
Deconstructing Aestheticism in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: Beauty and Moral Corruption

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Abstract

This analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* using an aestheticism approach and decadence theory. This study aims to analyze the representation of aestheticism influenced by the thoughts of Walter Pater and the concept of decadence rooted in the ideas of Charles Baudelaire through the main character Dorian Gray. The method used is a descriptive qualitative analysis of the elements of characterization and symbolism in the novel. The analysis shows that Dorian Gray represents the extreme application of aestheticism, placing beauty, youth, and pleasure as the main goals of life without considering the moral consequences. The separation between Dorian's body, which remains beautiful, and the portrait that bears the inner decay becomes the main symbol of the paradox of aestheticism. From the perspective of decadence, Dorian's life reflects the decline of moral values, the excessive pursuit of pleasure, and the state of "spleen" in the form of boredom and existential emptiness. This study concludes that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not only celebrates beauty but also critiques aesthetic life detached from ethical values.

Keywords : *aestheticism, decadence, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Fiction can reveal human civilization, the author's own background, or even serve as a medium for conveying opinions or criticism (Thanh Nha , M.A & Thi Hoa , M.A, 2020). This is evident in the work of Oscar Wilde, a renowned writer and follower of the aesthetic movement that emerged in the late Victorian era. The Victorian era was known for upholding morality above all else (Guan, 2018). However, at the end of the 19th century, British society experienced a period of transition where the Victorian era began to decline. The Victorian era ended with the death of the Queen. Rapid industrialization widened social inequality, created urban poverty, and exploited workers. Meanwhile, advances in science began to shake Victorian society, leading to an identity crisis. This

period became a transitional period toward modernity, marked by the emergence of various intellectual, artistic, and scientific movements that rejected the moral certainties of the previous era. One of the movements that occurred at that time was the aesthetic movement or aestheticism pioneered by one of the French critics, Théophile Gautier, who carried the motto of *l'art pour l'art* or art for art's sake through the preface in his work *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (Gautier, 1835). Through this theory, Walter H. Pater began to introduce the aesthetic movement in England and Oscar Wilde became one of those who accepted this theory. He articulated his views on art and beauty through his writings, such as *The Critic as Artist* (1891) and *The Decay of Lying* (1891). One of his most controversial and provocative works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), is considered both a manifestation and a celebration of decadence.

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) is the first and only novel ever written by Oscar Wilde. This novel describes the tension between beauty, morality, and identity. The story begins when Basil Hallward becomes inspired by the beauty and handsomeness of a young man named Dorian Gray, which he then channels through painting a portrait. Then, Henry Wotton, one of the characters who plays a very important role in changing Dorian's characteristics in the story, when he experiments with Dorian by introducing beauty based on the principles of aestheticism. Under Lord Henry's influence, Dorian transforms into a representation of life with the main principle of aestheticism – glorifying beauty just for the sake of pleasure. Dorian begins to become obsessed with eternal beauty, he is even willing to exchange his soul for a painting of himself just for eternal beauty and handsomeness. His obsession becomes increasingly uncontrollable, causing him to lose the woman he loved, Sybil Vane. However, this does not stop Dorian from pursuing worldly beauty, he lives a life of pleasure and sin without guilt and the portrait of Dorian Gray decays along with Dorian's moral development, as if present as a record of Dorian's sins. Wilde uses the portrait of Dorian Gray as a representation of decadence, where beauty and pleasure are pursued beyond the limits of the basic principles of aestheticism.

According to Bristow (2018), aestheticism, or the aesthetic movement, is an art movement that emerged in the late Victorian era as a form of freedom from the harsh modern world. This movement also expressed a rejection of the idea that art must be tied to moral or social values. Aestheticism refers to a person's desire for beauty, sensation, all new things obtained by any means, and includes all ugly and disgusting things (Valentine, 2023). As conveyed by Immanuel Kant in his book *Critique of Judgment* (Pluhar & Gregor, 1987), aesthetic experience is present as the highest goal pursued in life and an art is only judged by its beauty without considering the moral and function bound within it. The ideas put forward by Kant became the basis for the development of aestheticism. One of the critical figures who developed this idea, Théophile Gautier, a French critic, pioneered aestheticism by introducing the slogan *l'art pour l'art* or art for art's sake through the preface to his work *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. According to Guan (2018), this motto became a meaningful doctrine that art is only valued for its beauty and does not require moral values in it. Besides Gautier, there were

several other figures who helped develop this movement, one of which was Walter H. Pater, who became one of the figures who influenced Oscar Wilde towards aestheticism.

Walter H. Pater's theory of aestheticism places beauty and aesthetic experience at the center of human life. In his most influential work, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873), Pater argued that the primary purpose of art is not to convey moral, religious, or social messages, but rather to provide intense and meaningful sensory experiences. He rejected the view that art should educate or improve human morals, emphasizing instead that the value of art lies in its ability to evoke sensations, emotions, and an awareness of beauty. Pater also emphasized the concept of intensity of experience as a way for humans to give meaning to a short and temporary life. He viewed life as a series of fleeting moments, so humans should strive to capture and deeply savor each aesthetic experience. Thus, Pater's aestheticism is not limited to art but also becomes a philosophy of life that prioritizes sensitivity, enjoyment, and appreciation of beauty in all aspects of life.

Aestheticism goes hand in hand with the decadence movement (Stetz, 2022). According to Mahoney (2018), decadence is a state of decline or degeneration that occurred in the late 19th century. In this application, decadence demonstrates a confusing contradiction and diversity, for example, the contradiction between beauty and ugliness, or pleasure and suffering, both of which are unknowingly intertwined and connected. Decadence is a further stage of aestheticism itself, where decadence is characterized by a form of human social decline (Dowthwaite, 2025), when beauty and pleasure are excessively pursued to the point of self-destruction. In the book entitled *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) by Charles Baudelaire (1922), Baudelaire describes the condition of modern humans trapped in alienation, ennui, and inner restlessness. Decadence, for Baudelaire, is not simply moral decline, but an awareness of the collapse of traditional values amidst urban development, capitalism, and modernity (Valimaki, 2021). He sees decadence as a hallmark of the modern age, where beauty and ugliness paradoxically coexist. He stated that decadence is not only a form of decline, but also refers to an artistic awareness of beauty in human decay and destruction (Sil, 2022). In his poetry, sin, suffering, death, and decay become sources of aesthetic inspiration. This view challenges classical aesthetics, which associates beauty with harmony and moral goodness (Guan & Xie, 2017). For Baudelaire, decadent art reveals the inner truth of modern man—that behind beauty lies destruction, and behind pleasure lies suffering.

Another key feature of Baudelaire's theory of decadence is the glorification of extreme experiences and exaggerated sensations. The lyrical characters in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Baudelaire & Campbell, 1922) are often depicted seeking escape through pleasure, drugs, sex, or fantasy, but remain trapped in an inner emptiness. This suggests that decadence is not a celebration of happiness, but rather an expression of despair and alienation. Beauty in decadence is fragile and transient, often emerging from a sense of sin and self-destruction.

In Charles Baudelaire's theory of decadence, the concepts of spleen and ideal are two main poles that describe the inner conflict of modern man. Both are introduced explicitly in the structure of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Baudelaire & Campbell, 1922), particularly in the section "Spleen et Idéal,"

which is the core of Baudelaire's aesthetic and philosophical thinking. Spleen refers to a state of existential boredom, despair, anxiety, and profound inner emptiness. It signifies a state of decadence: humans are aware of their moral and spiritual decay, but unable to escape it. This awareness gives rise to a sense of disgust with themselves and the world. In contrast, the ideal symbolizes the desire for beauty, purity, love, and transcendence. The ideal is the human longing to transcend material conditions and find higher meaning through art, love, or aesthetic experience.

In his novel, Oscar Wilde implicitly demonstrates a form of self-destruction due to extreme aestheticism and a disregard for moral values. This has sparked debate and attracted the attention of many researchers. Several previous studies related to the topic were found, such as: "*Verdeus: Oscar Wilde, Dorian Gray, and the Colors of Decadence*" (Ribeyrol, 2021), "*Hedonism as Seen in Oscar Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray'*" (Intan & Saputri, 2015), "*Immoral Science in The Picture of Dorian Gray*" (Raitt, 2017), and "*'Life/Death' Binary Opposition in Folk Prose Narratives*" (Naumovska et al., 2021), "*Aestheticism, Desire, and Morality: Revisiting Wilde's Dorian Gray through Lesbian Reimagining*" (Poorghorban, 2025). However these studies generally still view aestheticism as a complete and relatively established idea, both as an object of criticism and as a framework for analysis. Research that specifically highlights the internal contradictions of aestheticism in this novel, which have the potential to undermine its fundamental claims, is still rare. Therefore, research that applies a deconstructive approach is needed to show that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) not only displays aestheticism in an extreme way, but also implicitly dismantles and challenges it through the tension between beauty and ugliness, art and the realities of life, and aesthetics and morality.

In this novel, Oscar Wilde experiments with aestheticism and decadence through the character of Dorian Gray as the main object. This analysis uses the aesthetic view of Walter H. Pater and Charles Baudelaire's view of decadence, which refers to a decline or downfall in modern humans.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method, which is a method for understanding social phenomena and human life, as well as interpreting the meaning in a text in depth and not focusing on numbers or statistical data (Rijal Fadli, 2021). The author uses a qualitative method to explain in detail the form of aestheticism that is deconstructed through the concept of binary opposition in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This study uses the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by Oscar Wilde as the primary data. Data collection is carried out using the library research method, where the author will read and collect related information from quotations, dialogues, and narratives that reflect the main concept of this research. The author will read the novel text thoroughly to find data related to the topic. Then, the author will identify text data related to aesthetics, beauty, and morality. After that, the author will group the data relevant to the theory used. In addition, the author also took additional references from existing books and journals to support this research.

The author will use Walter H. Pater's aestheticism theory and Charles Baudelaire's decadence theory. Pater's aesthetic framework is used to interpret the concept of beauty, aesthetic experience, and the principle of art for art's sake that shape Dorian Gray's outlook on life, while Baudelaire's

theory of decadence is used to analyze the shift towards hedonism, double life, and moral decay that emerge as a consequence of extreme aestheticism.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Aestheticism in The Picture of Dorian Gray

In the context of the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde used the character of Dorian Gray as an experiment in aestheticism and decadence. In his novel, this experiment is carried out by the character Lord Henry Wotton, as he attempts to introduce Dorian to a world of beauty and pleasure, as quoted:

"There is no such a thing as a good influence, Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral—immoral from the scientific point of view." (Wilde, 1890:29)

"The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it." (Wilde, 1890:31)

Through the dialogue above, Lord Henry is seen trying to introduce the doctrine of aestheticism to Dorian, as an initial form of aestheticism experiment in Dorian. In the dialogue above, Lord Henry truly indoctrinates Dorian to pursue pleasure and not to think about morals. Simply accept and enjoy all beauty, whatever it may be. Lord Henry, who also recognizes Dorian's handsomeness and pure beauty, seems to want to use it and make it a form of absolute beauty that is not bound by moral or social values

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Basil Hallward himself became a symbol of beauty, as he was known to be a painter. He was amazed and inspired by Dorian's beauty and handsomeness, which he embodied through a portrait of Dorian. His refusal to Lord Henry to exhibit his paintings shows that he did not pursue the pleasure of painting only for reputation, but for his own pleasure and this proves that Basil is a symbol of aestheticism itself, as quoted:

"It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul." (Wilde, 1890:13)

In the dialogue above, Lord Henry vents his irony at his painter friend, Basil Hallward, simply because the painter has no intention of exhibiting his paintings. Lord Henry feels that it would be a waste if it was not exhibited. This illustrates that Lord Henry's dissatisfaction with Basil's decision shows that he is indirectly criticizing the life of the Victorians who tend to be rigid and unfree. However, unlike Lord Henry, Basil does not think too much about that and only cares about his painting – the portrait of Dorian Gray.

Dorian as a Representation of Ideal Beauty and Aesthetic

Dorian is the model for Basil's painting. Basil considers Dorian to be a pure beauty that he has never encountered before, so Basil really protects Dorian as a form of pure beauty untouched by dirty values, including Lord Henry's doctrines. Indirectly, Dorian has entered into Lord Henry's doctrine of beauty and satisfaction. This is seen in the following dialogue, where Dorian has indirectly sold his soul to obtain eternal beauty as seen in his self-portrait.

“How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June.... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!” (Wilde, 1890:41)

“If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now! Why did you paint it? It will mock me some day—mock me horribly!” (Wilde, 1890:42)

Through the dialogue above, it is clear that Dorian is captivated by the beauty and handsomeness of the portrait painted by Basil. However, this actually creates anxiety and jealousy in Dorian. He feels jealous of his portrait which will always be beautiful and never age, in contrast to himself who will live to age and he feels he will become ugly and end up being the object of ridicule by people. The dialogue above also shows that Dorian has described the concept of Spleen as explained by Baudelaire, where Dorian is experiencing pressure due to the fact that he will age and he wants eternal beauty (the ideal concept).

Lord Henry feels that his attempt to draw Dorian into the concept of aestheticism has been successful. So, he continues his experiment by further introducing Dorian to aestheticism. When Dorian reveals that he is in love with an actress and wants to marry her, Lord Henry again conveys his thoughts on women. In Lord Henry's view, women are merely a nuisance and of little use in achieving anything. Through his doctrines, Lord Henry provides advice to Dorian regarding his choice of women, especially for the purpose of gaining a reputation.

“The Plain women are very useful. If you want to gain a reputation for respectability, you have merely to take them down to supper.” (Wilde, 1890:70)

Once again, Lord Henry talks only about reputation, pleasure, and beauty. Dorian, feeling helpless and curious about Lord Henry's world, naturally becomes increasingly drawn into it. He again shows his interest in Lord Henry's thoughts, as in the following dialogue:

“You filled me with a wild desire to know everything about life. For days after I met you, something seemed to throb in my veins.” (Wilde, 1890:71)

The tension becomes even more apparent when Dorian, Lord Henry, and Basil watch a play by Sybil Vane—the young lady Dorian loves. After the play, Dorian intends to introduce Sybil to his two friends. However, midway through the performance, Lord Henry comments on the performance and declares it a terrible performance and Dorian believes him. Rather than defending Sybil's acting, Dorian shares his disappointment and considers it a terrible performance, as shown in the following dialogue:

“But she seems to me to be simply callous and cold. She has entirely altered. Last night she was a great artist. This evening she is merely a commonplace mediocre actress.” “Don't talk like that about any one you love, Dorian. Love is more wonderful thing than art.” (Wilde, 1890:122)

In the dialogue above, he no longer cares about the fact that the play is being performed by the woman he loves. He continues to express his negative comments and feelings of disappointment,

even calling Sybil not a great artist. And through the dialogue above, it is also seen that Basil warns Dorian not to say bad things about the woman he loves. However, Dorian remains firm in his thoughts and remains disappointed with Sybil. Dorian's feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction with Sybil's appearance illustrate that Dorian feels he has failed to get pleasure from Sybil's own appearance. Dorian's anger towards Sybil is increasingly apparent in the following dialogue:

"I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows and art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid." (Wilde, 1890:126)

The dialogue above seems to show that Dorian loves Sybil because he feels that Sybil can satisfy his desire for beauty. So, when Sybil fails to provide this experience, Dorian feels disappointed. This is also seen as a result of Dorian taking Lord Henry's opinions about women too seriously. Lord Henry then uses Dorian's feelings of disappointment towards Sybil to take him further into the world of aesthetic pleasure, to see how far Dorian can accept all the principles of aestheticism. Dorian is drawn further into the aesthetic world until he approaches the principle of decadence, where he continues to pursue pleasure even though it destroys him. At this point, Dorian reaches the ideal point, in Baudelaire's concept, where he is in a world of absolute pleasure far from reality.

Decadence as a Consequence of Extreme Aestheticism

The destruction in Dorian is not seen directly in himself, but through the portrait of Dorian painted by Basil. The portrait of Dorian becomes a symbol of the decadence that occurs in Dorian, where the portrait changes and decays slowly, as shown in the following dialogue.

"The quivering ardent sunlight showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing." (Wilde, 1890:130)

Having exchanged his soul for the painting, Dorian feels that he has become a representation of eternal beauty. He realizes that the destruction he has caused by pursuing pleasure too far is not directly visible to himself, but rather through his self-portrait, which makes him feel even more free to experience pleasure. He tries to hide the portrait as a way of hiding the damage he has done to himself. He even kills Basil to cover up the ugliness and all his sins depicted in Dorian's portrait, as quoted:

"I owe a great deal to Harry, Basil," he said at last, "more than I owe to you. You only taught me to be vain." (Wilde, 1890:156)

"Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips. Hallward stirred in his chair as if he was going to rise. He rushed at him and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man's head down on the table and stabbing again and again." (Wilde, 1890:226)

Dorian's murder of Basil is seen as Dorian's silencing of the basic principles of aestheticism. Basil never oversteps the boundaries of aestheticism itself, pouring his love of the artistic world into a painting. Meanwhile, Dorian, the object of Lord Henry's experiment, reaches further into aesthetic

experience, reaching the limits of destruction or decadence. Dorian's attempts to eliminate the evidence of his sins lead to his own brutal destruction, it is death.

“As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter’s work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead, he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace.” (Wilde, 1890:318)

“When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage.” (Wilde, 1890:318-319)

Dorian's attempt to destroy his portrait painting reflects his disappointment, due to the painting's failure to reflect him. This indirectly violates the basic principle of aestheticism, where art should be free from any value. In addition, Dorian's tragic end proves Baudelaire's theory, where the ideal concept is fragile and can return to the concept of spleen at any time.

The novel demonstrates how the idea of aestheticism—as formulated by Walter Pater—is implemented to its extreme through the character of Dorian Gray. The principle that life should be lived for the beauty and intensity of experience is reflected in Dorian's life choices, which prioritize youth, pleasure, and artistic sensation. Art, particularly Dorian's portrait, serves as a medium that separates beauty from ethical consequences, allowing the character to live a life without the burden of moral responsibility. In this context, the novel both supports and tests the limits of aestheticism by showing how absolute beauty can actually lead to self-alienation.

From the perspective of Charles Baudelaire's decadence, Dorian Gray can be understood as a modern decadent subject who is aware of the decline of traditional values, yet still chooses to drown in them. Dorian's life reflects the concept of decadence, characterized by the pursuit of extreme pleasure, a fascination with sin, and a feeling of "spleen," or inner boredom and emptiness. In line with Baudelaire's thinking, beauty in this novel is never pure; it always coexists with decay, guilt, and moral decay. Dorian enjoys the beauty of his life, but at the same time experiences a profound alienation from himself and from human values.

By linking Walter Pater's aestheticism with Baudelaire's theory of decadence, this discussion asserts that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* serves as a critique of aesthetic modernity that has lost its moral orientation. This novel shows that the pursuit of beauty and pleasure as the primary goal of life does not bring liberation, but instead accelerates individual destruction. Therefore, *Dorian Gray* can be read as a symbol of modern man trapped between the ideal of beauty and the reality of decadence a condition in which art and life are intertwined, but also mutually destructive.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research above, it is proven that Oscar Wilde has experimented with aestheticism and decadence through the character of Dorian Gray, which he made as the object of his experiment. Basil Hallward, who is a symbol of the basic principles of aestheticism, is shown in his efforts to paint Dorian Gray because he is amazed and inspired by the beauty and handsomeness of the young man.

Then Lord Henry Wotton, one of the characters who conducted a direct experiment on Dorian, to prove how far Dorian could survive in the principles of aestheticism. The success of Lord Henry's experiment began to be seen when Dorian was ready to exchange his soul for eternal beauty. It can also be concluded that Dorian has demonstrated the concept of spleen in the theory of decadence, where he feels depressed by reality and desires absolute beauty. Lord Henry's experiments have brought Dorian into a further aesthetic world and even beyond the basic principles of aestheticism itself. This leads to self-destruction in Dorian, which is shown through Dorian's decaying portrait, as Dorian searches for the experience of pleasure. The experience of pleasure that Dorian gets indirectly brings him to the point of the Ideal concept, where he succeeds in obtaining absolute beauty. However, this concept is fragile and can return it to the concept of spleen. This is proven in Dorian's death, in his attempt to destroy the painting.

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