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The Dorian Gray Effect: Legacy, Scandal, and the Cult of the Aesthetic

O Efeito Dorian Gray: Legado, escândalo e o culto da estética

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Abstract: *This research proposes a systematic and comprehensive investigation of Oscar Wilde's work focusing on* The Picture of Dorian Gray *(1890), widely regarded as the centrepiece of his aesthetic and philosophical discourse. The study begins by contextualizing the author's biography and education, emphasizing the decisive influence of Greco-Roman classicism and the reverberations of Victorian aestheticism. These cultural landmarks are examined to elucidate how they are intricately integrated into the novel's ideational and narrative structure. A detailed analysis of the paradigmatic oppositions Wilde mobilizes–idealism and materialism, spirit and body, truth and appearance–is offered to highlight the dialectical relationship between art and existence, a recurring theme throughout his oeuvre. The analytical approach also considers Wilde's biographical condition, particularly his inner and social exile, reflected in the moral and aesthetic tensions experienced by the protagonist within the context of a declining Victorian society. It aims to decode the novel's symbolic and aesthetic dimensions while situating it within the broader discourse of Wilde's contemporary aesthetic and ethical debates, exploring his ambivalence toward both traditional and modern values. This approach contributes to a nuanced and in-depth interpretation of Wilde's work, revealing the stratifications of his artistic discourse and the associated identity issues, in alignment with modern critical perspectives.*

Keywords*: Oscar Wilde;* The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Aestheticism; Classicism; Decadence; Individualism.*

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Resumo: *Esta pesquisa propõe uma investigação sistemática e abrangente da obra de Oscar Wilde, com foco em* O Retrato de Dorian Gray *(1890), amplamente considerado a peça central de seu discurso estético e filosófico. O estudo começa contextualizando a biografia e a formação do autor, enfatizando a influência decisiva do classicismo greco-romano e as reverberações do esteticismo vitoriano. Esses marcos culturais são examinados para elucidar como estão intrinsecamente integrados à estrutura ideacional e narrativa do romance. Uma análise detalhada das oposições paradigmáticas que Wilde mobiliza – idealismo e materialismo, espírito e corpo, verdade e aparência – é oferecida para destacar a relação dialética entre arte e existência, um tema recorrente em toda a sua obra. A abordagem analítica também considera a condição biográfica de Wilde, particularmente seu exílio interior e social, refletido nas tensões morais e estéticas vivenciadas pelo protagonista no contexto de uma sociedade vitoriana em declínio. O objetivo é decodificar as dimensões simbólicas e estéticas do romance, situando-o no contexto mais amplo dos debates estéticos e éticos contemporâneos de Wilde, explorando sua ambivalência em relação aos valores tradicionais e modernos. Essa abordagem contribui para uma interpretação matizada e aprofundada da obra de Wilde, revelando as estratificações de seu discurso artístico e as questões de identidade a ele associadas, em consonância com as perspectivas críticas modernas.*

Palavras-chave*: Oscar Wilde;* O Retrato de Dorian Gray*; Esteticismo; Classicismo; Decadência; Individualismo.*

Introduction

Just as Oscar Wilde's biography is marked by contradiction—between genius and scandal, classical refinement and the spectacle of decadence—so too *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a text of duality and subversion. The novel is not only an aesthetic product of the British *fin-de-siècle*, but also a reflection on the relationship between art, morality and identity. It emerges from a cultural moment in which fascination with beauty coexists with anxiety about the seductions of aesthetics.

Just a few decades after his death, Wilde was described by Havelock Ellis as "an exotic product of a commercial age" (97), a paradox between the conventional and the decadent, the classicist scholar and the urban dandy. This observation captures the tension between artistic

imagination and the constraints of a morally utilitarian society. His Oxonian education, shaped by John Ruskin and Walter Pater, profoundly influenced his conception of art and aesthetic freedom. As editor of *The Woman's World*, Wilde "commissioned numerous articles on classicism, aesthetics, and Greco-Roman culture" (Ackroyd 142), transforming the journal into a space for the rehabilitation of ancient ideals within the moralistic framework of Victorian society. Thus, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* must be understood as an artistic transposition of this aesthetic ethos that elevates beauty as the supreme value and art's autonomy its guiding principle.

The novel's first edition, published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (1890), caused an unprecedented scandal, and the text was subjected to severe censorship: about five hundred words were removed to suit contemporary moral sensibilities. As Nicholas Frankel demonstrates in his *Annotated, Uncensored Edition* (2011), these deletions were primarily directed at the homosexual content and emotional nuances of the relationship between Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray. In the original manuscript, Hallward confesses: "It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man should ever give to a friend [...] I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly". (Qtd. in Frankel 120). This confession was radically censored in the printed edition, transforming a moment of vulnerability and desire into an idealized reflection on platonic beauty. Other passages, such as the narrator's observation that in Hallward's nature there was "something that was purely feminine in its tenderness" (118), were also removed, diminishing the novel's emotional depth. Censorship, in this sense, was an act of symbolic amputation, reflecting Victorian fears of aestheticized desire.

Press reactions were remarkably virulent: *The Scots Observer* condemned the novel as "a tale fit for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys" (21), while the *St. James's Gazette* published a defence of Wilde, arguing for artistic freedom. These responses became aesthetic manifestos, turning aestheticism into an instrument of cultural opposition. In 1891, Wilde published a revised edition, accompanied by his famous preface—written in an unmistakably aphoristic style—which proclaimed the autonomy of art: "All art is quite useless". (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 9). Far from nihilistic, this statement proclaims that art must serve neither morality nor utility, but its own ideal of beauty—an act of intellectual rebellion in a moralistic age.

In a letter to Ralph Payne, Wilde offers a self-reflexive interpretation of the novel: "Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry what the world thinks me; Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps". (*Letters* 263). This triad reveals the fragmented identity that structures the novel—between interiority, image, and aspiration. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* thus expresses a yearning to transcend reality through beauty and idealization.

From this point of view, Wilde's disdain for "good people"—figures of moral and intellectual conformism—must be read as a philosophical critique of mediocrity. For Wilde, "good people" lack spontaneity, incapable of free thought or creative sensitivity, a notion echoed in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), whose working title, *A Good Woman*, betrays the author's irony toward moral conventions. There, "goodness" is a fragile social construct, a pretext for exclusion, and virtue becomes a form of hypocrisy. (*Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde 47). Moral irony becomes Wilde's aesthetic strategy, undermining conventional value systems.

In *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891), Wilde formulates his aesthetic philosophy: "Nothing should be able to rob a man at all. What a man really has is what is in him. What is outside of him should be a matter of no importance". (17). For him, interiority becomes the source of freedom, and artistic creation its expression. He also adds that "The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful" (30), establishing a fundamental dichotomy between social utilitarianism and aesthetic individuality. This contrast supports the entire ideological edifice of Wilde's aestheticism and grounds the reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a manifesto of aesthetic freedom against moral uniformity.

The novel thus becomes an exploration of art and ethics, and of identity's fragility under social pressure. It proposes a dual inquiry: that of the artist confronted with the public and that of art confronted with its own meaning. This study seeks to delve deeper into these tensions, examining how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects the conflict between aestheticism and morality, classical scholarship and decadent modernity, creative individualism and the collective pressures of the Victorian era. In this sense, the novel is not merely a text of decadence, but a dialectical synthesis of the classical Apollonian and the Dionysian of late modernity, erudition and scandal, beauty and damnation—an expression of aesthetic freedom in its purest form.

Oscar Wilde and the Art of Becoming

Oscar Wilde, born in Dublin on 16 October 1854 into a family driven by cultural ambition, began his life under the sign of Libra—an astrological symbol that metaphorically prefigures his lifelong oscillation between form and impulse, aesthetic order and existential chaos. Beyond this zodiacal coincidence, such "oscillation" becomes an ontological principle in the structure of his personality. His biography, read retrospectively, confirms—almost with prophetic logic—this inner dynamic between stability and crisis, self-affirmation and dissolution. As Richard Ellmann notes, "Wilde emerges as one of the most remarkable and controversial figures in the history of English literature—or even world literature—having pursued a career that can be described, without exaggeration, as 'kaleidoscopic and at the same time catastrophic'." (5). Ellmann's remark offers a key to understanding Wilde: he simultaneously embodies the paradigmatic figure of the *fin de siècle* aesthete and the artist who becomes, unintentionally, his own experiment.

In his academic youth, Wilde formulated a self-reflexive vision of his public destiny—an early awareness of the performativity of his identity. His declaration, "Somehow or other I'll be famous, and if not famous, I'll be notorious" (Qtd. in Mendelssohn 24), was, as contemporaries recall, addressed to his friend William Ward. Here, the Wildean concept of becoming through spectacle is crystallized: fame is secondary to the act of turning oneself into a public work. This self-declaration is performative, a conscious act of self-institution through which Wilde becomes, above all, an aesthete of the self.

The well-known episode of his 1882 arrival in America—when he allegedly told the customs officers, "Nothing [...] but my genius"—must be treated with greater historical and critical precision. Although this formulation has become emblematic of the mythology surrounding his personality, it is not attested in contemporary sources. The line, first appearing in *The Oscar Wilde Calendar* (1910), edited by Stuart Mason, is likely apocryphal. Yet this very biographical ambiguity has symbolic value. Rather than dismissing it, we can read the story as a collective projection of the Wildean spirit—a fabrication that expresses the essence of his reputation: that of an artist perceived by Mason as endowed with "a provocative, ostentatious genius incompatible with the institutional normativity of the age". (17). Even if the episode is not factual, it remains revealing in what it suggests about how Wilde was imagined and mythologized.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Wilde was no longer merely an aesthete or dandy, but had become a cultural symptom of late modernity. His transformation into a *cause célèbre* revealed how Victorian society, seemingly morally solid, exorcised its anxieties by demonising the exceptional. His figure, once admired in literary salons and the refined circles of the aristocracy, was recorded by the press and public opinion as that of a poseur, a "dangerous" artist defined by his refusal of conformity. Here it is necessary to mention the Souls group, that London intellectual-aristocratic elite who, although fascinated by Wilde's spirit and humour, never truly integrated him. His relationship with the Souls perfectly illustrates what Ari Adut has called "the conspiracy of tolerance" (228): ironic acceptance coupled with latent rejection. The Souls invited him, cultivated him, and accepted his dedications in *The House of Pomegranates*, but abandoned him as soon as his eccentricity became undesirable. This exclusion was inseparable from his status as an Irish outsider in imperial England—a status Wilde later weaponised, citing the rejection of *Salomé* as proof of systemic marginality, turning exclusion itself into symbolic capital.

This ambivalence—being simultaneously celebrated and condemned—defines the paradoxical reception of Wilde's aestheticism. For the Victorian aristocracy, aestheticism was a "religion of beauty" without a moral or social utility, which made it both fascinating and threatening. Tolerance toward Wilde was purely rhetorical, a double morality that allowed society to condemn Wilde publicly while consuming him privately.

Before this paradoxical consecration, however, Wilde had followed an intellectually rigorous path. After graduating from Portora Royal School—a respectable, albeit provincial institution—and then at Trinity College, Dublin, he distinguished himself in ancient Greek language and literature. The Berkeley Gold Medal, established to encourage Bachelor of Arts students in the study of Greek, marks an early recognition of his commitment to Hellenic culture. His formative relationship with John Pentland Mahaffy—tutor, mentor, friend and later collaborator on *Social Life in Greece* (1874)—was crucial. Mahaffy, a scholar balancing sage-life wisdom with academic professionalism, inspired Wilde, who "wanted, perhaps, to be a professional academic as well as a sage". (Ross 141). This double tension—between academicism and wisdom, rigour and hedonism—would mark the entire Wildean aesthetic.

Wilde later described Mahaffy as "my first and best teacher and the scholar who showed me how to love Greek things" (Qtd. in Sanders 201)—a phrase loaded with semantic ambiguity, since the term "Greek" could, in the Victorian cultural code, serve as a euphemism

for homosexuality, adding symbolic and affective depth to their bond. Their journey to Greece was not merely a study trip, but a spiritual initiation—a Grand Tour transformed into an exercise in aesthetic self-discovery. For Wilde, Greece represented an "ideal homeland" of the spirit, the place where form and idea, beauty and truth, meet in Platonic harmony. Through Mahaffy, Wilde developed not only his taste for philosophical argumentation, but also his sensitivity to what Plato called *to kalon*[1]—the pure, non-functional beauty that generates an ontological tension between self and world—an idea central to his mature aesthetics, in which art transfigures life rather than imitating it.

At Oxford, Wilde entered an environment where the classical culture was not merely an object of scholarly study, but a genuine way of being—a living cultural paradigm, an ethos of intellectual spirit and beauty. The intellectual atmosphere was animated by figures such as Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol College, erudite theologian, and canonical translator of the Platonic works. Jowett's authority was both revered and ironized, as revealed by the well-known epigram:

> Here come I, my name is Jowett.
> All there is to know I know it.
> I am Master of this College
> What I don't know is not knowledge! (Qtd. in Almond 33)

Although humorous, this versification suggests the seriousness of the academic environment in which Wilde was formed—an intellectual space where authority and the discipline of knowledge were almost sacred. In the same context, Henry Liddell, dean of Christ Church and co-author of the famous *Greek-English Lexicon*, upheld a high standard of philological excellence. Access to the seventh edition of the Liddell-Scott lexicon was, at the time, equivalent to entering a community of initiates for whom Greek was not merely a research tool, but an elitist cultural code—a language of spirit and refinement.

The intersection of philological erudition and literary imagination—reflected in the relationship between Henry Liddell and Lewis Carroll—shows that Wilde was formed in a space where the aesthetic and the intellectual coexisted organically. Oxford thus became for him an ideal *topos*, a "Greece of the spirit", where the values of Antiquity were revived in modern forms without losing their aspiration to the aesthetic absolute. This period not only consolidated his intellectual formation, but also provided the symbolic infrastructure for his later project: constructing his life as a work of art grounded in classical culture, aesthetic rhetoric, and social defiance.

This disciplined erudition was what Wilde had long sought since entering Magdalen College—an institution rooted in intellectual tradition, where the aspiration to the classical ideal was intertwined with the freedom of aesthetic speculation. In *De Profundis*, in a grave and confessional tone, Wilde identifies two defining moments in his life: his father's decision to send him to Oxford and his later imprisonment. As Richard Ellmann points out, this contains "a dose of poetic license" (188), since Wilde himself who, following an examination in his third year at Trinity College, Dublin, obtained a demyship at Oxford—an act of personal merit rather than paternal directive. Symbolically, however, the reference to Oxford becomes in his text a sign of spiritual initiation—an entry into a higher order of thought and culture. Oxford offered him a space dedicated to intellectual debate and cultural refinement, where the Greek symposium—from *συμπόσιον* to *ἀγάπη*—served as the ontological framework for articulating a Platonic erotic-aesthetic philosophy. The second moment, that of deprivation, marks a collapse into an order of suffering: an institutionalized regime of moral and social exclusion. Thus emerge two antithetical hypostases: on one hand, the life of intellectual dialogue, where *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* shaped his understanding of beauty as a principle of knowledge; on the other, the dungeon—a descent into Dante's chaos, where reading the *Inferno* in the original becomes a meditation on his own moral exile.

The tragic lesson of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta—"Nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / nella miseria"[2] (Alighieri 121–23)—acquires, for Wilde, a profound existential resonance, echoing a personal past transfigured by trauma. In this experience of suffering, he reinterprets John Milton's adage from *Paradise Lost*: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n". (254–55). Originally grounded in Puritan moralism, the statement gains in Wilde a new poetic-philosophical dimension, affirming the autonomy of consciousness and the duality of perception—a tension he internalizes both as aesthetic reflection and inner freedom amid suffering.

Wilde's academic notes from his Oxonian period (1874–1878), published only recently, reveals a young scholar who rejected superficiality. These notebooks are not collections of disparate fragments—as the "magpie" metaphor might suggest—but systematic, rigorously thematized records adapted to the exigencies of academic competitions. As Richard Ellmann observes, "Wilde used this and other notebooks not as a 'magpie' picking up and keeping stray bits, but to record substantive content focused on the Chancellor's English Essay Prize topic".

(32). This confirms his seriousness as a thinker already concerned with the intersections of rhetoric, morality, and aesthetics.

His readings ranged widely—from Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Plutarch—to Baudelaire, Swinburne, Pater, Ruskin, Hegel, Renan, T. H. Huxley, Spencer or Mommsen. He also mastered biblical and Shakespearean texts and showed an early capacity to anticipate his own literary concerns. His studies in *Literae Humaniores*, focused on classical culture, provided a framework comparable to the theology (*Res Divinae*)[3] that his mentor, Jowett, had pursued. Although Wilde did not seek an ecclesiastical career, his intellectual ambition approached that of contemporary theologians, aiming at a moral-aesthetic understanding of existence.

A graduate of *The Greats*, shaped by a literary and nationalist upbringing—his mother being a figure of the Irish Cultural Renaissance—and influenced by Oxford Hegelians, Wilde entered authoritatively into debates on Hellenistic philosophy, Egyptian art, Romantic idealism and the tension between eternity and corporeality. These threads later resurfaced in his creative work—his prose, drama and, most notably *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where classical erudition becomes an authentic aesthetic of ethics.

Wilde's personal onomastics reflect notable cultural and genealogical density. The name "Oscar" was linked, in family tradition, both to Oscar, son of the legendary Ossian in Celtic mythology, and—according to an apocryphal tale—to King Oskar I of Sweden. Recent biographies, however, refute this direct association, showing that his father, Sir William Wilde, did indeed receive the Order of the Polar Star from King Charles XV in 1862, but that the tale of a "royal" baptism appears to be "a sentimental invention of his mother, Lady Wilde". (Sherard 62). The name "Fingal", Ossian's father, symbolized the liberator of Ireland under the poetic name Éirinn (anglicized *Erin*), while "O'Flahertie" evoked an old Galway clan renowned for strength and fighting spirit.

Wilde came under the direct influence of John Ruskin—promoter of Pre-Raphaelitism and fervent defender of the Italian Renaissance—and Walter Pater, theorist of aestheticism. Under their tutelage, Wilde reinterpreted the tradition of the Italian Grand Tour, making formative journeys to Turin, Milan, Genoa, Florence, Padua, Venice and Ravenna. These experiences enabled him to develop a synthesis between archaic Greek culture and the aesthetic ideals of classical Rome, articulating a vision in which beauty becomes an end in itself. Rejecting industrialism and mass production, he advocated authenticity, uniqueness

and an aesthetic untainted by utilitarianism. His words—"It is better to be beautiful than to be good. But it is better to be good than to be ugly" (*The Soul of Man* 61)—represent not merely a refined paradox, but a reflection on the duality between appearance and ethics. Over time, Wilde emerged as a cultural arbiter within the Victorian aesthetic movement.

Oscar Wilde further shaped his public identity after his Parisian experience in spring 1883, a period characterized by intellectual sociability in cafés and salons, and by his "active integration into the cultural and social networks of the age". (Ackroyd 7). His earlier promise—not to remain an obscure academic, but to become a major artistic creator, whether poet, playwright or narrator—reveals both vocational clarity and an aspiration to a quasi-mythical stature, symbolically expressed as being 'in the lap of the gods". (7). His continued concern with academia and class is evident in his confession: "I often think with some regret of my Oxford days and wish I had not left Parnassus for Piccadilly". (Qtd. in Frankel 45). This reflection reveals not only nostalgia for his university days, but also an awareness of the social and material compromises inherent in London public life. His involvement in the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies—attending its inaugural meeting at the Freemason's Tavern on 16 June 1879—and his application to translate Greek for George MacMillan (after traveling in Greece with him), attest to sustained academic commitment and his ambition to build a solid intellectual career. Later, after the birth of his first son and amid financial difficulties, Wilde applied, unsuccessfully, for the post of inspector of schools—formerly held by Matthew Arnold—supported by recommendations such as Mahaffy's. These aspects reveal the intersection of intellectual affirmation, material security, and the evolving artistic identity that defined Wilde's early career.

Wilde's 1884 marriage to Constance Lloyd, situated in "a respectable but not necessarily extremely wealthy social environment," as Ashley Robins points out (144), acquires a special symbolic dimension when we analyse the way he describes his future wife in a letter addressed to the actress Lillie Langtry, to whom he confessed with aesthetic sincerity:

> I am going to be married to a beautiful young girl called Constance Lloyd, a grave, slight, violet-eyed little Artemis, with great coils of heavy brown hair which make her flower-like head droop like a flower, and wonderful ivory hands which draw music from the piano so sweet that the birds stop singing to listen to her". (Wilde, *Letters* 228)

This idealization, addressed to a worldly figure he admired, reveals the tension between the public image of the marriage and Wilde's privately shifting identity. At the same time, the influence of Robert Ross—whose "confident and discreet" homosexual profile left "a lasting mark on his self-perception and creative trajectory" (146)—offered Wilde an existential and creative counterpoint. Ross's admiration and discreet support for homosexual relationships opened a conceptual space in which "Greek love" became both lived experience and aesthetic resource, making sexual experimentation, as Robins observes, "an integral element of the process of self-knowledge and creative development". (146-147).

London's cultural milieu also defined Wilde's position within theatrical circles, where figures such as Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt played central roles. Wilde met them around 1879, and his flamboyant gesture toward Bernhardt in Folkestone—throwing a bouquet of lilacs at her feet—exemplifies the theatrical manner in which "Wilde constructed and performed social relations". (Sherard 33). This admiration for Bernhardt "influenced the very way in which Wilde shaped his own public persona", as Sherard notes (34), partly modelled on the French artist. Connections with figures such as James Abbott McNeill Whistler further reinforced his image as a "self-proclaimed Professor of Aesthetics". (Ackroyd 9). His public image became a performance of elegance and sartorial eccentricity, from *pêcheur*[4] trousers and silk stockings in varying colours to the conspicuous flower in his buttonhole.[5]

Peter Ackroyd's "imaginary testament" attributed to Wilde (7) highlights the contradictory complexity of his personality through a subjective narrative perspective: "magician and prophet", "beggar and saint", an individual whose "wonders the world scorned to flatter ...". (7). This paradoxical image, in which Wilde was sometimes perceived as a "prehistoric animal" or a "stray dog", reflects both his social stigmatization and resilience, salvation being achieved through the "persuasive power of literature". (7). Wilde was deeply aware of his dual role: Solomon and Job, capable of great pleasures and profound suffering. The sense of belonging to a tradition marked by suffering and exile, filtered "through Irish legends and reflection on social marginalization" (Frankel 52) constitutes the core of his identity. This awareness manifests itself in his navigation between "the decadent luxury of London's Strand and the periods of financial and social hardship in Paris, where he lived under the pseudonym Sebastian Melmoth" (53)—an allusion to Saint Sebastian and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. This final mask symbolizes a 'universe of masks", where

intelligence shielded itself through eccentricity and frivolity, as a defensive strategy against the consequences of excessive sincerity.

Regarding sexual orientation, Ashley Robins dismisses the idea that Ross "originally seduced" Wilde at the age of thirty-two, calling it "highly improbable". (144). Wilde was likely already aware of his homosexuality, perhaps through "frustrating and even repulsive experiences in married life" (146), making him receptive to intimacy with Ross. Although younger, Ross may have introduced "new and more ambitious forms of homosexual expression" (146–147), further integrating sexual exploration into Wilde's personal and artistic evolution.

Wildean Dualities and the Fall of the Ideal

A careful reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shows that the narrative functions primarily on a literal and conceptual level: it examines not the moral corruptibility of the individual, but the corruptibility of art and its relationship to human perception and reality. Rather than simply depicting a character's moral decline, the novel reflects on the status of art, its power to transcend life's ephemerality, and the intersections of aesthetics with ethics, psychology, and social perception. The novel's conceptual structure rests on oppositions—idealism versus materialism, altruism versus egoism, mind versus brain, soul versus body, perfection versus degradation, beauty versus ugliness. Within this dialectical system, the motto "Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself" (*The Picture* 97)—derived from Wilde's aesthetic philosophy—becomes the focal point of a contemplative, speculative and reflexive process resonating with the Greek notion of θεωρία, understood not simply as a "philosophical vision", but as an act of elevated perception—an intellectual contemplation presupposing a higher level of artistic discernment and receptivity. In this paradigm, art aligned with popular taste is linked to mediocrity, superficiality and an inability to transcend the banal. As Wilde states, "All art is at once surface and symbol./ Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril./ Those who read the symbol do so at their peril". (67). This duality of art—as surface and symbol—underscores the tension between appearance and essence, phenomenon and concept, immediate beauty and hidden meaning.

The novel has generated a remarkable diversity of critical interpretations. Ari Adut first perceives it as "an attack on late Victorian hypocrisy" (350), stressing its social and moral critiques embedded in the characters' dialogues and decisions. He also sees it as "the story of the domination of an older man by a handsome young man" (237), emphasizing the

psychological, seductive, and erotic dimensions of the relationships between the characters, especially between Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton. A third interpretation views the work as "a sophisticated reinterpretation of Goethe's *Faust*, in which Wilde's protagonist becomes the prototype of the man dominated by Saint Bernard's *curiositas*, after having sold his soul to Lord Henry Wotton's Mephistopheles" (355), underlining the universal theme of the pact with evil, the desire for absolute knowledge, and the allure of transgression. In this light, the narrative can be perceived as a "story about the pact with the devil" (Woodcock 283), resuming the fundamental tension between art and life—a tension Wilde repeatedly explores in his essays, where aesthetics becomes both a mode of living and an existential danger.

Dorian Gray is portrayed as a hyper-self-conscious artist whose pathological projections—onto others and onto his own portrait—catalyze his moral and aesthetic decline. His encounter with Basil Hallward, who sees in him a new creative force—"I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before" (Wilde, *The Picture* 7)—initiates a tragedy that is at once aesthetic, moral and psychological. Yet the potential of this "ideal thing" is lost through Dorian's moral weakness, his fixation on ephemeral beauty and his failure to integrate emotional responsibility into artistic creation. Hallward becomes an ambivalent figure, a corrupted angel of benevolence whose subtle influence contributes to Dorian's moral degradation, a dynamic reflected in the protagonist's relationship with Sibyl Vane, the fragile actress whose beauty reiterates Wilde's own mechanisms of idealizing the women in his life. Wilde's perception of Constance Lloyd—described to his friend Thomas Waldo Story as "quite young, very grave, and mystical, with wonderful eyes, and dark brown coils of hair" (Wilde, *The Letters* 87), alongside the confession "We are of course desperately in love" (89)—is transfigured into the novel's configuration of femininity as an aesthetic object vulnerable to destruction. This parallel intensifies when the description of Constance reappears in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through Sibyl—"quite young, very grave, and mystical" with "wonderful eyes, and dark brown coils of hair [...]" (Wilde, *The Picture* 19)—serving as a self-referential sign of Wilde's tendency to aestheticize intimate reality into fiction. As a symbol of fleeting beauty and irretrievable innocence, Sibyl Vane embodies the artist's desires, fears, and conflicts, representing an aesthetic ideal so delicate that its corruption becomes the inevitable prelude to catastrophe.

Dorian's personal drama extends into his relationships, and the degradation of the portrait—reflecting his moral decay—becomes a metaphor for the dissolution of integrity,

vanity and morbid curiosity. Awareness of the consequences of one's own sins, superficiality and hypocrisy culminates in the murder of Basil Hallward. This act serves as a prelude to a paradoxical liberation that tragically culminates in Dorian's death, while emphasizing the tension between the desire to immortalize beauty and the inevitability of biological and moral decay. At this culminating moment, the roles of model and portrait reverse, revealing the illusory fragility of youth. The portrait regains its crystalline beauty, while Dorian becomes "an ugly old man" (Wilde*, The Picture* 209), reminding the reader that only art preserves youth intact, while life merely imitates the irreversible passage of time—fragile and imperfect. Andrew Sanders, one of the most authoritative scholars of Victorian literature, interprets *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as "a tragedy of sorts with the subtext of a morality play; its self destructive, darkly sinning central character is at once a desperate suicide and a martyr". (464). This highlights the novel's dual nature, oscillating between personal tragedy and moral discourse, articulated on multiple interpretative levels. Dorian is both the author of his destruction and the victim of fate, and this ambivalence gives the text its dramatic tension, reflecting both the fragility of the human condition and the pull of contradictory aesthetic and moral impulses. The obsessive fear of aging and the wish to manipulate time justify George Woodcock's description of "a neo-alchemical dream of the magic preservation of youth". (22). Lord Henry's warning—"Time is jealous of [him] and wars against [his] lilies and [his] roses" (Wilde, *The Picture* 103)—underscores the inexorability of time and the imperative of youthful experience: "There is nothing better or more beautiful in this world, there is nothing else but youth". (204). This fixation on ephemerality and the artificial preservation of beauty becomes the novel's central axis, offering both "an explanation of Dorian's ambivalence and a philosophical explanation of the impossibility of reconciling aesthetic desires with the biological and moral realities of human existence". (Sanders 464).

In Wilde's work, the figure of the double or *doppelgänger* symbolizes self-fragmentation and inner division, illustrating both otherness and the tension between morality and immorality, ideal and reality. This doubling triggers identity crises and existential anxiety, reflecting Wilde's fascination with magical rituals and occult practices—not as superstitions, but as ways to test personal limits and feel the weight of destiny. His biography reveals a particular sensitivity to such metaphysical tendencies, manifested in ritualistic prohibitions: "To drive in a cab with a white horse, and at dinner he would object if there were mauve flowers on the

table". (Woodcock 38–39). This blend of aesthetic fastidiousness and obsessive concern with premonitory signs reveals how Wilde lived the aesthetic and metaphysical simultaneously.

After his imprisonment, Wilde's discourse shifts toward reflections on failure and inevitable decadence, illustrated through historical figures like Napoleon, Tiberius, and Christ, invoked "with a mixture of pathos, irony, and a bitter awareness of the paradox of greatness and decline". (Ellmann 502–508). This marks a deepened concern with the fragility of the modern subject, caught between decadent aesthetics and social pressure. Aesthetic ideals become seductive yet illusory and sinful, and daily experience appears "even more treacherous" by contrast, as Wilde emphasizes in *De Profundis.* (1905, 72).

This complex aesthetic perception reaches exceptional refinement in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where Walter Pater's influence—especially regarding Roman decadence and Greek pleasure—shapes the meditation on luxury, ephemerality, and effervescent beauty. Basil Hallward's studio is described with synesthetic precision that engages all the senses: "the rich odour of roses", "the heavy scent of the lilac" and "the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn" (Wilde 18–19), creating a space where beauty becomes simultaneously contemplative object and symbol of human frailty. The shadows of birds cast on silk curtains evoke a "momentary Japanesse effect" (18), capturing the paradox of stasis and movement. Lord Henry Wotton, positioned marginally in this scene, acts as both spectator and implicit critic, embodying the corrosive influence of decadent aestheticism—echoing Henry James's remark that "The artist's studio is a natural setting for the critic". (Qtd. in Mendelssohn 91). This interplay of space, aroma, movement, and character positioning heightens the tension between real and imaginary, ideal and vulgar, contemplation and moral criticism. The dialogue between Basil and Lord Henry reveals, on one hand, the aspiration toward a classical aesthetic ideal, reimagined through New Hellenism, and, on the other, a critique of society expressed through a "madness" that fractures the harmony between ideal and reality, generating "a realism that is vulgar and an idealism that is void". (Wilde, *The Picture* 105). Basil—whose name derives from the Greek βασιλεύς, symbolizing the authentic artist—embodies the artist "who upholds the absolute aesthetic ideals promoted by Wilde: New Hellenism, New Individualism and Art for Art's Sake". (Chislett 357). In contrast, Lord Henry represents the decadent, cynical force that undermines this ideal and shapes Dorian's destiny. The text explicitly states: "The lad was to the painter who had fashioned the wonderful portrait. He would seek to dominate him ... He would make that wonderful spirit his own. There was something fascinating in this

son of Love and Death" (Wilde 236–37), highlighting how Dorian becomes absorbed into the gray anonymity of decadence. His identity dissolves into an amorphous entity devoid of individuality—revealing the corrosive impact of Henry's influence and the vulnerability of the aesthetic self.

The novel's finale underscores the irreversibility of decline and the moral and physical degradation that accompany the loss of identity:

> 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. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognised who it was. (336)

Colin Cavendish-Jones notes that this "morbid anonymity" becomes identifiable only through the rings, which, like the portrait, function as "immortal artefacts", evoking the paradox *Ars longa, vita brevis*.[6] (255). This final scene not only concludes the narrative tragically, but also offers a synthesis of the modern subject—victim of decadent aestheticism and of a reality that replaces the ideal with the vulgar—underscoring the tension between beauty, ephemerality and morality. Wilde thus reflects on the human condition: the struggle between the desire for aesthetic immortality and the inevitability of decay, sensory exaltation and ethical fragility.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, Oscar Wilde's intellectual and literary profile—as well as his canonical work *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—embodies the fundamental tension between radical aestheticism and the moral constraints of the late Victorian era, between the desire for absolute beauty and the awareness of moral decline. This dialectic reflects the dissonance between his classical training at Trinity College and Oxford—under the guidance of John Pentland Mahaffy, who instilled in him a love of the Greek spirit—and the restrictive values of the society that Wilde "seduces and ironizes at the same time". (Robins 112). His aesthetics, grounded in the Greek ideal of *theōría*— contemplation and self-definition—thus function as a form of inner resistance and ethical individualism. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, often superficially read as

a plea for hedonism, is in fact a subtle theoretical construction in which art and ethics are inseparable. As Wilde asserts in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, "Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known" (35): art becomes ontological self-affirmation against conformity. The portrait of Dorian operates as an ontological device—"a mirror of the split between appearance and essence, aesthetic permanence and corporeal ephemerality". (Frankel 214).

Thus, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* must be understood as an act of intellectual defiance—a meditation on aesthetic freedom and the price of individualism within a morally prescriptive society. Wilde, trained in classicism yet living in an age of decadence and hypocrisy, turns the novel into a space of controlled transgression, where each aphorism becomes an act of selection and subversion, confirming Harold Bloom's claim: "At the bottom and in essence, Wilde is a master in the art of selection". (69). The present study highlights this dialectic—between aestheticism and morality, individualism and conformism, classical culture and modern decadence—to demonstrate that Wildean aesthetics is not mere stylistic play, but a critical reflection on the relationship between art and existence. In view of the censorship of the *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* version and subsequent revisions analyzed by Nicholas Frankel (198–200), it becomes clear that Wilde does not endorse moralizing art, but one that, through ambiguity and transgression, exposes Victorian duplicity. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ultimately transcends fiction: it is an encrypted self-portrait, a meditation on the violence of social repression, and proof that, beyond scandal and exile, art preserves its autonomy, dignity, and lasting significance.

Notes

1 *To kalon* is a key concept in Platonic philosophy, designating ideal, pure, and eternal beauty. In the Symposium, Plato describes the absolute form of beauty: "He will see the beauty now, not in the likeness of a face or of hands or of anything else that belongs to the body ... but the beauty itself, absolute, pure, unmixed ... but the divine beauty itself, in its one form". (Symposium, 211d–212a, trans. Nehamas and Woodruff).

2 "There is no greater sorrow than to recall in misery the time when we were happy".

3 *Res Divinae* is a Latin phrase denoting the study of theology, especially in the academic context of Oxford. In contrast to Literae Humaniores, which includes the study of classical languages, philosophy, and ancient history, Res Divinae refers to the theological discipline–the study of religious doctrines, the Bible, and patristic writings–and was frequently pursued by those preparing for ordination in the Church of England.

[4] Pêcheur trousers were loose, short or rolled-up trousers associated with the late 19th-century bohemian style, often worn by eccentric artists or intellectuals, suggesting a mixture of rustic ease and affected style.

[5] The buttonhole flower, especially the green carnation, was a discreet symbol of homosexual identity in the decadent circles of Victorian London, popularized by Oscar Wilde and his circle. This type of clothing symbolism functioned as a code of recognition in a repressive social context.

[6] "Art is long, life is short".

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