

DECONSTRUCTIVE INTERPRETATION OF OSCAR WILDE'S *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* (1891)

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore, analyze and examine Oscar Wilde's (1854-1900) The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) and the theory of Aestheticism while keeping in view critic and philosopher Jacques Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction. This is a qualitative Research, and its major focus is on the characters and the setting of the said novel. Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray presents the characters of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward who embodies different aspects of theory of Aestheticism and also reveal the process how they fail to understand the limits of human expressions and the drawbacks of these characters' incongruous ideologies. The story of this novel revolves around the young lad Dorian Gray who after looking at his beautiful portrait wishes to be young and handsome forever and, in this process, he loses his moral, spiritual and ethical aspects of his personality. This is a qualitative Research and involves the theory of Deconstruction to examine the various thematic structures offered by Wilde. This research will be helpful for the reader to understand some interconnected components between Aestheticism and Wilde's novel while keeping in view Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction.

Keywords: Aestheticism, expressions, spirituality, Deconstruction, thematic structures.

Introduction

Late Victorian Society seems different from the rest of the Victorian Literature because it anticipates the modern era and also puts forward individual's skepticism towards religion, existence, social and religious values. In both early and late Victorian Literature, novel has had a big success as it was popular among different strata of middle class and this also helped common British people to understand different point of views and ideas of Victorian society. Yet, late Victorian novelists, whether Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) or Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), represent ideologies different from the early Victorian Values and ideas. Oscar Wilde took a different stance from the rest of the Victorian Novelists, his major focus in his writing is on social classes, aestheticism, and beauty. Late Victorian Literature has been highly influenced by Aestheticism, appreciation of art and French symbolism. This kind of influence is a reaction against alarming class difference, urbanization, and industrialization. Aestheticism has been an overwhelming expression between 1889-1895 and this can be taken as an escape from the difficult times late Victorian society has been facing.

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854, his mother, Lady Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde (1820-96), was a poetess and was given the title, 'Speranza' while his father Sir William Wilde was a physician who had a specialization in the diseases of eyes and ears. Oscar had two siblings; one brother and a sister, but his sister died in 1857 and that affected him quite deeply. In 1881, he published his first collection of poems and Wilde also became the proponent of Aestheticism. Oscar Wilde wrote short stories and plays and his only novel which is actually his magnum opus *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Initially, this was a novella, *Dorian Gray* (1890) but after its success, Wilde turned this into a novel. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveals a gothic tale of a handsome lad who wishes to be forever young after looking at his portrait prepared by the artist, Basil Hallward. Dorian, at that time, makes a Faustian bargain by wishing that he could sell his soul to be forever young. This wish turned true, and he remained young while his portrait started showing the signs of Dorian's moral and spiritual decay and one day, he wanted to destroy that portrait but mysteriously he was found dead, and the portrait regained its original form. The story

of Dorian Gray is not as simple as it seems, it's about human expression, ideologies, and the development and degeneration of different characters. The purpose of this research is to explore and expose different interpretations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* while applying the different techniques of Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction. This paper will also examine the multilayered expressions in the late Victorian Aestheticism. This will help the reader to understand the undertones of social, moral, and spiritual decay within the multilayered thematic structure of this novel.

Research Questions:

1. How Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* embodies Late Victorian Expression and sensibility?
2. How can Derrida's idea of Deconstruction be applied to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*?

Literature Review:

This Research focuses on the reasons and aspects of Aestheticism in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* while keeping in view the Derrida's concept of Deconstruction. For this purpose, various writings have been discussed to understand the multi-dimensional discourses of Wilde's novel. Walter Pater's work *The Renaissance* (published in 1873 and revised edition in 1877) focuses on the different aspects of Aestheticism and its philosophy. This manuscript has been an important source for this research to understand the ideology and the expressions of beauty and art offered by Wilde in his seminal work. Walter Pater also provides the idea that everything is in flux and mind and matter are temporary. *The Renaissance* has been a helpful work to understand the diverse definition of Aesthetic philosophy. Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1969) focuses on the understanding of multiplicity of language and linguistics structures, and this has been helpful to redefine Aestheticism and Wilde's aesthetic approach embedded in the novel. This book has also been a useful source to understand and recognize the inception and different aspects of Derrida's theory of Deconstruction. Hans Bertens' work, *Literary Theory: The Basics*, puts forward the origin and definition of literary theories. This has been a helpful source to understand and realize the multiple components of different literary theories and how these theories are connected to each other and to what extent they are useful for the reader. This manuscript would help the reader to explore and examine the various approaches and perspectives within the literary and theoretical trends.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on Qualitative Research as it involves Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction and the literary information from the variety of books and articles. These sources have been incorporated in this research to explore and analyze Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Discussion and Analysis

The Picture of Dorian Gray focuses on the themes of art, beauty, fantasy, love, homosexuality, and moral decay. The novel begins with an enchanting description of Basil Hallward's studio where he is completing the portrait of Dorian Gray.

The studio was filled with the rich odor of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink flowering thorn. (Wilde, 1891, p.3)

This is how the novel begins; 'rich odor of roses' 'light summer wind' and 'heavy sent of the lilac' represent the aesthetic expression of late Victorian era in which the appreciation of beauty

has been prioritized as Wilde points out in the Preface to his novel, “The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful thing” (Wilde, 1890, p.1). Wilde’s aesthetic approach is evident as according to him, the definition of art and artist and limit of the artist should be very clear. According to Aestheticism, beauty and art should be appreciated and understood in a way where there should not be any interference from moral, social, and religious institutions. The appreciation of art should not be aligned with the appreciation of the artist, rather art should be understood while putting the artist’s effort aside. Wilde, in his novel, emphasizes this argument with the same vigor as his mentor Walter Pater (1839-1894) (Essayist, Literary and art Critic) had done earlier. Walter, who gave the idea ‘Art for Art’s Sake.’ also focused on total withdrawal from social, political, and economic issues to understand and appreciate literature and more specifically art. As Walter defines in his essay, “is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly” (p.11). According to Pater the beauty of art or any literary work should be realized on its own. Late Victorian Art and Literature is very much inspired by French Symbolism which is based on different properties of art, literature, and culture. As Stephane Mallarme (1842-1898) points out, “To name an object is to take away three quarters of the charm of the poem, which is so constructed as to reveal itself little by little; to suggest it, here is the dream” (Mallarme, 1970, p.869). Borrowed different characteristics from French Symbolism, Aestheticism focuses on the ideology of art and literature while removing all the social, cultural, and religious influences. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, character of Lord Henry Wotton presents himself as the complete incarnation of aestheticism; to appreciate art, beauty, and literature while unconsciously he turns the ideology of aestheticism into an insensitive and a detached state. Wilde towards the end of Preface, Wilde declares, “All art is quite useless” (Wilde, 1891, p.2). This statement indicates the several incongruities within Aestheticism, however, Pater’s approach towards aestheticism and the appreciation of art and beauty deeply influenced Wilde and his artistic career.

The Picture of Dorian Gray seems to have multifaceted thematic structures which lead the reader to a complex interlinking among society, individuality and indifference which are embodied through the appreciation of art and literature. These Complexities have been analyzed in this paper while keeping in view Derridean Deconstructive techniques. In his book, *Writing and Difference* (1967), Derrida points out:

The “subject” of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author. The subject of writing is a system of relations between strata: . . . the psyche, society, the world. Within that scene, on that stage, the punctual simplicity of the classical subject is not to be found’ (Derrida, 1967, p. 226-7)

According to Derrida, there is a complex system of themes, ideas and structures in the text which is both related to and detached itself from the authorial interference and it transforms the text into a chameleonic expression of diverse ideas. Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* represents various thematic threads working together and at the same disconnecting themselves from each other. The characters of Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton focus on the insensitive social and cultural phenomena, marriage life and the status of women in society. The character of Basil Hallward seems to be reasonable enough to understand and realize the realities of life. Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray represent two worlds and Wilde through these two characters represent the late Victorian society where the sincere expression, humanity, and empathy towards different classes cannot be found easily as this particular class (High class)

tends to escape from the bitterness and harsh realities, so it seeks refuge in Art not for the artistic creativity but for the sake of artificiality. The Deconstructive point of view is important to understand the ideologies denoted by Wilde as they address the issues related to human psyche and high-class morbidity. As Lord Henry Wotton reveals the malaise in the elite class of Late Victorian era:

Look at the successful men in any of the learned professions. ... A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen, and consequently he always looks absolutely delightful.... He is a brainless, beautiful thing, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at...Don't flatter yourself, Basil: you are not in the least like him. (Wilde, 1891, p.6)

These lines, uttered by Lord Henry Wotton, demonstrate not only *his* (my italics) aesthetic point of view but also his superfluous approach towards society. Lord Henry Wotton, an aristocrat, in his thirties, married but later his wife leaves him for another man, believes in sensual pleasure and doing nothing except the mere appreciation of art, beauty, and literature. To a great extent, Dorian Gray also tends to follow in Wotton's footsteps as he aspires to be like him. Wotton's approach towards life is totally different, rather insensitive and he instills the same desensitized expression in Dorian as Wotton believes, "Conscience and cowardice are really the same things, Basil. Conscience is the trade-name of the firm. That is all" (Wilde, 1891, p.11). While analyzing these expressions in a Deconstructive manner, these utterances connote a different interpretation; as Jacques Derrida points out, "... there is nothing outside the text, but that in it, in its interstices, in its spaces and its omissions, reigns the reserve of the origin; that it is thus not at all necessary to seek elsewhere..." (Derrida, 1979). Derrida's ideology of writing focuses on the significance of the text, and it also leads to the different forms of analysis. Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has presented before the reader not only the characters but also their multilayered discourses, "Laughter is not a bad beginning for a friendship, and it is the best ending for one" said Lord Henry, plucking another daisy" (Wilde, 1891, p.11). Lord Henry Wotton's laconic expression not only presents his selfish attitude towards life but also reveals the Late Victorian Elite Class's activities. Throughout the course of the novel, Henry Wotton does not show any feeling and sincerity towards anyone, and he remains indifferent to the situation even at the time when Dorian tells him that he has murdered Basil Hallward, Lord Henry does not believe that and assumes that Dorian has got bit delusional. This is something notable that Lord Henry seems to be the harbinger of Aestheticism and the ideology of Walter Pater. His escape from reality, trying to exist within the precincts of the superfluous world of art, literature which does not show any concern towards the other issues of the world.

Lord Henry's expression and utterance introduce a certain wit and satire in the novel, "There, of course, I stumbled against Lady Brandon. 'You are not going to run away so soon, Mr. Hallward?' she screamed out... 'Yes; she is a peacock in everything but beauty,' said Lord Henry..." (Wilde, 1891, p.9). Lord Henry's attitude towards life, beauty, art, and women is self-contradictory. He loves Art and artistic activities but quite skeptical about his surroundings, appreciates beauty but does not let other appreciate it, and wants to be the part of parties and soiree, but quite reluctant to respect women whom he meets during those parties with a smiling face and appreciating countenance. According to Derrida "...And the 'de-'of deconstruction

signifies not the demolition of what is construction itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructivist or destructionist scheme” (Derrida, 1993, p.77). Derrida believes that the destabilization of language in fact makes language constructive and multifaceted. Language does not have only one meaning nor does this follow any kind of binary opposition rather it goes far beyond these restrictions to progress towards manifold meanings. It seems that language denotes the possibility of decentrality of meaning which makes language more challenging and significant. Tyson asserts this point that post structuralism is a “reaction against structuralism’s orderly vision of language and human experience” (Tyson, 1990, p.250). Deconstruction focuses on the indeterminacy of the language. Jacques Derrida believes in the transformation and multiplication of linguistic interpretations. Derrida took this word from Heidegger’s (1889-1976) ‘Destruktion’ but for him it meant to construct, destruct, reconstruct and deconstruct. The most important thing for Derrida is to be persistent in finding out the new interpretations of the text. The characters of Lord Henry and Dorian Gray represent the superficial Late Victorian society. As Lord Henry talks reluctantly about his own brothers and relatives:

‘My dear fellow, I am not quite serious. But I can’t help detesting my relations. I suppose it comes from the fact that we can’t stand other people having the same faults as ourselves. I quite sympathize with the rage of the English democracy against what they call the vices of the upper classes. (Wilde, 1891, p.12)

Lord Henry’s discourses are deceptively simple and provide the reader with a multiplicity of interpretations. He not only embodies his own character but also manifests the social values of that time. He has a satirical expression while exposing the social and cultural ugliness of Late Victorian era. On the one hand, he is a representative of the last decade of 19th century, and on the other hand, his attitude also anticipates the indifference and reluctance of early 20th century era. As Lord Henry says, ...the value of an idea has nothing whatsoever to do with the sincerity of the man who expresses it. Indeed, the probabilities are that the more insincere the man is, the more purely intellectual will the idea be... (Wilde, 1891, p.13). This is how he manifests the late 19th century social values, and this is one of the major reasons that Basil does not want him to get close to Dorian as Basil fears that Lord Henry would pollute Dorian’s mind, and, in his apprehension, he has been proved right. To Basil, Dorian is not a human being, rather a piece of art, “He is all my art to me now.” (Wilde, 1891, p.13). Though this novel has a major focus on homosexuality, it also exposes what society is and what it will be in future. One can find a struggle among the characters without realizing what they want to do. Another purpose of life these characters have is how to describe and appreciate beauty. It seems that the description of beauty is everything, yet the reader can understand that there are few underlying purposes of their discourses; and those discourses also represent various interpretations of social ideologies. In this regard, one can bring forward Derrida’s point of view, “There is nothing but text, there is nothing but extra text, in sum an ‘unceasing preface’ that undoes the philosophical representation of the text, the received opposition between the text and what exceeds” (Derrida, 1969, p.43). Derrida focuses on the idea that the text reveals the real self through the discourses and these discourses do offer readers an opportunity to draw their own interpretations. Wilde’s point of view about the art and the artist demonstrates the ugliness of the late Victorian era:

The nineteenth-century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass. The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything. (Wilde, 1891, p.2)

Though Wilde here focuses on the theory of Aestheticism, it does represent some Deconstructive interpretation. It seems that Aestheticism and Derridean Deconstruction have something in common, and that is the significance of text and the absence of authorial point of view. The Reader is left free to set his own perspectives regarding the text. Though both Aestheticism and Deconstruction address readers differently, they do leave everything to readers to explore and analyze the text on their own. The difference lies between the very spirit of these theories; as Aestheticism focuses on beauty, appreciation of art and sensibilities while ignoring all the social issues and problems, on the other hand, Deconstruction focuses on the role of a reader as an author who will explore the different discourses embedded in the texts. Deconstruction also focuses on the idea of language and how language works.

Wilde focuses on the rigidity of Aestheticism as this movement does not provide enough space for the reader or for the text to move and can develop according to their own will. “never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself ...” (Wilde, 1891, 125). This is important how Wilde not only presents the enchantments of the aesthetic expressions but at the same time he also embodies how this approach limits human understanding and choices because it never lets its disciples think differently. As Dorian Gray tells Sybil Vane, his beloved and an actress at stage, harshly, “Without your art, you are nothing” (Wilde, 1891, p.101). According to these characters, human existence can only be recognized and understood once it learns to appreciate art, and this demonstrates a sense of rigidity within the expression of freedom, liberation, and the honest appreciation for art. After looking at his own portrait, Dorian Gray makes a gothic wish to remain young, handsome, and attractive for his entire life:

I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me... if it was only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now... (Wilde, 1891, p.35).

Dorian’s approach towards beauty demonstrates an utmost passion and it also expresses the fixity of this movement and the stringency of impression. The Deconstructive point of view is important here that even within the rigidity of Aestheticism, there is a certain sense of resistance which leads the reader to appreciate the text more emphatically. As Bertens points out, “Derrida tells us that language is inherently unreliable. This means, language operates on the basis of differentiation” (Bertens, 2001, p.124). Aestheticism focuses both on fixity and ideological freedom as it indicates imaginative expression of the readers. Dorian’s attitude towards life, beauty and art seems to be rigid as he does not want to realize the temporariness of his

surroundings but at the same time his discourse provides the reader an opportunity to understand the limitations of human expressions.

Conclusion

This research has explored Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Aestheticism, and different aspects of Deconstruction. Wilde's novel focuses on Late Victorian Society, Aestheticism, flamboyant lifestyle, and gothic expressions. Moreover, this also demonstrates the Faustian bargain of Dorian Gray, and in the result, he lost faith and individuality. In this research, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been analyzed and examined while keeping in view Jacques Derrida's Deconstructive interpretation of the text. According to Derrida, text has multiple interpretations and those interpretation remain in flux and the status of writer becomes less effective as the reader becomes the author. In this research, different aspects of Aestheticism and Deconstruction have been analyzed collectively to recognize and realize the significance of different characters, settings, and events in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

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