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***The Picture of Dorian Gray: Hedonism and  
Morality***

**Bakalářská práce**

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### **Prohlášení**

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně a s použitím uvedené literatury a pramenů.

V Olomouci dne 14. 4. 2023

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Lukáš Kawulok

## **Poděkování**

Rád bych velmi poděkoval panu Mgr. Petrovi Anténemu, M.A., Ph.D. za jeho pečlivé vedení mé bakalářské práce, cennou zpětnou vazbu a vstřícný přístup během celého procesu jejího psaní.

Také děkuji všem, kdo mě během studia a práce na této práci podporovali, zejména mým přátelům a rodině.

Speciální poděkování patří mé přítelkyni, která mi vždy poskytla stabilní domácí prostředí a tím mi usnadnila psaní práce. V neposlední řadě vzdávám vděk své rodině, a to zejména své mamince, která mi vždy zajistila motivaci studium dokončit.

## Annotation

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<b>Název práce:</b>	<i>Obraz Doriana Graye</i> : Hédonismus a mravnost
<b>Název v angličtině:</b>	<i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> : Hedonism and Morality
<b>Zvolený typ práce:</b>	Výzkumná práce – přehled odborných poznatků
<b>Anotace práce:</b>	Bakalářská práce se zabývá románem Oscara Wilda <i>Obraz Doriana Graye</i> , přičemž klade důraz na analýzu hédonismu a morálky v kontextu viktoriánské společnosti. Cílem práce je prozkoumat, jak Wilde používá postavu Dorianu Graye ke kritice morálního pokrytectví a společenských norem tehdejší doby. Wilde v díle zobrazuje konflikt mezi vnější krásou a vnitřním morálním rozkladem, což reflektuje dvoji morální standardy viktoriánské éry. Tento komplexní přístup umožňuje hlubší pochopení Wildeovy kritiky viktoriánského pokrytectví a poskytuje filozofický a etický náhled do lidské povahy, který zůstává nadčasově relevantní. Wildeova literární dílo <i>Obraz Doriana Graye</i> je prezentováno jako kritika, která nutí čtenáře přemýšlet o morálním rozměru našich vlastních snah o krásu a potěšení.
<b>Klíčová slova:</b>	Oscar Wilde, <i>Obraz Doriana Graye</i> , Viktoriánská společnost, hédonismus, morálka, estetika, morální pokrytectví, společenské normy, vnější krása, morální úpadek, literární analýza, etická kritika
<b>Anotace v angličtině:</b>	This bachelor's thesis examines Oscar Wilde's novel <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> , focusing on the analysis of hedonism and morality within the context of Victorian society. The aim of the thesis is to explore how Wilde uses the character of Dorian Gray to critique the moral hypocrisy and social norms of that time. In the work, Wilde portrays the conflict between external beauty and internal moral decay, reflecting the dual moral standards of the Victorian era. This comprehensive approach allows for a deeper understanding of Wilde's critique of Victorian hypocrisy and provides a philosophical and ethical insight into human nature, which remains timelessly relevant. Wilde's literary work " <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> " is presented as a critique that compels readers to think about the moral dimension of our own pursuits of beauty and pleasure.
<b>Klíčová slova v angličtině:</b>	Oscar Wilde, <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> , Victorian society, Hedonism, Morality, Aesthetics, moral hypocrisy, social norms, external beauty, moral decay, literary analysis, Ethical critique
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## **Abstract**

This thesis conducts a comprehensive exploration of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, focusing on the intricate dynamics between hedonism and morality within the narrative and its broader implications on Victorian society. It delves into the definitions of morality and aestheticism, examining how these elements merge to portray the complex socio-cultural dynamics of the era. Additionally, the thesis provides an overview of Oscar Wilde's life, his philosophical inclinations, and the critical reception of his work, emphasizing its literary value and significance.

The analysis examines the role and depiction of hedonism and moral decay in the novel, the impact of these themes on the characters and society depicted in the story and interprets Wilde's motivations for creating this work. It challenges the traditional view that the novel serves merely as a caution against the perils of aesthetic indulgence. By comparing Wilde's narrative strategies and thematic concerns with real-world moral and aesthetic theories of the time, the thesis highlights Wilde's nuanced critique of the duality of public virtue versus private vice.

The study concludes that while *The Picture of Dorian Gray* prominently features themes of aesthetic beauty and ethical degradation, its core critique extends beyond a simple warning of hedonism. Instead, it presents a sophisticated commentary on the contradictions of living a life governed by both visible and invisible morals. Wilde's work, characterized by its intricate character dynamics and profound philosophical inquiries, challenges the reader to reconsider the boundaries between beauty, morality, and the societal constructs that define them.



## Introduction

"There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book," Oscar Wilde once stated, capturing the essence of his provocative work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Set against the backdrop of Victorian England—a society defined by strict moral codes and aesthetic ideals—Wilde's novel delves into themes of hedonism, morality, and the perils of succumbing to self-indulgence. Through the narrative of Dorian Gray, a young man whose quest for eternal youth leads him down a path of moral and spiritual decay, Wilde challenges Victorian propriety and critiques the era's duplicity.

This thesis aims to deeply explore Wilde's examination of aesthetic beauty and moral decay, positioning *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not simply as a narrative of personal downfall but as a critical commentary on the societal norms of the time. By situating the novel within the moral and social structure of the late 19th century, this work seeks to uncover how Wilde's personal ideologies and the broader societal attitudes of his era are reflected in the narrative.

By exploring the intricate relationship between the protagonist's actions and the societal values that both dictate and condemn his behavior, this thesis highlights Wilde's critique of Victorian hypocrisy and his insight into the human condition. Through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde challenges readers to consider the price of beauty and the cost of denying one's true self in favor of societal approval.

# 1. The Victorian Era and Oscar Wilde

The hearts of the Victorian age were brewing with a cultural revolution, which would rise up in arms against industrial materialism and the inflexible morality of the age. This movement, referred to as the Aesthetic Movement, was characterized by a maxim of "art for art's sake" and demanded that art must be judged according to aesthetic values or form, and not its moral or educative value (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.; Khan Academy, n.d.; The Art Story, n.d.).

Characters in this movement included greats such as Oscar Wilde, who avowed and propagated the values in his work and his life. Wilde himself would continue to be an icon of the Aesthetic Movement in both his written works and person by following the philosophies. William Morris is famously quoted on the subject of beauty in the home as: "Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful" (Aesthetica Magazine, 2024; Victoria and Albert Museum n.d.).

The Aesthetic Movement is known to have an obsession with the visually striking and sensually attractive, which was driven by the classical, Japanese, and natural motifs. Direction is clearly marked in works by such artists as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and James McNeill Whistler, in whom aesthetic beauty and mood come to be of more importance than the message or narrative content. Rossetti's "The Ghirlandata" and Whistler's "Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room" both enforce beauty through their art, using subjects holding the eye that needs no moral explanation within it or a narrative (The Art Story, n.d.).

This influence spread further than the canvas to everyday objects and interior design, finding echo both in the work of Christopher Dresser and Edward Burne-Jones. Dresser's simple teapot designs, linear, and "The Golden Stairs" by Burne-Jones, a painting void of complex narrative, filled only with aesthetic harmony, are just two more examples of how the movement doggedly devoted itself to incorporating beauty into every single facet of life (The Art Story, n.d.).

Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be seen as a literary embodiment of the Aesthetic Movement's ideals. The novel, with its preoccupations of beauty, youth, and pursuit of pleasure, embodies the very ethos of the movement; it is a seminal work about the Victorian moral landscape. Wilde uses the story of Dorian Gray as a lens through which to consider what effects such a life of aesthetic beauty and pleasure, free from moral consequences, could have on the lives of those who lived it—a scathing commentary of his own on the Aesthetic Movement and its reception by Victorian society.

In other words, the aesthetic movement—with its concern for beauty of form—seemed to be a counterpart for the materialism and moral exactitudes of Victorian England. Oscar Wilde, in his life and work, epitomized this movement because he argued against cultural standards and prodded an evaluation of the place of art and beauty in life. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, therefore, endures, holding within it some sort of testament to all these ideals and being filled with all the tensions and contradictions of the Aesthetic Movement in its narrative.

## 1.1 Moral Codes and Social Expectations

The Victorian era was characterized as by very rigid social codes and moral expectations, therefore, were the great hallmark of the age in every sphere from personal conduct to public demeanor. These norms became deeply entwined with the broader cultural and social ethos of the time, characterized by strong focuses on respectability, chastity, and the public display of morality. The Victorian moral code was more or less guided by Christian values in great virtues, such as temperance, which the sanctity of the family unit called for; life led within the established moral boundaries (Hamilton, 2011).

This moralizing viewpoint was inclined to the production of stories glorifying characters that adhere to the standards of society, and vice versa—they moralize about those who would dare to break away. Bright against this sombre moral background stands the Aesthetic movement, a lively counterfoil to plead for the enjoyment of beauty independently of moral or didactic aims. One of the main precursors of this movement, Oscar Wilde, provoked the then dominant Victorian moral codes through his works and postulated that art and beauty had to be beyond mere moral judgments (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.; Khan Academy, n.d.; The Art Story, n.d.).

Oscar Wilde's masterpiece *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, explores the delicate balance between beauty and moral downfall. It shows how the Aesthetic Movement questioned the strict morals of Victorian society. The hedonistic feelings of the novel, portrayed in Dorian Gray's merciless search of pleasure and beauty at any cost, are an exact exemplification and critical reproach against the unalterable ethical policies of the age.

The text by Wilde suggests that more than just individualistic, independent forms of expression and desire being stifled by Victorian strict moral codes, all hypocrisies, and contradictions within were covered up under the lid of respectability (The Art Story, n.d.). The fall of Dorian Gray from innocence into a debauched life, obsessed with how to keep up appearances of a youthful face, mirrors, if arguable, Wilde's attack on social values in which

veneer respectability, more than real authenticity, is held in high value. The moral degeneration of Dorian, Wilde shows, is nothing other than a by-product of complete devotion to aesthetic ideals without concern for morality.

This will emphasize the possible dangers of divorcing beauty from morality and, at the same time, criticize the Victorian habit of either overlooking or not focusing on human desire and morality while always wearing the garb of respectability. Drawing on Walter Hamilton's "The Aesthetic Movement in England" (1882), the same can further be placed to support some of the Victorian moral and social expectations that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be generally inclusive of. Hamilton describes it as an age of time "dominated by a strict social fabric, heavily influenced by prevailing moral codes and expectations" —a backdrop essential to understanding Wilde's portrayal of Dorian Gray. The path of the character simultaneously reveals and alternates with the dichotomies of the period. It was respectability on the outside, corruption on the inside. Yet, it presents that respectability is only a false norm of superficial society. The Aestheticians, therefore, sought to elevate beauty and art above the moralistic restraints of the day by avowing an appreciation of art that would be above conventional judgments of good and bad or right and wrong.

This philosophy, somehow integral to Wilde's work, amounted to a severe criticism of the prevailing moral double standard, which held that the perception of beauty may lead to deeper truths in regard to the self and society. (Hamilton, 2011) From Hamilton and Wilde's thematic exploration in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in sum, one is able to derive and draw on some of the ideas in a holistic appraisal of Victorians and their moral guidelines together with social requirements. In fact, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* criticizes the very norms that it partakes of in the larger aesthetic and philosophic debates of Wilde's age.

In the narrative of Dorian Gray, Wilde critiques the Victorian morality, presenting art and beauty as lenses through which the complexities of social life can be explored and understood.

In reality, the social fabric was deeply intertwined with its moral codes and expectations, permeating every aspect and detail of daily life. These principles directed both personal behavior and public conduct. However, these guidelines were not only the surface sign of good morals but apparently got into the contemporary Christian ethos with an elevated price they gave to precepts of chastity, respectability, and moral rectitude. These are considered as the pillars in the sanctity of the family unit and the responsibility of each and every individual regarding public morality. The age of this era, reigning under Queen Victoria between 1837

and 1901, ensured a class-based society upon a growing state and economy that put Britain, across the globe, as an empire to reckon with. It seemed rather like great riches and stability; they clung deeply to moral expectations between them, which steered how they were supposed to have conducted their social interactions and personal behavior. (Steinbach, 2021)

Matthew Sweet, in "Sex, Drugs and Music Hall," refuses to adhere to the normative stories of Victorian propriety but rather exposes the bohemian underbelly of the times. People indulged in pleasures and entertainments that were defying morality. Sweet depicts a world that comes alive in the seductions of the music hall and its secret pleasures of recreational drug use and all the entertainments that lured audiences away from the strict moral code of the era. This foray into Victorian leisure pursuits does not so much refute the moralistic and repressive image of the period but, in doing so, it reveals the complex and contradictory reality that lies just below the surface of Victorian rectitude. Here, Sweet unveils a society in which people sought enjoyment and leisure despite the public moral standards. They took an intensity in public pleasures and breathless enthusiasm for the diversions in life (Sweet, 2011).

The contrast of the social overview Steinbach gives, against Sweet's profile of the less visible aspects, really does give one a picture of society at the time. That is perhaps the epoch not really signposted with its moral codes and anticipation but was rather hallmarked by the clandestine chase of pleasure. This duality in the Victorian ethos speaks to the human compartments and society norm complexities that must bring to focus the need to dig further beyond the surface narratives and really capture the whole tone of life at this time. An examination of such facts reveals that under the inflexible façade of Victorian society, morals lay a vigorous, contradictory landscape in which the quest for pleasure and the limitations of morals, though frequently in collision, existed side by side.

## **1.2 Oscar Wilde: Rebel with a Cause**

Very much at the core of the Victorian era—in a time usually portrayed with rigid social and moral values—there rises a character that would by his literary brilliance and personal life set at naught the conventions of his contemporaries. This part of the thesis breaks down the nuanced Wilde's criticism to Victorian society.

Britannica has summed up the whole of the Victorian social structure as follows: their society was Christian morality based, and under this, virtues like chastity, respectability, and sanctity in family life were most important. It was a stubborn commitment to public morality

that had the influence on individual behavior and social expectations to a complex network of moral standards deep within the structure of everyday living (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).

Where Wilde's literary output was active in a role, as Eltis argues, it was in a glaring contrast to this dominant moral story of the day, revealing an oppositional stance to these norms. Wilde's preoccupation with aesthetic beauty, individualism, and social critique in his works points to a value given to disrupting Victorian values. Eltis argues that Wilde's plays and essays attack the rigidity of Victorian moral values as a means to persuade while providing an entertaining vehicle for social criticism. In Eltis' view, the relation of Eltis' plays and essays to Victorian moral rigidity is to dissuade a full understanding of its desired objects—human desires on the one hand and societal structures on the other (Eltis, 1996).

Intellectual and artistic, this journey of Oscar Wilde into these realms was truly the reflective one of his rebellious campaign against the common set of social norms that reigned in the Victorian setting. Wilde looked at a society in his essays, plays, and personal belief that holds aesthetic beauty and individual freedom in place of the strict moral codes reigning during his time. His essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" best depicts his belief in individualism, that the social environment can yield a way in which to allow opportunity for creative and liberating life rather than repression and uniformity. Wilde would have dreamed of a society for which socialism might provide framing of the freedom of the individual from economic imperatives that strangle his creativity to propose a utopia where art may flourish free from such kinds of commercial pressures and moral judgment. "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" presents an idea: to create a society free of poverty and conventionality, where people have the possibility to fully enjoy life. It offers features whereby people can live life to the full without property in persons and without the social principles reigning through the systems (Jacobin, n.d.).

What is more, controversies were synonymous with the personal life of Wilde, bringing about his trials and imprisonment that had rationally looked at tensions between individual freedoms and society's expectations. With costs at a personal level within the trial, Wilde undoubtedly stated the fact that true art and individuality had to win against conformism and censorship. His experience highlighted the fact that the dangers that may accrue from a society that is unwelcoming to a difference in thought and way of life warn against the cost of enforcing moral standards that are too rigid (Wilde, 1891).

His criticism, conception of society, and the need for reform with socialist eyes and the freedom for art clearly pointed him to have an understanding of the limitation of Victorian morality on the single soul. His works and biography raise criticism of modern time and simultaneously offer perspectives for moving on, according to which creative activity, individuality, and freedom of all should be among the most valuable things (Eltis, 1996; Jacobin, n.d.).

Wilde's literary masterpieces, especially *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, serve not just as entertainment but as profound commentaries on the societal morals of his time. This novel almost to a fault illustrates Wilde's criticism of the Victorian preoccupation with the outward appearance of moral propriety and its fixations for the decay of man's soul. Wilde's representation of Dorian Gray's plunge into unchecked hedonism, untempered by ethical consideration, unravels his day's moral hypocrisy in double societal standards exposing the parallel of equal regard valuing morality and pleasure.

Further, the adversity that Wilde had to face—to be convicted on charges of gross indecency—represents a much larger conflict between individual liberty and the kind of behavior that an oppressive society expects. On the other hand, the uncompromising commitment of Wilde to his set of beliefs and to his identity only reveals the high price individuality commands in a society that adheres to codes of morality. His own tribulations very clearly caution against far greater risks that society runs when it prefers conformity to personal freedom and places, within this context, the need for a balance between societal norms and individual rights (Ellmann, 1988).

The socialist aspirations of "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" of Wilde further point out his regard for the changing nature of society to one underlain by individual creativity and freedom, rather than by the incentives and moral conservatism of the capitalists. "Under Socialism all this will of course be altered. There will be no people living in fetid dens and fetid rags, and bringing up unhealthy, hunger-pinched children in the midst of impossible and absolutely repulsive surroundings" (Wilde, 1912, p. 2). Through this work, Wilde proposed socialist view as an avenue that would free art and personal expression from the demands of economic survival and society's judgments so that they could bring out its artistic vibrancy (Wilde, 1891).

Fuse Wilde's literary criticism then in with his very personal struggles and philosophic ideals to a much more complicated image of a man who was acutely opposing the constraints

of his time. Calling on us with a far-reaching perspective that must be adopted by the rich diversity of humanity combined with artistic freedom: the rebel-artist, the unique thinker, the one with a vision. Wilde questions the interplay of societal respectability, art, and human right to individual liberty.

Oscar Wilde lives a never-ending legacy as one of the "rebels with a cause," pointing to some of the wittiest critique points at the Victorian society and standing always for a world that will find space for individual freedom, artistic expression, and social equality. Through his writing and through his trials, Wilde indeed compels serious reflection on the way in which society, art, and morals do actually fit together and pleads for a future in which individual spirit is exalted and unchained (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).



## 2. The Pursuit of Pleasure

The pursuit of pleasure has been a central theme across cultures and epochs, examined through the lenses of philosophy, ethics, and culture. This means pleasure is the highest good in human life. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus said that the absence of pain and a quiet mind are the true pleasure (O'Keefe, 2010).

Ethically, it raises an eyebrow toward the balance between individual happiness and the happiness of the community at the same time. Philosophers argue, therefore, that where moral actions are concerned, one has to be moved not by desire to the pleasure expected out of their moral actions but rather by duty. Duty is an emphasis on what is ethical and not for personal gains (Kant, 2003).

Culturally, societies have varied in their embrace and depiction of pleasure. The Aesthetic Movement, in which Oscar Wilde participated, celebrated beauty and enjoyment in art for themselves, in contravention of the moral bounds imposed on them during the period of the Victorian era (Dowling, 1994).

This was to point out tension between social conventions and individual hunger — the theme that would come home with quite some relevance for Wilde's criticisms. On the literature front, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2008) deals with some consequences of a life fully dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure, examining the cost that may have on a person's morals and spiritual life.

Locked within its historical moment, this story is timeless, speaking to the universal problem of how to deal with hedonistic desires with the ethical burden of responsibility. The current discourse on pleasure goes hand in hand with the issues of consumerism and digital media, leading to questions of whether happiness could possibly be reinvented and the role of technology in our pursuit of fulfillment. The story holds the argument that in these dialogues, the characters try to make an attempt at finding the meaning and worth of life again and again, which leaves them unable to have a meaningful sense of life.

From the ancient philosophies to the modern reflections, the thread of pleasure weaves through as part of a complex tapestry of desire, morality, and fulfillment.

In fact, as Epicurus had shown in antiquity and later Wilde had proven, the idea that pleasure was something demonstrated in seeking to find some means of instant gratification

was entirely false; instead, pleasure lay in attempting to find ways to live that would prove benefits for a good life and ethical considerations.

## **2.1 Defining Hedonism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when analyzed with the attention to hedonism, brings to the fore a rich tapestry of thematic elements that examine the relationship between aesthetic beauty, moral ambiguity, and pleasure-seeking. Oscar Wilde masterfully weaves these elements into the story that peers not only into the soul of his hero but points at some oddities of the social morals of Victorian England.

The hedonism represented through Wilde's story is not just the free-run pleasures of the senses but has projected such intricacy that it would be convincing enough to make a person question what beauty means and what morality is. "The novel's power lies in the interstices of its parable—in those passages in which the author appears to be confessing doubts of both a personal and an impersonal nature" (Oates, 1980, p. 427). This is a point that Joyce Carol Oates clearly brings out, arguing that the kind of narrative presented in Wilde's novel serves as a "parable of the Fall," enigmatic and seductive. This apparently simple story reveals the great moral and existential dilemmas which Dorian Gray is swept into as he sets out down his shameful path.

According to my perception of the book, it seems that based on the experiences of Wilde himself and the society he watched, the story of Dorian Gray is a mirror that reflects secret indulgences of society in the Victorian era. Under the impact of Lord Henry, Dorian turned into a living manifesto of the hedonistic philosophy: the purpose in life is pleasure, which ripples him into a way of moral degradation, reflexed by his portrait. This difference offered criticism of the Wildean hedonistic philosophy that emphasized living a life for pleasure at the cost of losing one's character and inviting destructive consequences.

Wilde expressed hedonism as not only individualistic desires but went to further extents, revealing how art, morality, and the social values of hypocrisy end up. Dorian Gray is a story that covers Wilde's invitation to reflect on questions of beauty and the nature of desire and consideration of the moral issues that must temper the reflection on the ethical considerations that must temper the pursuit of pleasure.

In crafting a section on the definition of hedonism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it becomes clear that the deepest reflection on the consequences of hedonism is found in Wilde's

tale. In fact, this novel would be the perfect story of caution with regard to the stability of this hedonistic way of life and what it certainly does to the soul, personal values, and society.

## **2.1 The Impact of Hedonism on Dorian Gray's Life**

In the extremely complex narrative of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian is the character who becomes alluring and dangerous. Full of possibilities, pure—that's what Dorian was character-wise until he gets fascinated by philosophical reflections from the mouth of Lord Henry Wotton. Lord Henry is a charismatic figure with a sparkling gift for speech who introduces Dorian to a certain vision of the world, according to which the satisfaction of one's sensuality and the search for aesthetic beauty both in man and in the world around are some kind of summum bonum of human life. This provides Lord Henry with the insidious conviction of a philosophy where one is to act on the impulses and desires that promise the fullest life—a complete surrender to immediate temptation and the senses.

In her critical review, Joyce Carol Oates is referring to Lord Henry's hedonistic philosophy as something transforming for Dorian, acting more like a catalyst to the further moral downfall of Dorian. Oates refers to the charm in Lord Henry's worldview, which increases the possibility that he will charm Dorian into being persuaded until he is dragged into a whirlpool of self-indulgence, with his moral center and moral considerations being gained control of slowly. "The charm of Dorian is precisely Henry's awakening from innocence to a realization of his own power. Talking to such a person, Henry thinks, is like playing upon an exquisite violin—and it strikes him as highly desirable that he should seek to dominate Dorian, as Dorian, without knowing it, dominates Basil. There is something enthralling to Henry in the exercise of influence" (Oates, 1980, pp. 423-424). It is these seductions by hedonism that I will be focusing on concretely later on, having underlined the key moment at which Lord Henry puts forward the idea that seeking after beauty and pleasure should actually be the main thing for living one's life. The very idea completely fascinates Dorian, who readily embraces this hedonistic credo—for this will only be the catalyst for his dramatic change.

This was more than just the literary device; this philosophical seduction served quite as a commentary on the human condition and morals of his day. As Dorian travels along with Wilde, he toys with a deadly dance of desire and destruction, showing how the pursuit of immature pleasure without the first thought of an ethical or moral question ends up leaving a deep, hollow void leading to fall.

It is a theme that certainly comes across with ease to the reader since it is a summary of all the eternal struggle of human beings to come to terms with a balance of joys of sensory experiences and lasting values of virtue and integrity. Therefore, the slide of Dorian Gray into hedonism, under the sweet persuasion of Lord Henry Wotton, develops into a tale rich with philosophical meaning and moral questions. What does a man pay for living a life in which he tries to take away pleasure out of existence? Where from does one obtain this satisfaction or happiness? Is it something that is actually obtainable through any of the means offered by hedonistic philosophy?

Within the beautiful tapestry of the narrative, the disfigured state of Dorian Gray's portrait is a gaudy, spectral subject of his ever-intensifying moral corruption and spiritual degeneration. The artistic device, used by Wilde, becomes, on one hand, a chronicle not only of Dorian's descent into the abyss of hedonism but a visually sophisticated reflection about questions of beauty, sin, and the human soul. The portrait first shows innocence and aesthetic perfection in an ideal embodiment of youth; however, with time, it grows into a grotesque representation of the vices and moral failings that Dorian has gone through. And this is again showing duality in the relation of Dorian to the changes made on the portrait—horror and a kind of fascination. This duality has a deep psychological struggle, as Dorian fights off the evidence of decay within him in comparison to the unmarred appearance.

As Dorian pursues earthly pleasures without a stop, driven by Lord Henry's hedonistic philosophies, the portrait seems like a silent but grim housekeeper of his imperishable soul. Every cruel act, every vice, was embodied upon the canvas with such wonderful force of contrast and juxtaposition that it is difficult to say at which of his several stages the portrait showed best the intention of the artist to darken the character of Dorian. It continuously records such sin and excess with a most inverted and exacting realism and renders the portrait an absolutely accurate counterpart of the real Dorian. Meanwhile, Dorian stands apart from the physical consequence of his actions—an embodiment of eternal youth and beauty, unburdened by either time's ravages or the weight of guilt. "He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age" (Wilde, 2008, p. 124). The strong contrast between the kept outward form of Dorian and the decayed state of the picture

well summarizes the whole novel: appearance versus reality, what is seen and what may remain unseen, superficial versus profound.

Wilde's showing of the portrait, therefore, carries it beyond serving only as a central motif within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to represent a powerful metaphor for the concealed implications of a life given to relentless pursuit of pleasure, utterly separated from moral reflection and ethical boundaries. It wraps the image in decay within the portrait, thus ever-preserving it as a haunting reminder of the price of hedonism; a price paid not in currency of bodily or societal decay but in the manner of loss of soul and vanishing of true beauty, residing in the realm of the moral and the virtuous.

As he delves into the changes that take place in Dorian's portrait, Wilde opens up deeper questions at the very core of human life: the desire for an eternal youth and beauty, the allure of secret and dark pleasures, and lastly, the cost of giving in to one's most primal desires. This narrative element of Wilde allows him to question the values and virtues of Victorian society; at the same time, it brings forth a surge, provoking the reader to critically think over deeper, most of the times ignored issues of beauty, morality, and the human condition. "The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, or made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it." (Wilde, 2008, p. 205). This quote encapsulates the inner decay and moral loss Dorian experiences as he pursues hedonistic pleasures, aligning with the metaphor of the decaying portrait as a symbol of his corrupted soul.

The increasing image of Wilde in the story does not, in essence, depict the moral failures of Dorian Gray's life; it is a complex symbol for the complexity of art, ethics, and identity. It very well portrays the serious consequences of what happens when a person separates his actions from its moral implications and gives a timeless reflection on the nature of true beauty and the permanent effects a life, led astray by the siren call of hedonism, brings.

Joyce Carol Oates examines the story of Dorian Gray in such a manner that it exposes not just that this is a story about one man's downfall but makes a critical look into the society's woes surrounding this one man. Dorian's journey to self-ruin, very much under the influence of Lord Henry's philosophies, reflects the faults of a world where one is more into how things look than the real value behind it. Seeking pleasure without accounting for the virtues. Oates highlights "Dorian's sin is that without any emotion, he involves others in his life's drama 'simply as a method of procuring extraordinary sensations'" (Oates, 1980, p. 420).

The journey of Dorian Gray becomes a great warning and an alarm against the double standards that exist in society. The story of the downfall of Dorian tells one to think long and hard about what it really costs to live a life in an unyielding pursuit of pleasure.

### **3. Dorian Gray's Hedonistic Descent**

This section of the thesis continues to explore deeper within the core of Wilde's story, revealing the nuanced layers of the journey belonging to Dorian. Weaving through rich tapestries of themes and character developments in the novel, my analysis aims to explore the gap between Dorian's personal story and the wider sociopolitical implications it represents. This section will explore key moments through which Dorian signaled his spiral into hedonism, looking into some of the psychological, moral, and existential problems such a life brings up.

Lord Henry Wotton's power over Dorian marks one of the most fateful turns the novel takes and brings up a philosophical problem of definitions about beauty, pleasure, and morality. For instance, it is through the seductive rhetoric of Lord Henry that Dorian is drawn into this world, where the aesthetic becomes the ethical, where the pursuit of beauty and pleasure matters most, moral cost be damned. This influence is captured when Dorian becomes mesmerized by Lord Henry's words, "To get back one's youth one has merely to repeat one's follies" (Wilde, 2008, p. 42), illustrating the impact Lord Henry has on Dorian's worldview as Dorian's eyes are glued to Lord Henry's lips the whole conversation.

Further, the portrait's role as some sort of moral compass, a silent observer of Dorian's decline in morals, adds an interesting complexity to questions of identity, conscience, and humanity's duality. For as much as Dorian loses himself in hedonistic pursuits, the portrait is a reminder of his internal corruption and of the tremendous loss of innocence involved with hedonistic pursuits. The role of the portrait in echoing the consequences of Dorian's choices is highlighted when Dorian himself notes, "The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience" (Wilde, 2008, p. 89).

#### **3.1 From Innocence to Pleasure-Seeking**

Dorian Gray is described as an innocent and pure character, fascinating the artist Basil Hallward with his beauty. Initially portrayed as naive and morally uncomplicated, Dorian is described as "wonderfully handsome, with his finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair" (Wilde, 2008, p. 19). This description highlights his aesthetic perfection, which initially appears untouched by the cynicism or decadence he later adopts.

Early on, Dorian is also shown to possess a kind of youthful purity, unaware of the corrupting influence of his beauty and the power it holds. Basil expresses concern about the potential impact of Lord Henry's cynical worldview on Dorian, fearing it might alter his

character negatively. He says, "I don't want you to meet him" (Wilde, 2008, p. 16), indicating his worry that Lord Henry could spoil Dorian's innocence.

These descriptions from Wilde's text capture Dorian Gray who initially resembles a blank canvas, symbolizing potential and innocence that is gradually overshadowed by the darker influences introduced by Lord Henry. This initial characterization sets the stage for his tragic descent into moral ambiguity and self-destruction, driven by his growing obsession with maintaining his physical appearance at the expense of his soul.

Commenting on how Dorian's actions are not only of his own moral decline but also serve as a critique of broader societal norms. These norms uphold morality but secretly excuse vice. Oates highlights the societal hypocrisy that allows individuals like Dorian to prosper without facing accountability within their privileged circles. (Oates, 1980, pp. 419-428).

### **3.2 Key Moments of Transformation**

The initial seduction of Dorian Gray by Lord Henry Wotton's philosophy marks a critical point. Lord Henry introduces Dorian to a hedonistic worldview that glorifies youth and beauty while encouraging for the pursuit of pleasure as life's main objective. His philosophy is very well defined in one of his most famous phrases, "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself," resonates deeply with Dorian, setting the stage for his moral and spiritual downfall (Wilde, 2008, p. 21).

Lord Henry's philosophy appeals to Dorian at a moment of vulnerability and naivety, as he is on the beginning of adulthood and still forming his identity and values. The idea that surrendering to temptation can be a liberating force challenges the restrictive moral codes of Victorian society and attracts Dorian with the promise of personal freedom and fulfillment.

Lord Henry also interlaces his hedonistic philosophy with a profound appreciation for aesthetics, arguing that beauty and sensory pleasures are not merely superficial but are essential to a life well-lived. This perspective particularly appeals to Dorian, who is aware of his own physical beauty and is increasingly obsessed with the idea of preserving it indefinitely. Lord Henry's influence therefore not only shifts Dorian's moral compass but also amplifies his ego and fear of aging and decay.

Following their very first encounter, Dorian's personality begins to shift dramatically. Initially portrayed as somewhat innocent, he becomes increasingly narcissistic and immoral,



driven by his desires and the newfound philosophy that encourages him to fulfill them without regard for consequence. "If it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now! I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose?" (Wilde, 2008, p. 28). This wish represents a turning point, marking the start of Dorian's immersion in his own beauty and the power it grants him over others.

Dorian Gray's descent into hedonism starts with minor but deeply consequential acts of cruelty and selfishness. As Dorian becomes more influenced by Lord Henry's philosophies, he becomes increasingly indifferent to the moral weight of his decisions. His cold dismissal of Sibyl Vane marks a critical evolution in his character from innocence to a conscious pursuit of cruelty and hedonism.

The abandonment of Sibyl Vane by Dorian Gray marks one of the first and most disturbing examples of Dorian's descent into hedonism in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This event is crucial not only for its impact on Sibyl but also for its effect on Dorian's character, exposing the early signs of his moral decay.

Sibyl Vane is introduced as a young, talented actress in a shabby theater, where Dorian first encounters her and becomes fascinated with her performances, which he contrasts with her beauty and purity. Initially, Dorian's affection for Sibyl seems genuine, as he is enchanted by her artistry, which he describes with almost worshipful admiration. However, Dorian's love goes hand in hand with Sibyl's performances, which he sees as an extension of her identity.

The turning point in their relationship occurs after Sibyl delivers a poor performance, which Dorian and his friend, Lord Henry, witness. Dorian's reaction to this performance is critical; he feels betrayed, not because he cares for Sibyl as a person, but because she fails to live up to the idealized image, he has constructed of her. Dorian tells her, "You have killed my love" (Wilde, 2008, p. 84), emphasizing that his feelings were superficial, rooted more in the aesthetic pleasure her acting provided than in any deeper emotional connection. (Chapter 7)

After her failed performance, Sibyl, in her love for Dorian, explains that she could not act because she has experienced real love, which made her previous acting feel like a sham. Despite her emotional appeal and the authenticity of her feelings, Dorian cruelly dismisses her, stating, "Without your art, you are nothing, a third-rate actress with a pretty face" (Wilde, 2008, p. 85). This dismissal not only devastates Sibyl but also marks a significant moral regression for Dorian, as he values art and surface beauty over human feelings and relationships.

The consequences of Dorian's actions become apparent when he learns of Sibyl's suicide. Rather than expressing genuine remorse or empathy, Dorian is influenced by Lord Henry to view the event as a form of art, an approach that further signifies his immoral descent. Dorian is dazed by Henry's sentence and agrees, "The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died" (Wilde, 2008, p. 100), showcasing his complete detachment from reality and his deepening embrace of hedonism.

The transformation of the portrait that Basil Hallward paints of Dorian Gray serves as a profound symbol of Dorian's internal corruption. As Dorian indulges in sinful pleasures and moral decadence, the portrait ages and worsens, bearing the physical marks of his sins while Dorian himself remains unchanged and eternally youthful. This contrast between the portrait and Dorian's appearance highlights the deepening void between his soul's reality and his outer appearance.

Despite the alarming changes in the portrait and the escalating consequences of his lifestyle, Dorian remains persistent in his pursuit of pleasure. His refusal to alter his ways and his continued embrace of a hedonistic life highlights a moral and existential crisis. Dorian's choices lead him deeper into a life marked by superficiality and self-destruction.

Dorian's statement in Chapter 9, "There is something fatal about portrait, it has a life of its own" and "Poor Basil, how little, he knew of the true reason! And how strange it was that, instead of having been forced to reveal his own secret, he had succeeded, almost by chance in wresting a secret from his friend" captures his tragic realization and yet his unwavering commitment to his hedonistic lifestyle (Wilde, 2008, pp. 112-113). This moment marks a critical point in the narrative, emphasizing Dorian's obsession with maintaining his youthful appearance at all costs, even as the grotesque transformations of the portrait reveal the true horror of his actions.

Basil Hallward's murder by Dorian Gray is another key moment of Dorian's descent into moral ruin. This critical event starts when Basil asks Dorian to reform, having heard rumors of his hedonistic lifestyle. Dorian's response is to reveal the altered portrait to Basil, showing him the physical manifestation of his corrupted soul. Overwhelmed by what his own art has become, Basil is horrified. In a moment of rage and fear, Dorian murders Basil. Wilde vividly describes this moment: "The friend who had painted the fatal portrait to which all his misery had been due, had gone out of his life. That was enough" (Wilde, 2008, p. 152).

The murder symbolizes Dorian's complete detachment from his conscience. Basil, the creator of the portrait and the one who saw Dorian in his purest form, represented the last link to his innocence. By killing Basil, Dorian attempts to erase his past and fully embrace his hedonistic lifestyle without moral restraint. This act is not just a rejection of friendship and gratitude but also an annihilation of his better self, which Basil had always cherished and attempted to preserve through his art.

Discussing the symbolic and thematic implications of this murder, suggesting that Dorian's act of killing Basil is not only a rejection of his moral self but also a profound critique of the aestheticism that fails to acknowledge the ethical dimensions of life. Oates points out that the horror of the portrait, now a grotesque reflection of Dorian's soul, mirrors the horror of his actions. The murder therefore serves as a metaphor for Dorian's self-destructive impulse and his final surrender to the corrupting influence of hedonism. "The murder of Basil by Dorian is usually seen as one of the most demonic of Dorian's acts. Yet the murder is symbolically appropriate, and appropriate too is the fact that, for Dorian, this former idolator ("I worshipped you too much") becomes a loathsome "thing" after his death and must be eradicated by crude scientific means--cut up, presumably, and dissolved with nitric acid in a sleight of hand Wilde feels no need to make plausible" (Oates, 1980, p. 421).

After the murder of Basil Hallward, Dorian Gray blackmails an old friend, a scientist named Alan Campbell, to dispose of the body. He threatens to reveal damaging information about Campbell's past, leveraging this knowledge to force Campbell's compliance. This interaction is described vividly by Wilde: "I have a letter written already. If you don't help me, I must send it. You know what the result will be" (Wilde, 2008, p. 163). This moment indicates Dorian's ruthlessness and his complete departure from any semblance of the young, innocent man he once was.

Dorian's decision to destroy the portrait is driven by a desperate desire to destroy the visible evidence of his inner corruption. Throughout the novel, the portrait functions as a moral mirror for Dorian, reflecting his descent even as he maintains a facade of youthful beauty. By the end of the novel, overwhelmed by guilt and fear, Dorian stabs the portrait with the same knife he used to kill Basil Hallward, hoping to destroy the witness of his sins and perhaps revert back to the person he once was.

## 4. Wilde's Critique of Victorian Morality through Hedonism

The Victorian era is a great example of rising lavishness. The lavish society was made up of the wealthy upper class who lived in opulence and indulged in luxurious lifestyles, ignoring poverty, and hoping to escape the ugliness of industrialization. They lived in grand houses, hosted lavish parties, and dressed in the finest clothes. Despite their wealth, they were also subject to strict social norms and codes of behaviour, with a strong emphasis on morality and respectability. (Victorian Web, n.d.). Because of such wealth, hope for erasing memories from the Industrial age and tiredness of strict morals, Aestheticism with its attention to sensuous pleasures, aestheticism may seem related to hedonism.

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers a vivid critique of the Victorian moral landscape, highlighting the tension between public morality and private decadence. David Wayne Thomas, in *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic*, explores similar themes, arguing that Victorian aestheticism—often dismissed as mere decadence—was deeply interlaced with the era's liberal cultural movements. Thomas contends that Victorian aestheticism critiqued conventional moral values and proposed a more nuanced understanding of morality that included beauty and pleasure as vital components of life. (Thomas, 2003, p. 165). As Wilde said "To be entirely free, and at the same time, entirely dominated by law, is the eternal paradox of human life that we realize every moment." (Wilde, 1962).

Thomas's work illuminates how aestheticism challenged the strict moral codes of the time by promoting a worldview that valued personal and artistic freedom. This perspective aligns with Wilde's depiction of Dorian Gray, whose descent into hedonism serves as a metaphor for the broader societal conflict between repressive moral norms and the human desire for freedom and beauty. According to Farrell's review of Thomas's book, the Victorian aesthetic movement was not simply an escape into beauty and art but a complex negotiation of the period's restrictive moral landscape, which Wilde adeptly critiques through his narrative (Farrell, 2004, p. 866).

Farrell's review highlights Thomas's argument that the aesthetic movement was a form of liberal culture attempting to reconcile the contradictions of Victorian morality. This reconciliation involved reevaluating the role of the individual in society and questioning the prevailing moral standards that often stifled personal expression and creativity. Through Dorian Gray's tragic story, Wilde illustrates the destructive potential of a society that prioritizes appearance and repression over genuine individual expression (Farrell, 2004).

## 4.1 Public Virtues vs. Private Pursuits of Pleasure

In her discourse on Victorian virtues versus the private pursuits of pleasure, Gertrude Himmelfarb reveals the stark contrasts within Victorian society—an era externally characterized by strict moral standards but internally riddled with hidden indulgences. This duality is vividly mirrored in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the protagonist, Dorian Gray, becomes the embodiment of the era's hedonism under the guise of maintaining respectability and virtue.

Victorian society intensely emphasized public virtues such as hard work, self-reliance, and patriotism. These virtues were not merely aspirational but were expected to be embodied and demonstrated in daily life. Himmelfarb notes that these virtues were seen as essential for maintaining the social fabric of the time: "the word 'virtue' carried with it a sense of gravity and authority, as 'values' does not" (Himmelfarb, 1995). These virtues were institutionalized through various social and cultural norms, creating a solid framework within which individuals were supposed to live by.

In simple contrast to the public virtues is Dorian Gray's pursuit of pleasure, initially ignited by Lord Henry's seductive philosophies. Wilde introduces Lord Henry as a catalyst who embraces a hedonistic worldview, famously stating, "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Wilde, 2008, p. 21). This philosophy starkly contrasts with the Victorian moral imperatives of restraint and self-control, and it is through Dorian's interactions with Lord Henry that he begins to explore the depths of his desires without consideration for the moral consequences.

Wilde uses the changing portrait as a symbol to explore the hypocrisy of Victorian society. While Dorian maintains a youthful and innocent appearance externally, his portrait transforms to reflect the corruption of his soul—a direct consequence of his hedonistic lifestyle. The portrait serves as a private mirror to his sins, hidden away from the public eye, thus allowing him to indulge in pleasures while still keeping a facade of virtue. This dynamic reflects Himmelfarb's assertion that Victorian society was marked by a "great philosophical revolution," where moral values became increasingly relativized and subjectified (Himmelfarb, 1995).

In Victorian society, the dichotomy between publicly endorsed strict moral codes and private indulgences created an environment for hypocrisy and secrecy. Oscar Wilde captures

this through the character of Dorian Gray, whose external life remains the definition of youthful grace and innocence, admired by society, while internally, he spirals into moral decay.

Dorian Gray's transformation under the influence of Lord Henry reflects the impact of societal values on individual identity. As Dorian embraces a hedonistic lifestyle, his true self becomes increasingly detached from his social persona, leading to a double identity. This split is visually represented by the portrait, which ages and deforms in response to Dorian's sins, acting as a constant reminder of his true nature hidden behind a mask of perpetual youth and beauty.

The private indulgences hidden beneath a mask of public virtues not only threaten individual integrity but also sabotage societal cohesion. Wilde uses Dorian's story to question the stability of a society that allows, and even encourages, such duality.

## **4.2 The Duality of Victorian Morality Explored**

As discussed before, the Victorians projected a public image of moral righteousness and strict behavior, adhering to societal norms that emphasized restraint and politeness. Publicly, society upheld ideals rooted in Christian morality and the importance of maintaining an untarnished reputation. However, in private, many Victorians engaged in behaviors starkly contrasting with these public virtues, such as underground affairs, attendance at opium dens, and a fascination with the gothic and morbid, revealing a society deeply rooted in double standards. This dichotomy highlights the tension between societal expectations and personal desires, a theme central to Wilde's critique. "The threat, for most, the promise – of regression lurks everywhere" (Gay, 1993, p. 526).

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers a pointed critique of these double standards. Wilde presents Dorian Gray's life and the changes in his hidden portrait as a metaphor for the duality of Victorian society. On the surface, Dorian remains the personification of youthful beauty and charm, much admired and envied by the societal elite. However, his portrait, which he keeps hidden, reveals the corruption of his soul, bearing the scars of each sinful act. This dichotomy between Dorian's untouched exterior and the deformed portrait illustrates Wilde's critical perspective on the hypocrisy of a society that values appearances over ethics.

Lionel Johnson's critique of aestheticism discusses how this movement challenged the prevailing moral values by prioritizing beauty and sensory experiences, which often led to a

neglect of ethical responsibilities (Johnson, 1894, pp. 86-87). Wilde uses this cultural backdrop to underscore the superficial moral posturing of Victorian society, suggesting that the era's focus on aesthetic beauty could obscure deeper moral decay.

By dissecting the life of Dorian Gray and the society that shapes him, Wilde not only critiques individual moral failings but also indicts the societal norms that encourage such a schism between public virtue and private vice. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of a societal obsession with surface and the hidden depths of depravity that such an obsession can foster.

Richard Ellmann discusses in his biography of Wilde how the author's works, especially *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, present a profound challenge to the societal norms of his time (Ellmann, 1988, p. 264). Wilde's portrayal of Dorian Gray serves as a metaphor for the Victorian conflict between the cultivation of a pleasing exterior and the often corrupt inner life, highlighting the dangers of a society that values appearances over ethics.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the initial ambitions of this thesis, a nuanced analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been successfully accomplished, addressing the complex connection between hedonism and morality within the bounds of Victorian societal norms. This thesis has dissected Wilde's narrative to unveil not just the allure of aesthetic beauty and eternal youth, but also the profound moral consequences that these obsessions entail.

Throughout this analysis, key themes such as the impact of hedonism on personal integrity and societal values, alongside Wilde's critique of Victorian morality, were explored. The practical analysis provided deeper insights into how Wilde uses the character of Dorian Gray as a tool to challenge and critique the moral hypocrisy of his time. The juxtaposition of Dorian's outward beauty against his internal moral decay served as a powerful lens to examine the dichotomy between appearance and reality—a central motif in Victorian society.

Furthermore, the study revealed that Wilde's motivations extended beyond a mere critique of societal norms. Through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde engaged in a broader philosophical debate about the nature of beauty, ethics, and the human soul. This is highlighted by his exploration of the consequences of living a life unconstrained by moral considerations, which not only serves as a personal tragedy for Dorian but also as a cautionary tale about the dangers of excessive indulgence.

In conclusion, while each aspect of Wilde's narrative was crafted to reflect the aesthetic preoccupations of his time, the story resonates far beyond its era, offering timeless reflections on human desires and the ethical implications of our choices. This thesis has tried to honor Wilde's literary genius by delving deeply into the moral and aesthetic intricacies of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, illustrating how his work remains relevant in its critique of the eternal human condition. Wilde's legacy, as explored through this thesis, challenges us to reflect on the moral dimensions of our own pursuits of beauty and pleasure.



## Résumé

Tato bakalářská práce se podrobně zabývá románem Oscara Wildea *Obraz Doriana Graye*. Stěžejním tématem analýzy je zkoumání hédonismu a morálky ve viktoriánské společnosti, která byla charakteristická svými striktními morálními zásadami a estetickými ideály. Wilde v tomto díle rozvíjí příběh mladého Doriana Graye, který se rozhodne obětovat svou duši výměnou za věčnou krásu a mládí, což odráží kritiku povrchnosti a morálního pokrytectví tehdejší doby.

Analýza v práci propojuje historický a sociální kontext viktoriánské éry s Wildeovou osobní filozofií a zkoumá, jak tyto prvky ovlivňují interpretaci díla. Práce se zaměřuje na textovou analýzu románu, zkoumá dopad hédonismu na postavy a společnost, kterou Wilde popisuje, a vysvětluje autorovy motivy pro napsání tohoto díla. Tímto způsobem ukazuje, jak Wilde využívá svůj narativ k otázkám morálky a důsledkům života věnovaného estetickým přesahům nad etickými zvažováními. Analýza ukázala, že Wilde svým románem nejenže kritizuje povrchnost a morální pokrytectví své doby, ale zároveň poukazuje na složitý vztah mezi krásou a morálkou. *Román Obraz Doriana Graye* tak nepředstavuje pouze příběh o osobním pádu hlavního hrdiny, ale také nabízí filozofický a etický náhled do lidské povahy, která zůstává nadčasově relevantní.

Závěrem lze říci, že tato práce potvrzuje Wildeovu literární genialitu a jeho schopnost provokativně reflektovat a kritizovat společenské normy své doby. *Obraz Doriana Graye* je díky tomu vnímán jako nadčasové literární dílo, které čtenáře nutí přemýšlet o morálním rozměru našich vlastních snah o krásu a potěšení.

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