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Beauty Without Consequence: A Reflection of Late-Victorian Upper-Class Privilege in the Picture of Dorian Gray By Oscar Wilde

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Abstract. This paper examines how The Picture Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde marks a critical turn in which he critiques late-Victorian upper-class privilege and moral immunity. While previous scholarship has predominantly analyzed the novel as a moral allegory or aesthetic treatise, this study employs cultural materialism as a theoretical framework to demonstrate how Wilde uses Dorian's isolation of his portrait and subsequent hedonistic experimentation as symbolic representations of the aristocracy's ability to shield him from moral and social consequences. Wilde's text reveals how the English aristocracy could embody ideals of beauty and reap princely treatment while committing debauchery without reproach. Through Culler's close reading method toward this novel, especially chapters eight and nine, this analysis reveals how Dorian's act of hiding the portrait symbolizes social denial, while his obsessive aesthetic consumption reflects the practices of the leisure class. This shows that Wilde hints Dorian's social circle accepts his sensual life simply because his appearance remains unmarred—a commentary on class privilege. By examining the specific textual elements and historical context of—especially—chapters eight and nine of this novel, this study contributes to the understanding of how Wilde's novel serves as both a product of and commentary on the class structures and moral hypocrisy of late-Victorian England.

Keywords: Immorality; Oscar Wilde; The Picture of Dorian Gray; Upper-class Aristocracy; Victorian Period

1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) tells the story of a young, handsome man, Dorian Gray, who is obsessed with his own beauty and youth after seeing a portrait of himself by Basil Hallward. He makes a Faustian bargain where he remains eternally youthful, while the portrait ages and reflects the corruption of his soul due to his increasingly hedonistic and immoral lifestyle. Overall, the story explores themes of beauty, morality, vanity, and the consequences of one's actions.

The Picture of Dorian Gray was published during a period of significant social transformation in late-Victorian England, marked by the tension between traditional morality and the rise of aestheticism among privileged upper-class (Ergashev, 2017; Saputri, 2018; Wilde, 1890). In general, late-Victorian (the end of the 19th century) prose is marked with realism, social criticism, and is focused on moral and social problems. Authors often use their works to show social gaps, poverty, and the effect of industrialization on society. In terms of style, authors wrote long novels using innovative narrative technique. We can say that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is no exception in the sense that this novel, as we already mention above, concerns with morality, vanity, and the consequences of one's action—in this case of course are Dorian Gray's actions.

To be more specific, this paper focuses on Chapter 8 and Chapter 9, where Wilde dramatizes Dorian Gray's isolation of his portrait and his subsequent descent into decadent experimentation. The central research question guiding this analysis is: How does *The Picture of Dorian Gray* represent the lifestyle and moral privileges of the 19th-century English upper class, and how does Oscar Wilde uses decadent aesthetics as a critique of the aristocratic social

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system? This study aims to analyze Wilde's representation of Dorian's moral evasion and aesthetic excess in these chapters, to explore how these moments critique the broader privileges of the upper-class, and to contextualize Dorian's behavior within the structures of class immunity and public reputation of the time.

While scholars like Taylor (2015), Akbar (2018), Kidd (2022), and Çün (2024) have examined Wilde's engagement with class, morality, and aesthetics, few have provided close readings of the narrative turning points where critique becomes most explicit. Prior studies tend to focus on general themes of decadence, consumption, or Victorian values, leaving gaps in the specific exploration of class immunity in Chapters 8–9. To fill this gap, this research applies Cultural Materialism Theory to uncover how Wilde's portrayal of an aristocrat who indulges in beauty without consequence reflects the ideological structures that sustained upper-class privilege. This analysis contributes to broader discussions of Victorian literature by exposing how Wilde satirizes the mechanisms that allow the elite to avoid both moral reckoning and public accountability.

2. Theoretical Framework

This analysis draws on Raymond Williams' Cultural Materialism (1977) as its theoretical foundation, an approach that views literary works as representations of ideological and class structures in society, revealing social inequalities conveyed through narratives and symbols within the text (Williams, 1975). Unlike traditional approaches that might treat literature as merely reflective of social conditions, Cultural Materialism recognizes that cultural forms, including literature, are material practices that actively participate in shaping social reality (Soqandi & Basirizadeh, 2020). Williams argues that literature does not simply mirror society but is an active part of the social and historical processes that constitute it (Edwards, 1999). This perspective is particularly valuable for analyzing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as it allows us to understand how Wilde's novel both reflects and critiques the class structures and moral values of Victorian society.

3. Methodology

The research method used in this research is qualitative method, applying the combination of Jonathan Culler's close reading method with historical contextualization. Close reading, as Culler explains in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (2000), involves careful attention to how meaning is produced or conveyed through specific textual elements, not just what the meaning is. This method focuses on analyzing language, structure, narrative style, and ideological meaning within the text. By applying close reading to Chapters 8-9 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this study examines how specific textual elements—such as the locked room, the portrait, and Dorian's collections—function as symbols that reveal Wilde's critique of upper-class privilege. This textual analysis is then situated within the historical context of late-Victorian England, particularly regarding class structures, moral codes, and the aesthetic movement, to understand how Wilde's critique relates to the social realities of his time (BCCC ASC, 2019). The discussion or analysis is descriptive based on our reading of the main data and secondary sources.

4. Discussion

It is important to note that every genre of literary work, whether poetry, prose, or drama, should be considered as a whole unit. As a whole unit, the story of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in its entirety, as we have mentioned, concerns a variety of themes. In addition, we can say that Oscar Wilde differs from other late Victorian authors such as Thomas Hardy, George Gissing, Rudyard Kipling, Samuel Butler, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Thomas Hardy's work is often called a regional novel, exploring social issues. Meanwhile, the subject matter in George Gissing's works is often related to the struggles of workers. Rudyard Kipling wrote many stories set against the backdrop of imperialism and adventures in the British colonies. Samuel Butler's works are often satirical, and Robert Louis Stevenson's are adventure stories. Meanwhile, Oscar Wilde, who actually wrote more plays and only one novel, is very famous for his satire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

To start the discussion, first we present a synopsis of these two chapters. In chapter 8, *Dorian Gray* is shaken by the transformation of his portrait after Sibyl Vane's death, and

decides to hide the painting in a locked room at the top of his house. He instructs his servant and housekeeper to help him conceal it, ensuring that no one but he himself has access to this secret space. Despite his inner turmoil, Dorian quickly returns to his social life, showing little genuine remorse for Sibyl's death and only expressing concern for how the incident might affect his own comfort and reputation. This chapter ends with Dorian becoming absorbed in the 'yellow book' sent by Lord Henry, which fascinates and influences him deeply. Meanwhile, as the story moves on, in chapter 9, Wilde details the long-term impact of the 'yellow book' on Dorian's life. Dorian becomes obsessed with aesthetic experiences, indulging in the collection of rare objects, perfumes, jewels, and art. His pursuit of pleasure and beauty becomes increasingly excessive and detached from moral consideration. Despite growing rumours about his immoral activities, society continues to accept him. He is protected by his wealth, charm, and unchanging youthful appearance. The narrative highlights how Dorian's social circle refuses to believe ill of him, even as evidence of his corruption mounts.

Concealment and Privilege

Chapter 8 marks a critical turning point in the novel where Dorian makes the conscious decision to hide his portrait—the physical manifestation of his moral corruption—in the old schoolroom at the top of his house. This act of concealment serves as a powerful metaphor for how the upper class could isolate their moral transgressions from public scrutiny (Akbar, 2018), as we can read in this part, “He had the key, and no one else could enter it. Beneath its purple pall, the face painted on the canvas could grow bestial, sodden, and unclean. What did it matter? No one could see it. He himself would not see it” (Wilde, 1890, p. 121). In our discussion, Maria and I came to an agreement that by writing this, Wilde reveals the privileged ability of the aristocracy to compartmentalize their moral failings. The locked room becomes a symbol of the private spaces—both physical and social—that were available exclusively to the upper class, allowing them to engage in behaviors that would be condemned if practiced by those of lower social standing.

Wilde's description of the “purple pall” that Dorian uses to cover the portrait is particularly significant as it represents the aestheticization of moral corruption. The purple color traditionally associated with royalty and wealth becomes a covering for sin, suggesting how the upper class uses beauty and luxury to mask moral decay. When Dorian reflects that “the face painted on the canvas could grow bestial, sodden, and unclean” while remaining hidden beneath this luxurious covering, Wilde creates a powerful metaphor for how Victorian high society used aesthetic refinement to disguise moral bankruptcy. Covering the painting, Dorian's outward appearance and countenance remain lovely and unchanged. This gap between inner corruption and outer perfection epitomizes aristocratic privilege or, in other words, this is a kind of ability to conceal one's sins.

Notably, Wilde shows that society's attention stays on appearances. Within hours of the portrait's concealment, Dorian returns to his social life and all comments on his charm. No one in Dorian's circle suspects the supernatural portrait. Basil Hallward arrives to speak with him, yet Dorian simply lies, confessing only to a minor heartbreak. Lord Henry also remains oblivious. As Dorian reflects on the portrait's location, he notes that “... it was here that the fatal portrait was to be hidden away. How little he had thought, in those dead days, of all that was in store for him!” (Wilde, 1890, p. 121). Thus, Wilde illustrates how Dorian's class and beauty buy him silence and complicity. The luxurious world of the noble Dorian with elegant clothing and invitations become a facade behind where the truth is sealed. In cultural materialist terms, Dorian's hiding of the portrait is akin to the aristocracy's ideology—covering up the exploitative or corrupt practices with decorations of culture and etiquette.

Chapter 8 also reveals Dorian's callous reaction to news of Sibyl Vane's suicide, demonstrating the upper class's indifference to the suffering of those beneath them socially. When Dorian reads the newspaper account of Sibyl's inquest, his response is telling, “He frowned slightly, and, tearing the paper in two, went across the room and flung the pieces into a gilt basket. How ugly it all was! And how horribly real ugliness made things!” (Wilde, 1890, p. 124). His concern is not with Sibyl's tragic death but with the ugliness of the situation and how it might affect him. This reaction exemplifies the aristocracy's tendency to view lower-class individuals as disposable and their suffering as an aesthetic inconvenience rather

than a moral concern. Dorian's dismissal of Sibyl's death, "What had Dorian Gray to do with Sibyl Vane's death? There was nothing to fear" (Wilde, 1890, p. 124), reflects the broader social dynamic in which the upper class could engage with and then discard those of lower social standing without consequence. Sibyl, as an actress from a poor background, represents the expendable lower classes whose lives and deaths were of little consequence and importance to the aristocracy (Carriero, 2022).

Aesthetic Excess and Immunity

Chapter 9 begins with Dorian's obsession with the "yellow book" given to him by Lord Henry, a thinly veiled reference to Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884), a seminal work of decadent literature (Turner, 2017). Wilde writes that "For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it" (Wilde, 1890, p. 127). This book becomes a guide for Dorian's exploration of aesthetic experiences and sensual pleasures, representing how decadent philosophy functions as a form of class privilege.. Dorian's procurement of "no less than five large-paper copies of the first edition, and had them bound in different colors, so that they might suit his various moods" (Wilde, 1890, p. 127) exemplifies the excessive consumption characteristic of the upper class. This extravagant purchase, made purely for aesthetic pleasure, demonstrates how wealth enables a form of consumption divorced from necessity or utility. The yellow book's influence on Dorian parallels the way aesthetic philosophy influences the aristocracy, providing an intellectual justification for self-indulgence and moral relativism that is available only to those with the education and leisure to pursue it (Turner, 2017).

This chapter leaps forward in time (nearly two decades). Wilde details Dorian's obsessive collection of perfumes, music, jewels, embroideries, and tapestries, representing the material culture of aristocratic privilege. The ability to dedicate one's life to aesthetic pursuits was available only to those with wealth and leisure, making decadence itself a marker of class distinction, as we can understand it in this part, "... he would often spend a whole day settling and resettling in their cases the various stones that he had collected" (Wilde, 1890, p. 137). This might highlight how the leisure to engage in such activities is itself a form of class privilege. These collections do not only serve as aesthetic objects but as status symbols that demonstrate Dorian's wealth and refined taste. His ability to procure "... from Amsterdam three emeralds of extraordinary size and richness of color" (Wilde, 1890, p. 138), reflects the global reach of British imperial wealth, connecting aesthetic consumption to colonial exploitation. Dorian's collections also represent an attempt to escape moral responsibility through aesthetic distraction. Wilde has a specific note here, i.e. "For these things, and everything that he collected in his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne" (Wilde, 1890, p. 143). This reveals how aesthetic consumption functions as a form of escapism for the upper class, allowing them to avoid confronting the moral implications of their privilege.

Perhaps the most explicit critique of upper-class privilege in Chapter 9 comes in Wilde's commentary on how society responds to rumors about Dorian's behavior. Despite growing whispers about his immoral activities, Dorian continues to be accepted in society because of his beauty and charm. What Wilde writes, "Society, civilized society at least, is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich and charming. It feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals, and the highest respectability is of less value in its opinion than the possession of a good chef" (Wilde, 1890, p. 146), directly addresses how wealth and social grace provide immunity from moral judgment in Victorian society (Carriero, 2022). The contrast between Dorian's beautiful appearance and his corrupt soul parallels the contrast between the aristocracy's refined public image and their moral bankruptcy'. Wilde notes that "Even those who had heard the most evil things against him (and from time-to-time strange rumors about his mode of life crept through London and became the chatter of the clubs) could not believe anything to his dishonor when they saw him" (Wilde, 1890, p. 128). This observation reveals how physical beauty functions as a form of social capital that could override moral concerns, particularly for those already privileged by wealth and status. Dorian's continued acceptance in society despite his

increasingly depraved behavior serves as Wilde's indictment of a class system that valued appearance over substance.

Chapter 9 also explores how the upper class maintains a separation between their public and private selves, a privilege not available to those of lower social standing. Wilde describes how Dorian would "creep up-stairs to the locked room, open the door with the key that never left him, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass" (Wilde, 1890, p. 128). The physical separation between Dorian and his portrait parallels the social separation between the aristocracy's public reputation and private behavior (Castro Miranda, 2021). This ability to compartmentalize one's life is a form of privilege available only to those with the social standing to ensure that their private transgressions remain private.

In sum, these chapters operate as both a product and critique of late-Victorian society, exposing the contradictions within the privileged class. Through Dorian's concealed portrait and excessive aesthetic indulgence, Wilde reveals how inherited wealth enables the upper class to mask moral corruption behind beauty and sophistication. The novel critiques not only individual hypocrisy but systemic class immunity, where aristocrats enjoy indulgence without consequence. Dorian's hidden portrait symbolizes how social structures allow the elite to separate public virtue from private vice, reinforcing the illusion of moral superiority while avoiding accountability. Dorian's experiences in these chapters expose that the "triumphant" elite can consume sin as easily as they consume art and still demand the same reverence – a beauty without consequence.

Conclusion

The analysis of Chapters 8–9 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* demonstrates that Oscar Wilde employs Dorian's concealment of his portrait and his immersion in aesthetic excess as incisive critiques of late-Victorian upper-class privilege. Through close reading and historical contextualization, it becomes evident that Wilde does not merely portray Dorian as an isolated figure of moral decline, but as a representative of an aristocratic class able to evade social and ethical consequences through wealth, beauty, and social standing. The locked room, the opulent collections, and society's willful blindness to Dorian's transgressions collectively expose the mechanisms by which the elite maintain their immunity from public scrutiny. Ultimately, Wilde's narrative satirizes the "princely treatment" and double standards afforded to the privileged, revealing how Victorian society prioritized reputation and appearance over genuine moral accountability. These chapters thus serve as both a mirror and a critique of the ideological structures that allowed the English aristocracy to enjoy lives of indulgence without consequence.

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