) but the intelligence and witticisms of the female characters in the novel prove him wrong, especially Lady Gladys during the brilliant dialogue between her and Lord Henry.

Lord Henry is married to his wife Victoria, which seems to be the cause of a substantial portion of his ramblings but Basil calls Lord Henry out on the hypocrisy of his claims and says that he believes that Lord Henry is in fact a good husband. It is true that Lord Henry possibly likes his wife very much. The line “But when she does find me out, she makes no row at all. I sometimes wish she would; but she merely laughs at me.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 8) reveals a lot about both Lord Henry and Victoria. On the one hand, it shows that Lord Henry is sad about Victoria’s indifference to him and later he does show remorse that has divorced him. On the other hand, it portrays Victoria as a very independent woman. In general, the women in the novel are portrayed as having independent desires and indulging in love affairs, which was naturally unacceptable in Victorian times - starting with Dorian’s mother, who eloped with a man who was of a lower class and thus “unworthy” of her. Sibyl Vane’s mother, on the other hand, fell madly in love with an aristocratic man and had two illegitimate children with him but he never bothered to commit to her and marry her because it would have been a disgrace. Then there is Lady Gladys, who is married to a “jaded-looking man of sixty” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 185) but who openly flirts with Dorian Gray and the

unfortunate Hetty Merton who is ready to run away with him before he “decides to spare her.” The only pure woman in the novel, who is up to Victorian standards as she strives for marriage and is absolutely devoted to Dorian, is Sibyl Vane and she ends up killing herself.

## **2.4 Dandyism**

### **2.4.1 Lord Henry as a Dandy**

In the novel, the character that has the most distinguishable features of a dandy is Lord Henry. Firstly, he pays meticulous attention to his personal appearance and is described as being always impeccably dressed, with a keen eye for fashion. His devotion to fashion transcends the limits of mere attire into making a statement, for example, when during a conversation with Dorian about a romance he says that he “once only wore violets all through one season, as a form of artistic mourning for a romance that would not die“ (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 131) when he could not successfully break up with a woman. On another occasion, he wears an extraordinary orchid in his buttonhole, “a marvellous spotted thing, as effective as the seven deadly sins” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 185), which was a matter of wealth and luxury at that time because exotic flowers were very expensive.

Lord Henry is very characteristic for his charm, wit, theatricality and elegance. Everything was a pose or performance for him and he always knew what to say. His charm is often overshadowed by descriptions of Dorian’s beauty, however, Lord Henry lives and breathes elegance. His every step was calculated while also seeming effortless and nonchalant. He is certainly independent and does not need anybody, or so he tries to come off as for the most part, although it is revealed towards the end of the novel that he does miss his wife after she has left him.

His typical pose is described already on the first page of the novel: “From the corner of the divan of Persian saddlebags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, (...)” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 5) - always relaxed and untroubled, and the way he is always described as moving and talking languidly and “flinging himself on the divan” every chance he gets is very characteristic of someone that is seductively charming and graceful. He always talks “in his low, musical voice, and with that graceful wave of the

hand that was always so characteristic of him” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 21). Even Dorian is charmed by Henry from the first moment he meets him. He is described as thinking that

“there was something in his low, languid voice that was absolutely fascinating. His cool, white, flower-like hands, even, had a curious charm. They moved, as he spoke, like music, and seemed to have a language of their own” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 23).

Lord Henry’s pose was his art, as was typical for the dandies. Basil Hallward tries to call him out on it - “Your cynicism is simply a pose.” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 8) - to which Lord Henry calmly responds that “being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 8) meaning that he is well aware that it is unavoidable to not have a pose in society and that is why it is necessary to embellish oneself with certain mannerisms in order to make life more intriguing and extraordinary even though he might come off as shallow, pretentious or contradict himself as a result. In other words, he makes himself as artificial as possible which is very typical of the dandies and decadents.

Lord Henry is quite vain as well and to a certain extent, he admits to being aware of his own vanity. “I choose my friends for their good looks, my acquaintances for their good characters, and my enemies for their good intellects. (...) Is that very vain of me? I think it is rather vain” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 11). He mainly considers himself superior to most people and typically acts as unmoved as possible no matter how shocking a situation is and he disguises his true emotions to enhance his sense of superiority. He has an intense disdain for mediocrity and values uniqueness and authenticity as has already been discussed in previous chapters, which is a typical feature of the dandy. There is a passage about George Brummell in Barbey d’Aurevilly’s essay, which could not express the character of Lord Henry more accurately:

“Like all dandies, he preferred astonishing to pleasing, for terror is the supreme form of astonishment. His indolence forbade his being lively, for to be lively is to be excited; to be excited is to care about something, and to care about something is to show oneself inferior; but he was always cool and said just the right thing” (D’Aurevilly 79).

As discussed in the previous theoretical part, it was extremely important for dandies to always leave an impression and Lord Henry expresses his concern about the value of

attention as well when he says that “there is only one thing in the world than worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 22), which has become one of the most well-known quotes of the whole novel. Lord Henry is a master at leaving an impression and his great power lies in his social influence which is very well demonstrated during the lunch at Lady Agatha’s in chapter 3 when he steals the spotlight with his witty and intriguing monologue about his tempting idea of mistakes and regrets - or rather the lack thereof.

„He played with the idea, and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox. (...) He was brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible. He charmed his listeners out of themselves...” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 42).

Most importantly, Lord Henry uses his charm on Dorian Gray. As has already been analysed in a previous chapter, Henry starts getting under Dorian’s skin right from the moment they first meet and that impression is only reinforced during the lunch at Lady Agatha’s of which Lord Henry is very well aware and pleased about.

“He felt that the eyes of Dorian Gray were fixed on him, and the consciousness that amongst his audience there was one whose temperament he wished to fascinate, seemed to give his wit keenness, and to lend colour to his imagination. (...) Dorian Gray never took his gaze off him, but sat like one under a spell, smiles chasing each other over his lips, and wonder growing grave in his darkening eyes” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 42).

#### **2.4.2 Dorian Gray as a Dandy**

While Lord Henry is portrayed as a dandy right from the beginning of the novel (and is already corrupted from the beginning as well), Dorian Gray becomes a true dandy halfway through the book as he falls under the influence of Lord Henry and the Yellow Book, (Des Esseintes was a dandy as well) and in many ways, Dorian Gray becomes a sort of extension of Lord Henry. He realizes his seductive power and charm and begins taking it to his advantage, consciously or unconsciously.

“Fashion, by which what is really fantastic becomes for a moment universal, and Dandyism, which, in its own way, is an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of beauty, had, of course, their fascination for him” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 125).

Dorian’s dandyism is for the most part modelled by the way George Brummell was known and admired, Dorian became a sought-after celebrity with a wide variety of social influence, hosting exclusive luxury dinners with the help of Lord Henry, and he amassed many followers and admirers, which was characteristic of Brummell.

“Indeed, there were many, especially among the very young men, who saw, or fancied that they saw, in Dorian Gray the true realization of a type of which they had often dreamed in Eton or Oxford days (...) His mode of dressing, and the particular styles that from time to time he affected, had their marked influence on the young exquisites of the Mayfair balls and Pall Mall club windows, who copied him in everything that he did, and tried to reproduce the accidental charm of his graceful, though to him only half-serious, fopperies” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 125).

The fact that the other men were so keen to copy Dorian touches on the problem of dandyism which was the problem of originality and authenticity. Everybody wanted to be a dandy but to be a dandy one had to be unique and original, which had as an effect that there could only be one true dandy (in the novel it was Dorian Gray) and all of the other “dandies” simply copied him (Garellick 14).

### **2.4.3 Other Dandyist Features in The Picture of Dorian Gray**

Another point to be made about the characters in the novel is that dandies typically did not work and their sophistication came from their enjoyment of leisure time. In *The Treatise on Elegant Living*, Honoré de Balzac creates an interesting division of society. Instead of the typical lower, middle, and upper classes, he distinguishes three types of living: “the busy life”, “the artist’s life”, and “the elegant life”, the elegant life (or the life of a dandy) being on top of the hierarchy because there was nothing more superior than being sophisticated, tasteful and most importantly elegant. The busy life was considered the most horrible and despicable mode of existence possible because poverty (and the necessity to work itself) and a lack of comfortable idleness made people blind to beauty because they lived mundane lives (Balzac 4). “The man accustomed to work cannot understand elegant living,” Balzac writes

(9). Dandies despised the spoiled upper classes (that also fit into the category of the busy life) as well because they were just as detestable because, despite their abundance of money and opportunity for enjoyment of life and cultivation of art and beauty, they were still only concerned with tasteless consumption and deserved nothing but contempt as well (Balzac 6). Dorian Gray and Lord Henry both fit into the category of the elegant life, of course. They are both wealthy and have plenty of leisure time to devote themselves to different pleasures of life and even Lord Henry's uncle makes such observation when Henry comes to visit him: "I thought you dandies never got up till two, and were not visible till five" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 34).

Balzac's societal division explains the position of the last of the three male main characters, Basil Hallward as he was not quite a dandy himself but he does not fit the busy life either. Basil Hallward was a painter and an artist so his lifestyle and existence would still pass as worthwhile in Balzac's eyes: "The artist is an exception: his idleness is work, and his work, repose; he is elegant and slovenly in turn; he does, as he pleases; (...) he is not subject to laws: he imposes them" (Balzac 10). Basil himself declares that he considers himself an independent creature and leads a peculiar life of his own (that is until he meets Dorian) and also expresses the opinion that artists are their special kind of people. "You know we poor artists have to show ourselves in society from time to time, just to remind the public that we are not savages" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 9).

It is an interesting fact, though, that even through the lens of dandyism, Basil Hallward still comes out as slightly inferior to Dorian and Henry and while he is still somewhat worthy of their friendship and company, Lord Henry is still shown to call Basil boring and a Philistine and Dorian has a cruel habit of picking Basil.

Speaking of cruelty, which is a vice that both Henry and Dorian have, there are some parallels with George Brummell as well. Barbey d'Aurevilly writes of Brummell:

"He was cruel: he could ingeniously cause the unconscious subject to place his own absurdities in the best point of view." This may have been a somewhat cruel sort of amusement; but Dandyism is the product of a bored society, and to be bored does not conduce to being kind" (D'Aurevilly 78).



And while there are many other factors at play for why the two characters behaved in such a cruel and ignorant way, it is intriguing to pinpoint this connection in Dorian and Henry's personalities.

The last interesting point to be made regarding this chapter is about the reason for the palpable disdain for women that Dorian and Henry seem to have at times. While the opinions and views on women in the novel have already been discussed in the previous chapters, analyzing it through the lens of dandyism offers an additional dimension to the issue. As has been already established, dandies were characterized by their feminine traits and by their artificial recreation of them. The natural woman then posed a threat to their pose which is why women were often hated and feared in decadent literature in general, not only in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Garelick 5). (Again, here we stumble upon another parallel with J.K. Huysmans' *Des Esseintes* since he had tendencies to vilify women in the novel as well.) "Women also reveal the essential device behind dandyism, because their very existence gives the lie to the dandy's pose as a double-sex being" (Garelick 5). Dandies saw no use in women so, essentially, it would not be a crude exaggeration to say that dandies wished to get delete women, which in hindsight is fairly unsurprising given the strong overlap of dandies and men with homoerotic desires, even though it was not a requirement for dandyism (Garelick 19).

## **2.5 Opium Use in *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

In the novel, the use of opium is included as a narrative element that contributes to the exploration of decadence and its consequences. Opium, a potent and addictive drug, serves multiple purposes within the story, although it is not the only substance that occurs in the novel. Aside from opium, alcohol consumption is mentioned sporadically throughout the story, often in connection with Dorian's hedonistic lifestyle since drinking alcohol is another pleasure to indulge in. There is also a hint that Dorian might have been consuming hashish (which was a favourite substance of the Decadent writers) as well, although it is not said outright: Right before Dorian decides to visit an opium den, he is shown to open a small box inside of which was a "green paste waxy in lustre" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 175), which is quite indicative of the typical qualities of hashish.

In regard to opium, Dorian is first introduced to the substance through Lord Henry who has a beloved habit of smoking cigarettes. The very first chapter opens with a scene where Lord Henry is portrayed lounging on a luxurious divan “smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 5). A few paragraphs later it is revealed that Henry’s cigarette was not just an ordinary cigarette but it is a “heavy opium-tainted cigarette“ (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 6) and suddenly the fragrant sunfilled atmosphere is enhanced by a “languid” opium haze. This seemingly minute piece of information is very important, as it is an indication that every time a character is portrayed as smoking a cigarette, he is most likely consuming opium along with it. Additionally, the shift when Dorian starts using opium is hinted at through a clever choice of words as well. The first time Dorian is shown to light a cigarette is in the moment when Dorian sends for the frame-maker to carry his portrait into safety, which was right after Basil confesses his secret to Dorian and by this time, Dorian adopts the “languid” manner of movement and speech, which until then was exclusively a characteristic of Lord Henry. “He opened The St James’s languidly, and looked through it” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 120). This change is indicative that Dorian has been further corrupted by Lord Henry.

As Dorian does not indulge in anything in moderation, he quickly becomes addicted to the substance, which exacerbates his already erratic and immoral behaviour. He is shown to indulge in obsessive binges in various disreputable places such as the “ill-famed tavern near the Docks” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 160) or the “dreadful places near Blue Gate Fields“ (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 135) where he would stay “day after day, until he was driven away“ (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 135), indicating that he was not shy to overstay his welcome on his pursuit for pleasure. (“Blue Gate Fields was one of the worst slums in London during the Victorian era (Fisher)).

Aside from the recreational indulgence in the drug, opium is also at times presented as a tool for relief from spiritual pain and suffering. (Here we stumble upon another parallel with J.K. Huymans’s *Des Esseintes* who would also often use opium as an attempt to relieve the physical pain caused by his disease.) After the murder of Basil Hallward, Dorian is tortured by his sin and calls it a “thing to be driven out of the mind, to be drugged with poppies, to be strangled lest it might strangle one itself” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 156) insinuating the use

of opium to forget his actions since opium is made out of poppies. Another instance when Dorian alludes to opium as a tool to forgetting the reality of his actions is after Sybil Vane kills herself. Dorian says, “I must sow poppies in my garden” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 98) to Lord Henry, to which Henry replies that there is no need for that because “Life has always poppies in her hands” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 98). He then goes on to lament one of his previous romances and says that he had “buried (his) in a bed of asphodel” (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 99). This passage has an intriguing double meaning. According to Greek mythology, both flowers, poppies and asphodel, namely symbolize death and the underworld so it could have been a metaphor for mourning the death of a romance. However, it could also be an allusion to Dorian’s future opium use in order to achieve forgetfulness. Additionally, in the original manuscript, Lord Henry says that he had to bury his romance “in a bed of poppies” (Wilde, *Uncensored Dorian Gray* 131) instead of asphodel. The reason for this change could have either been to avoid another obvious allusion to opium or because it could have simply been a stylistic choice on Wilde’s part in order to add another layer of metaphorical references (Mighall 241).

## Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis was to explore the various aspects of Decadence in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The novel offers a compelling exploration of decadence through various aspects, shedding light on the societal values and moral decline of the era.

Beauty plays a central role in the novel. It is a sensual pleasure to be pursued as well as it has the power to deceive and to corrupt, serving as a source of superiority for Dorian Gray. His exceptional physical appearance allows him to navigate society with ease, gaining admiration and influence over others. However, as the portrait symbolically ages and becomes more grotesque, it serves as a reflection of Dorian's internal moral decay, contrasting his outward beauty with the ugliness of his soul, which fascinates him. The atmospheric descriptions and handcrafted objects in the novel contribute to the creation of an alluring yet ominous setting, and the portrayal of enhanced beauty in the novel can also serve as a healing force.

The theme of moral decline permeates the entire story. Lord Henry represents the epitome of Decadence, encouraging Dorian to indulge in a life of pleasure without any regard for moral consequences. As Dorian's mentor and guide into a life of hedonism, Lord Henry becomes the catalyst for Dorian's gradual descent into depravity. This decline culminates in the portrait's degeneration, reflecting the transformation of Dorian's character into one consumed by vice and evil. Through Lord Henry's witty and persuasive discourse, the novel illustrates the seductive allure of immoral behaviour and its corrosive effects on one's character.

Moreover, it has been discussed that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shares striking parallels with Joris-Karl Huysmans' novel *À Rebours*, a seminal work of the Decadent movement. Both works explore themes of hedonism, Aestheticism, and the rejection of societal norms. The influence of *À Rebours* on Wilde's novel is evident in the emphasis on individualism, the pursuit of pleasure, and the celebration of art and beauty as guiding principles in life. Dorian's journey mirrors the protagonist Des Esseintes in *À Rebours* as they both embrace a life of self-indulgence, leading to their eventual downfall.

Homosexuality, considered highly decadent in Victorian England, is a significant theme in the novel and adds another layer of subversiveness to the narrative. While homosexuality is hinted at in the relationships between the main characters, its explicit depiction was met with outrage and had to be censored or disguised. This suppression reflects the societal constraints and the necessity for writers like Wilde to conceal their true identities and desires, underscoring the hypocrisy and repression prevalent during the time.

Additionally, the exploration of promiscuity within a society that prioritized marriage and moral values serves to challenge Victorian conventions. Lord Henry's insinuations and libertine attitudes toward affairs outside of marriage provoked outrage in the conservative society of the time and highlighted the tension between societal expectations and personal desires, revealing the hypocrisy and contradictions inherent in a morally rigid society.

Dandyism, a distinctive lifestyle focused on beauty, art, and fashion that was tightly associated with Decadence, emerges as a prominent theme in the novel as well. Upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that the philosophy of Dandyism is interwoven into the narrative and it becomes a driving force behind the behaviour of the characters, reflecting their detachment from conventional moral values and nonchalant attitudes. Moreover, the dandy's pursuit of aesthetic perfection and their contempt for the ordinary often result in callous disregard for others' emotions and well-being, which corresponds with the cruel undertones of the personalities of both Lord Henry and Dorian Gray.

Lastly, the purpose of opium in the book is multifaceted. It serves as a symbol of escapism, allowing characters to temporarily evade the harsh realities of their lives but it also represents the darker undercurrents of hedonism, as it provides a means to explore forbidden desires and indulge in pleasurable experiences.

In conclusion, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is filled with various aspects of Victorian decadence, exploring themes such as beauty, moral decline, parallel literary influences, homosexuality, promiscuity, dandyism, and opium. Through Wilde's masterful storytelling, readers are compelled to examine the societal norms and values of the era, questioning the oppressive constraints imposed by Victorian morality and offering a glimpse into the darker recesses of human nature.

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## Appendices

Figure 1: *The Apparition* by Gustave Moreau



Source: Moreau, Gustave. "Apparition." 1876, Harvard Art Museums/ Fogg Museum, Cambridge, [smarthistory.org/gustave-moreau-salome/](https://smarthistory.org/gustave-moreau-salome/).

Figure 2: *The Climax* by Aubrey Beardsley



Source: Beardsley, Aubrey. "The Climax." 1893. Tate Britain. Tate. [tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/aubrey-beardsley](https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/aubrey-beardsley).