



Nordau's warning- Aesthetics under siege

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Abstract— This research paper delves into the contrasting ideologies of Max Nordau, a prominent critic of the 19th century, and Oscar Wilde, a renowned aesthete and playwright, in the context of late Victorian society. Nordau's theory of degeneration, which condemned deviations from societal norms as signs of cultural decay, is analyzed alongside Wilde's deliberate embrace of excess, maximalism, and aestheticism. By juxtaposing Nordau's conservative views against Wilde's avant-garde approach, this paper explores how Wilde's subversion of Victorian beauty standards challenged prevailing notions of aesthetics, morality, and individuality. Through an in-depth examination of Wilde's works and Nordau's critiques, this research sheds light on the intellectual and artistic tension of the era, highlighting the clash between traditional values and emerging avant-garde movements.



Keywords— Max Nordau, Oscar Wilde, Degeneration Theory, Aestheticism, Late Victorian Society

INTRODUCTION

“Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic.”

(The picture of Dorian Gray)

This masterfully written novel by Oscar Wilde was a storm for the Victorians as it explored complex aesthetic themes, contemporary to the pragmatic Victorian mindset. With immensely lyrical and poetic language, this gothic novel takes you on a thrilling journey exploring complex themes of virtue vs pleasure, reputation vs real nature, art vs mortality, truth and what really lies beneath it, and touches the conflicts between beauty, truth, duplicity, eternity and art which have been beautifully vocalised in this story. Every symbol was highly evocative, carrying a deeper meaning.

As homosexuality was a taboo in then Victorian society, this novel also explores a theme of men romanticism between men as we shall witness the antagonist fronting as a confidant and the real confidant being inadvertently captured by the protagonist's flamboyance and salient beauty. This novel is a thrill, breaking the rudimentary set of values and hence eclectic in its approach to subtly endorse the philosophies Wilde believed in, which then practical societies reprimanded. Elements of both goth and

aesthetic are woven with complexity and beauty into the fabric of this novel who shows in a tragic manner- destruction of beauty, something meant to last forever.

AUTOPSY OF THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

The novel begins as Basil Hallward decides to paint a real life portrait of his newly found muse- Dorian Gray, an impossibly ravishing young man, the archetype of beauty. Basil soon realises that the portrait he has painted has glimpses of him i.e. the art created now has the power to reveal artist's soul as Basil has put too much of himself in each stroke of this magnificent painting. Lord Henry Wotton, a decadent aristocrat dwelled in cynicism sees the portrait on visiting Basil and soon falls for Dorian's refreshing and bewitching beauty. And Lord Henry enters, unbeknownst in Dorian's life, like a cruel storm spoiling a good, nourishing crop. Like a fire spread over a radiant garden whose buds danced indecently, rather gleefully in the air. Lord Henry makes Dorian aware of purity of his white boyhood, which adds the fear that the painting will retain what Dorian will lose each passing second- youth. The waning of his most exquisite traits bring him horror. And then, his idle wish is granted to him as his painting now reflects the increasingly grisly disposition in his moral

turpitude while his visage remains unaltered. The portrait reflects his white purity- now stained with every sin he commits. Lord Henry brings out Dorian's inner cynicism and glamorizes it. He acts as the 'critic', as explained in the preface ie: the translator of art as his own impression of anything beautiful. With his genteel behavior and reputable rank to uphold in the society, lord Henry exploits Dorian's fundamental beliefs and derives vicarious pleasures through Dorian's hedonistic endeavors and hence Dorian irrevocably became a disciple in Henry's sanatorium, charmed by his inexhaustible wit. To Dorian's every temptation, lord Henry encouraged indulgence, and he slowly dwelled into art and philosophies to escape the paradigm- ethical convention. Dorian was the perfect wet clay which Henry was much willing to mould. All his sins Under the influence of Henry's monstrous desires and opium. Dorian carries Henry's 'yellow book' as his new bible, following it religiously and exploring its written ways. The book depicts the stronghold of Henry over Dorian and his changing susceptible personality. Progressively, Dorian disregards human sentiments in search of the ultimate pleasures. Dorian changes Sibyl's reality by loving her. He adds love into her life, whose prior depravation caused her to act. With her art now lost, she loses Dorian whose primary interest in Sibyl was her skill. He wanted the aesthetics to be maintained which Sibyl ruined. And when what she had to offer was exhausted, he left her with an abysmal grief, pursuing her to kill herself. however, Henry encourages Dorian to look at it from an aesthetic lens- like a tragic pursuit in an Artist's life, thus glorifying Sibyl's suicide as an artistic triumph. Dorian Yielding to temptation however only satisfied pleasure and mocked virtue. Drugs, insanity and obsession front as mere temptations but soon unveil themselves as horrors in his life. Dorian's mourning shifts to pleasure after Henry's manipulation, Clearly implying how 'art' is shaping lives in this story. And as Dorian yielded to his every temptation, he now carried a plagued reputation. However, people rejected every negative connotation as soon as they laid eyes on his charming visage, as if the purity in his demeanor was incapable of nasty crimes. Thus proving- that looks can be deceiving. And here the question of reputation vs nature is raised. What is appearance and what is real? In the beginning, we can see Dorian's reality and appearance being in harmony however progressively the both distort as Dorian tries to dominate his emotions rather than being at their mercy. Corrupting Dorian's heart with fabricated lies, Henry tries to regain his lost youth by encouraging and imposing his self centred philosophies and exploiting Dorian's vanity. When basil asks to see the portrait, to his dismay he sees Dorian's corrupt soul and white innocence now scarlet. Dorian however ends up stabbing basil, adding

on to the ugliness of the painting. The characters have used different ways of escapes. The theatre, opium den, and painting are few ways through which the characters have divulged in escapism, art being the most illusional. We can see how art was just a facade that led to each character's ultimate destruction. His painting gets affected with each sin Like the conscience he forgot to introspect. It was now a hateful reminder of all his wrongdoings. In the spirit of individualism, Dorian lost the most necessary sense of belonging and let his insane desires bring him death. Dorian's beauty, now agonising. He is caught in the morass of guilt of all his wrongdoings, one glimpse at his soul and he is overcome by the urge of destroying the only evidence of his mortality. He stabs the painting thus killing himself, thus fulfilling his last temptation.

DEGENERATION AND EXCESS- EXPLORING MAX NORDAU'S THEORY

In the late 19th century, Europe grappled with profound societal changes. There was a clash between conservative ideologies and emerging avant-garde movements. Nordau, a prominent critic, propagated the theory of degeneration, denouncing deviations from societal norms as signs of cultural decay. Concurrently, Oscar Wilde, a celebrated playwright and aesthete, championed excess and aestheticism, challenging Victorian conventions of beauty, morality, and individuality. Nordau's theory, articulated in his work "Degeneration," posited that societal deviance, particularly in art and culture, indicated the decline of civilization and showed symptoms of moral and intellectual decay. Nordau's critique extended to Wilde's extravagant aestheticism, which he saw as a manifestation of this degeneration. Wilde, in stark contrast, celebrated beauty, art, and individualism in his works. His philosophy, encapsulated in essays like "The Critic as Artist," extolled the pursuit of beauty for its own sake. Wilde's characters reveled in excess, challenging societal norms and embracing unconventional lifestyles, epitomizing his commitment to aestheticism. Wilde as a writer is characterized by ornate prose, rich in metaphor, wit, and poetic language. His dialogues are cleverly crafted, exaggerated and dramatised, often resembling carefully constructed works of art. This deliberate attention to language serves to enhance the aesthetic quality of his writings, elevating them beyond mere storytelling. In Wilde's works, beauty is not just a physical attribute but also a metaphor for the exquisite and the extraordinary. Characters like Dorian Gray in "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and the charming Lord Henry in the same novel are obsessed with the pursuit of beauty, showcasing Wilde's fascination with aesthetic ideals. Drawing some more upon

atavistic theory, the idea that vice and appearance are strongly connected dominates the story.

Nordau by emphasizing aesthetic experiences, he questioned the rigid moral codes and societal expectations of his time. Wilde's characters frequently indulge in hedonistic pleasures, enjoying life's luxuries and indulging their desires. Drugs, insanity, and obsession front as mere temptations but soon unveil themselves as horrors in his life. Dorian's mourning shifts to pleasure after Henry's manipulation, Clearly implying how 'art' is shaping lives in this story, as he carries 'the yellow book' which is the root cause of all impulsive and cynical acts.

Scientific Rationalism in the Victorian era was marked by progress in science and rational thinking. Nordau's theory attempted to apply scientific principles to the understanding of human behavior and creativity, aligning with the prevailing intellectual climate of the time.

CONCLUSION

Max Nordau through his theory projects a world of decay and decline. pointing out the manifestations of excess aestheticism which would bear sour grapes for the future of civilisation. The picture of Dorian Gray also served as a cautionary tale for various critics who took this novel as a cautionary tale to showcase and warn Victorian society regarding a perpetual fall by indulging into uncontrolled hedonism in the wake of Industrialisation. Critics such as Nordau wanted Social Regeneration- ie bringing back the social values and moral norms in order to curtail excessive indulgence. Wilde responded to Nordau's assertion by saying - 'I quite agree with Dr Nordau's assertion that all men of genius are insane, but Dr Nordau forgets that all sane people are idiots.'

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