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"THREE-QUARTERS OF AN HOUR TO CONSUME EVERYTHING": DORIAN GRAY AND COMMODIFIED AESTHETICS

"Her Şeyi Tüketmek İçin Bir Saatin Dörtte Üçü": Dorian Gray ve Metalaşan Estetik

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the commodification of aesthetics in Oscar Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The novel is most extensively investigated within the artistic context employed, where Wilde's approach to art, aesthetics and beauty is regarded as surviving on a transcendental ground. Indeed, despite his identity as a decadent of fin de siècle Britain, and his depreciating critique of the middle and working class for their material pursuits, Wilde gets conceptually closer to the capitalist stream of consumption. The novel ostensibly highlights aestheticism, and hence, art living for its sake on the lines of the manner Wilde launches himself to the world of artistry and literature, particularly through the characters of Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward, and Lord Henry. However, the deep desire to experience artistic pleasure and beauty, as illustrated mainly by Dorian, gets along very well with, and ends up as, the British materialist pursuit. Dorian's initial position as the embodiment of beauty degenerates due to the same dynamic of beauty commodifying itself, and so, the others implementing it. The very commodities where aesthetic pleasure is sought commodify the aesthete. Wilde's use of ornamental and decorative elements, Dorian's search for eternal youth, and the whole structuration of aestheticism in the novel necessitate a political reading of the text, calling for the recognition of colonial, material and modernist platform the narrative deeply bases itself on.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, aestheticism, commodification, Fin de siècle.

ÖZ

Bu makale, Oscar Wilde'ın tek romanı olan *Dorian Gray'in Portresi*'nde (1890) estetiğin metalaştırılmasını incelemektedir. Roman, mevcutta yaygın olarak Wilde'ın sanata, estetiğe ve güzelliğe yaklaşımının aşkın bir zeminde hayat bulduğu varsayımı çerçevesinde, baskın olan sanatsal bağlamı kapsamında araştırılmıştır. Ger-

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çekte, 19. yüzyıl sonu Britanya'sından bir dekadan birey kimliğine ve orta ve işçi sınıfının materyale düşkünlüğüne yönelik değersizleştiren eleştirilerine rağmen Wilde, tüketimin kapitalist akıntısına kavramsal olarak yakınlaşır. Roman, ilk bakışta, özellikle Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward ve Lord Henry karakterleri aracılığıyla, Wilde'ın sanat ve edebiyat dünyasına kendini tanıtma biçimiyle aynı çizgide estetikçiliği ve dolayısıyla sanatın kendisi için var olması durumunu ön plana alır. Fakat ağırlıklı olarak Dorian tarafından sergilenen derin sanatsal haz ve güzellik deneyimi arzusu, İngiliz materyalist arayışla çok iyi anlaşmakta ve sonunda ona dönüşmektedir. Dorian'ın ilk etapta güzellik timsali olarak görünen konumu, sonunda kendini ve onu benimseyenleri metalaştıran aynı güzellik dinamiği sebebiyle yozlaşır. Estetik hazzın arandığı bu metalar, esteti de metaya dönüştürür. Wilde'ın süs ve dekoratif unsur kullanımı, Dorian'ın sonsuz gençlik arayışı ve romandaki tüm estetikçi yapılaştırma, eserin derinden temellendiği sömürgeci, materyalist ve modernist platformun farkındalığında, politik bir okuma gerektirir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Oscar Wilde, *Dorian Gray'in Portresi*, estetikçilik, metalaşma, Fin de siècle.

Introduction

Aestheticism as a philosophical concept is defined by the types of pleasures it attempts to study. It is occasionally perceived to have the same structural dynamics as hedonism, but it is the varieties of pleasures experienced that may separate aestheticism from hedonism. The philosophy anticipates that the beauty of an entity is measured by the pleasure it arouses, and the only crucial aim for the creator of art is to project through artwork the most beautiful, and hence, the most pleasurable.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) the decadent is considered the forerunner of aestheticism in fin de siècle Britain. For Robin Gilmour, aestheticism is a blend of anti-Victorianism, lavish poses, and newly emerging theories, which are embodied altogether in Wilde in perfect manner (1993: 236). The movement is especially noteworthy with its reaction against the manufacturing systems designed to mass produce goods for consumers to purchase and usurp for functional purposes. These goods, or commodities, are also the instruments British empire was proud of showing off in the Great Exhibition (1851). The commodification of any thing of use was the reason of the decline in cultivation in the Victorian age, Wilde declared (*The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 2000: 436). Remote from any moral doctrine or teaching, art's mere function is to be the creation, elevation, and stimulation of the instinct to seek beauty (*The Collected Oscar Wilde*, 2007: 459).

In her comprehensive study on Oscar Wilde and his affiliations, Regenia Gagnier states that especially in the late-nineteenth century, aestheticism emerged as a tool of rebellion against the defeat of human by nineteenth-century middle-class utilitarianism and commodification. In this regard, aesthetics should "function" in ways similar to an ideology standing in opposition to the capitalist marketing system. For Gagnier, the inutility of aestheticism circumvents the bourgeoisie urge to inspect life on a rational basis by declaring art as a self-existent, useless sphere. Aesthetics, then, is naturally destitute of morals, politics, or a pattern of transcendental metas (1991: 3). Gagnier certainly finds an aspect derogatory to the modernist commodification of life in aesthetics, or more specifically, in Wildean aesthetics. However, as this paper claims, the type of aesthetics read in Wilde's aesthetic manifesto, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* calls for a perspective where it partakes in the commodity, and in so doing, reinforces the materialist side to aesthetic philosophy. Wilde's aesthetics is extravagant, and contributes to the commodified perceptions of the colonial empire. It works as a realm where both creative imagination and material goods are monitored, and so, the nineteenth-century units of social regulations, class being the most prominent, are verified. Aestheticism at this point is no different than a rebellious act bringing its own destruction. As Richard Ellmann argues, the opposition Wilde shows to the politically hegemonic powers is performed within a frame similar to the execution of that politics, ironically feeding the image of the hegemonic powers (1988: 315). The extravagancy central to the novel's aesthetic imagery acts like the enactment of the British materialist pursuit.

Perception of art and beauty underwent a radical change especially in the late-nineteenth century. The ideological shifts in the class system and the emergence of the middle class in the early-nineteenth century due to industrialization led to the promotion of being hardworking and doing good, and such a construct of the individual was identified as improvement across middle and working classes. Personal improvement of all members of the middle class was quite important in this respect since they constituted a huge portion of the society. Hence, improvement was a part of the middle-class culture, evident in the emphasis education reform made on "industry, thrift, and self-improvement" (Matsuoka, 2003: 82). Art was commonly perceived as an area of performance where people from upper and middle classes gather, exchanging knowledge and ideas. The first official sphere of nineteenth-century commodified art can be stated to be Art

Union, established in London in 1837 with the aim of disseminating commissioned artworks among the union members through lottery. Hence, multiplying the number of artworks gained significance, and there arose the requirement to print and publish the works several times in a row. The romanticization of individualism through material possessions worked to fill the middle class with the hopes of prosperity and triumph.

Aesthetic achievement was regularly threatened by the commodification of life by the empire during the nineteenth century. In the late-nineteenth century works of fiction, the extravagancy of consuming culture confronts the individual as a force that threatens to corrupt the individual it supposedly stems from. The Western echoes of the novel genre specifically, as Edward Said suggests, prove that imperial structures dominate the novel to the extent that it is impossible to separate the historical fact of colonialism from the understanding of the novel (1944: 71). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a significant text to investigate under this perspective since it is the realm where the cultural-material setting is decorated by the aesthetic device- aesthetics as opposed to, but significantly within, the commodified Britain. The decay in British society as well as in the kingdom finds voice in the aesthetic conceptualization of the novel. The theme of the periphery was of common use in the fin-de-siecle works with their intense references to the unknown, the abject, or the mutated figures, such as Dorian's portrait. What makes Dorian and his setting different from the common discourse on the fin-de-siecle abject, however, is that as an anti-hero to the established culture of capital, the peripheric hero or object enters the stage intending to violate the material settlements culture tends to imbue, but ends up supporting those settings by joining them physically and ideologically. In actual fact, "Wilde's critique of imperialism [is] a system that overlaps with both capitalism and Paterian aesthetics" in the novel (Scheible, 2014: 135).

The imperialist dynamic is based on an "expansionist economic system", whether a capitalist of a communist one (Deane, 1995: 354). These systems promise a cultural setting which either stems from that financial system or initiates it, both of which equally demonstrate that the modernist process of commodification results from a set of economic regulations which claim to introduce welfare to societies yet deprived of that welfare. It is important to highlight Deane's statement here, that is, modernist commodification owes its existence to people confiscated in a fundamentally systematic manner (1995: 355). The nineteenth-century classifications of

life were crucial at this point since rendering them universal in accordance with the acquisitions of British empire would establish what is regarded as the commonsense knowledge- knowledge of the classes, ethnicities, and societies. Ellmann declares that the promotion of aesthetic perfection in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* comes not from indoctrinating aestheticism but from revealing the dangers of it (1988: 315). He further claims that aesthetics, with all the extravagance it is behind, embodies the penetration of British identity into the peripherical entities. In the novel, Dorian finding his true self and then bringing his own end needs to be examined within his indulgence in the aesthetic- while promising the sublime beauty, it exploits the subject, which, at the same time, means destroying itself. In the novel, the pleasure-oriented characters, while disparaging the existent authority on the one hand, crack open the conventional association between aesthetics and the "ideal" concept of beauty on the other. In fact, underneath these characters' subversive acts via the exaggerated aesthetics lies the hegemony of a modernist financial system that generates itself through commodification and teaches the acquisition of material goods as the only means to achieve perfection.

The traditional critique of aestheticism highlights art and aesthetic production as a threat to the nineteenth-century capitalism. It should be noted that Wilde's optimalization of the middle-class lifestyle is obscured by such an attitude to aestheticism. Aestheticism, in Wilde's terms, should have reacted against the whole tactlessness of "a doubtless more respectable but certainly less cultivated age" (*The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde,* 2000: 436). The novel, in Wilde's own words, is "an essay on decorative art" (*The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde,* 2000: 436), but indeed, it is also an outlook on the mingling of the middle-class insistence on consumption in an artistic setting. "The real moral of the story", which is "all excess, as well as all renunciation bring[ing] its punishment" (*The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde,* 2000: 435), is not independent from the aesthetic commodities surrounding Dorian and his story.

Dorian Gray: Commodification of an Aesthete

Aside from Dorian's, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) paints one more picture- one of the aesthete as an agent of the modernist capitalism. Dorian's hedonistic lifestyle, when lined up with the late-nineteenth century culmination of material wealth and possessions, calls attention to the claims proposed by aestheticism- the aesthetic dream flourishes in connection with the insatiable pursuit of material gains, an endeavor typical of

British colonial enterprise. Wilde's references to the English as the colonizing power also function to raise the voice of material overturn in the novel.

Wilde's Dorian owes inspiration to Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À rebours* (1884), where the protagonist, Jean des Esseintes is a solitary and dedicated zealot of aestheticism, abominating the late-nineteenth century middle-class society and striving to live a life in his artistically self-curated world. This novel, too shows the commodified ephemera of the time. Dorian shapes his destiny when he chooses eternal youth instead of the life of an ordinary mortal. As the plot proceeds, the beauty he has evolves into a threatening conceit that devastates anything he thinks to be dangerous for his outward appearance. Every conceited act of his, however, is projected by the portrait, and Dorian's beautiful appearance turns out to be flawed. Both the representation of Dorian spanning from the initial stages- where he is the construct of Basil and Lord Henry- and his portrait being a tool for exchange lead to the idea that Dorian is a figurative symbol of commodification positioned against, but very much in, the aesthetic atmosphere of the novel.

Commodification in society reveals itself with overt consumption in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This system has its foundation directly in the colonialist structures, which manifest themselves in Wilde's text with representations of the desire to let youth have its infinity. Such a dramatic ending would surely be expected of modernist literature in its yearning for the times wrecked by the capitalist endeavor. In this sense, it is possible to read Wilde's novel as the nation's surrender to globalization. Also, Wilde's thematizing eternal youth in the novel, which counts as the eternal progress promised by capitalist modernity, is an issue moving in accordance with the nineteenth-century colonial spirit of the empire since Britain's authority in spreading the nation's political and cultural teachings across the colonial subjects was enabling the dissemination of the sense of differentiation globally. While Gagnier highlights Wilde as a figure representative of the transition to the commodification culture, she reminds Wilde's position as the symbol of late-nineteenth century capitalist interactions, and the reflections of aesthetic and material culture in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are at equal distance from those interactions.

In the novel we see narrative style progress in two dimensions, romantic (aesthetic) and naturalist, as Georg Lukács terms it. Commodity culture completely engrosses the aesthetic society, ensuring the ally between cul-

ture and the material. It is also known that Wilde was involved closely in degeneration, a pin marker of fin de siècle, in the aftermath of dilemmas emerging from Darwinism. With the degeneration he goes through, Dorian, the artful subject, turns into the commodified object. He experiences a life of "arrested development, of delay and decay, of rise and fall" (Etsy, 2013: 104). These discrepant edges Dorian possesses validate the poor merge of commodification and art. In this regard, the novel carries in its story an immediate discrepancy between the romanticized ideal of a cultural thirst and the naturalist representation of commodity culture.

The novel exposes the damaging results of the capital commodification on a personal as well as on a moral level. Several magazine and newspaper reviews were published on the work, including a Notice in *Scots Observer*, saying the novel "is false to human nature- for its hero is a devil; it is false to morality- for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity" (1890: 181), and Wilde's aestheticism was an "elaborate Wardour Street" type (*Daily Chronicle*, 1890: 7), just as Dorian's love of excess in art and beauty was. Wilde was surely intentional in the moral corruption Dorian was to undergo because of his indulgence in material luxury; however, his portrayal of Dorian subsumed his extravagant behaviors, too. In contrast to the critical attribution that Dorian is a degenerate homosexual, his degeneration stems from excess in material consumption and his commodified perception toward life. The July 1890 issue of *Christian Leader* touches on this matter, too, hoping that the novel be read only by the people of classes it refers to the corruption of.

The Preface to the novel opens with the statement, "The artist is the creator of beautiful things" (Wilde, 2001: 3). The following aphorisms support art's transcendental position in the cultivation of beauty. Probably the most famous of the aphorisms in this section is the one stating art is "surface" and "symbol" (Wilde, 2001: 4), and what awaits under the surface is open to debate. The paper herein argues that this mystic realm is, indeed, the true matter of critique in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. We find an alloy of art and bourgeoisie capitalism clad in flawless language in the novel.

The novel's opening scene is Basil Hallward's painting studio which has a garden with an intense scent of roses. Inside the studio are "the divan of Persian saddlebags", "the long tussore-silk curtains... stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect" (Wilde, 2001: 5). Depictions ranging from furniture to the "honey-coloured"

laburnum, for whom it is so difficult to "bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs" (Wilde, 2001: 5), instruct the reader on concentrating on their senses to "feel" the narrative rather than concentrating on the action or the characters. The sensational descriptions and the succulent language used in the first chapter is indicative of the style of the overall narrative. Etsy (2013) claims at this point that such an organization of the narrative deforms the anticipation of realism, too. In other words, the novel carries the narrative onto a ground so sensational that the fancy of endless youth distorts the primary feature of the realist literature of the time: temporality. The fragmentation in dialogues, and epigrammatic flow of the narrative also help to disrupt the continuousness of the plot. At this point, the novel acts like a fragmented bildungsroman in that it switches between a text of fin de siècle degeneration and a text of cultural refinement (Clausson, 2003: 339).

The initial portrayal of Dorian Gray in the novel is plain and unsophisticated- he is mostly directed by Lord Henry Wotton, an upper-class gentleman enjoying the comfort of his wealth, and by Basil Hallward, an artist perceiving Dorian as the exemplification of true beauty. Dorian is a typical young Englishman with light hair and a fair face. He immediately becomes an object of desire and past romance for Basil and Lord Henry upon their encounter. He seems young and passionate, and unstained from the world. The endless youth is used by Wilde as a tool to critique the epitome of progress on a large scale. Both being the target of male desire and fantasizing eternal beauty for himself, Dorian is a plain agent who, devastated by art on the one hand, mixes with the material culture art seeks to be a part of on the other. In the portrait that he paints, Basil reverberates Dorian's youth and beauty in the most explicit ways. Dorian is triggered when Lord Henry reminds him of the temporariness of youth, and his first entreaties to stay forever youthful are heard; he is ready to give away his soul in exchange for it. While Basil, too feels that in his interaction with Dorian, "[he has] given away [his] whole soul to someone who treats it as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity, an ornament for a summer's day" (Wilde, 2001: 14), referring to the fact that "[the portrait] will never be older than this particular day of June", Dorian prays: "If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything!" (Wilde, 2001: 28).

Dorian's wish to satisfy his material desires is reciprocated by the affluent urban setting he is located in. London, fairly represented by Lord Henry's richly decorated house, is the metropolitan setting where, in Raymond Williams's words, "the most influential technologies and institutions of art... extend and indeed are directed beyond it, to whole diverse cultural areas... by immediate transmission" (1989: 37). Meanwhile, "the term metropolis has taken on a much wider meaning, in the extension of an organized global market" (Williams, 1989: 38). Dorian's fixation in epicurean practices is backed by his consumption habits, one of whose factors is the colonial culture- his inclination toward music made by gypsies, Tunisians, Mexicans or Indians, toward perfumes of Eastern origins, and toward jewels whose "taste enthralled him for years, and, indeed, may be said never to have left him" (Wilde, 2001: 130) are indicators of his keenness on commodified goods. Upon learning that "Charles of England had ridden in stirrups hung with four hundred and twenty-one diamonds", "Richard II had a coat, valued at thirty thousand marks, which was covered with balas rubies", "the favourites of James I wore earrings of emeralds set in gold filigrane", and "Henry II wore jewelled gloves reaching to the elbow, and had a hawk-glove sewn with twelve rubies and fifty-two great orients", Dorian groans: "How exquisite life had once been! How gorgeous in its pomp and decoration! Even to read of the luxury of the dead was wonderful" (Wilde, 2001: 132). Clearly, Dorian's sensational persona yearns for material riches, which he could find only in an urban setting as his. The riches provided by the capitalist culture in this setting emphasize the consumption stage of the commodity rather than the production phase, and Dorian pursues knowledge on the stories of the jewels, which gives him an ecstatic pleasure. Jewels and different types of wealth brought from the East to the West has been a motif inseparable to British fiction since decades; however, such emphasis Wilde makes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ironically strengthens the factual bond between commodification and aesthetic experience. It must also be noted at this point that the colonial commodities form the cultural ground on which Dorian experiments his hedonist desire to feel pleasure and beauty. Art, beauty and other sensational experiences, renowned as anti-practical, turn into practical, material entities Dorian actualizes. He embodies, by help of his endless youth, the biggest wish of his society, as Lord Henry put into words:

> Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. ... A new Hedonism – that is what our century wants. You might be its

> visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season. ... Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth! (Wilde, 2001: 25).

Here, Lord Henry is aware of the fact that youth and its temporariness are adhered to each other, and they cannot be imagined separately. In this regard, Dorian's ceaseless chase of youth may seem as a setback in growing old rather than a conscious action taken in order to resist growing old (Mao, 2008: 85). Dorian, however, cannot even picture growing and degeneration together as a conjoint entity. He whines about even the slightest possibility that they should be found together since he now "[has] a new ideal" and he is going to "alter" (Wilde, 2001: 200). This change he forespeaks evokes a shift in the grand narrative of growth in that neither growth nor degeneration may be measured by temporality; youth and growing old drift apart, and in between brim Dorian's materialized pleasures.

Dorian and Lord Henry's references to growth and its inability to reconcile with degeneration are, in a way, allusions to the middle-class ideal that British bourgeoisie is never on friendly terms with the upper class. After referring to the middle-class men as "countrymen" and defining them as falling short of recognition, Lord Henry explains that they are "more cunning than practical. When they make up their ledger, they balance stupidity by wealth, and vice by hypocrisy" (Wilde, 2001: 187). Money should compensate for the lack of notability at all costs. Cultivation in the self and the society comes with the material riches one has, not with the possession of any abstract, sensational competence, which sufficiently reveals the emphasis on the value of commodity rather than one of de-commodified aesthetic experience.

Wilde's reference to British obsession with progress, as Etsy claims, is evident in his recognition of the Arnoldian classes- specifically the Philistines heading the usurpation of commodities. For Wilde, England, the ruling country of the empire, is the place where any type of human occupation is imperiously materialistic, even the aesthetic pursuits. Wilde's aesthetic spokesperson Gilbert, too enunciates this in the essay, "The Critic as Artist" when he says men fight against materialism, but they forget that there does not exist any material improvement which have not rendered the world spiritual, and sin, indeed, is an element essential for progress (*The Collected Oscar Wilde*, 2007: 426-427).

The discussions Basil, Lord Henry and Dorian make concerning the contemporary state of art, the individual's position there, and the society's role help the reader see into the context of aestheticism in the period. Deaglán Ó Donghaile informs that Wilde's praise of individualism above everything in his nonfiction prose such as "The Soul of Man under Socialism" is to feed anarchy, which is the stairway to cultural refinement (2020: 158). From this perspective, Wilde's type of aestheticism is a result of the individual's resistance to the oppressive capitalism that blunts creativity and intellectual capacity, and hence, is anarchic. Dorian seems to be an anarchist in terms of his resistance against the authority of temporality and his commitment to individualism; however, his addiction to everything luxury, ornamented, or sensational takes encouragement only from the material possessions of the culture he revolts against. Basil implies this matter as he intends to bring into reality a new character for art who will contribute, with his manners and style, to the way his audience sees his paintings. For Basil, art's ability to transform things into better exports the primitiveness of social constructs as well as showing an indulgence in an empty idealism. At this point, he proposes a new sort of art, which is obviously represented by the character of Dorian. Deconstructing Dorian, in this sense, is to dismantle the capitalist pieces that make him. Basil, while initially warned by Lord Henry against the vanity he might see in Dorian, says that he sees everything in him, and he is a suggestion of a new manner (Wilde, 2001: 14). He continues reflecting on how Dorian's aestheticism differs from the conventional definitions: Dorian is more present on the painting "when no image of him is there" (Wilde, 2001: 14).

Jed Etsy claims that Dorian is a character following a self-developmental pathway which is devoid of certain aims or endpoints; he does not pursue any middle-class teaching on morality or self-discipline, either (2013). In this respect, the novel axes Victorian realist fiction, letting deformity and degeneration stream into the cracks it opens. Although in *The Theory of the Novel* Lukács fiercely argues that "neither can a totality of life which is by definition extensive be achieved by the object's being annihilated- by the subject's making itself the sole ruler of existence" and "however high the subject may rise above its objects and take them into its sovereign possession, they are still and always only isolated objects, whose sum never equals a real totality" (1988: 54), as a result of the strives of Western authors prioritizing cultivation and progress, realism found its way through naturalist and romantic ways of expression. Realist fiction occu-

pied the most powerful domain in Victorian fiction with its elucidative function. This, however, did not prevent either the dissipation of the middle-class material discourse or the decomposition of the discourse of development commodity culture advertises in every realm, among which fiction being the most fit (Lukács, 1989: 173). While Western realists might appeal to Lukacs' depiction of the protagonists being the outcomes of capitalist (and humanist) framework, late-nineteenth century fiction generally employs protagonists who are either tools of the societal norms or exceptional enough to keep contemplating on, and hence, questioning those norms.

The novel should also be conceived to be a frame of limitations surrounding the middle-class morality, embodied by the dullness of the commodities Dorian accumulates, such as books, jewels, Basil's belongings, and eventually, the knife that kills Basil and the portrait. These commodities Dorian surrounds himself with seem to be the spillovers of his polluted self. Dorian's absorption of the corrupting commodification into his self is further evident in the portrait's expensive frame whose "elaborate character ... had made the picture extremely bulky" (Wilde, 2001: 117) and which projected the capitalist soul of its owner in complete accuracy. Wilde takes on a Marxist attitude when broadcasting Dorian's backward progress in degeneration due to the commodification of the self. Despite the widespread commentary on aestheticism as a revolutionary movement, Wilde's aesthete in the novel is strongly bound up with the conventions of the bourgeoisie, the commodity culture of the period.

Dorian's portrait, shining out throughout the narrative with its foremost function to represent Dorian's soul, turns out to be an object to scrutinize the degenerative impact of commodification in Britain. Dorian's potentiality to establish his presence now depends on murdering Basil, who once created Dorian with an artistic endeavor. Is art, at this point, a performance which determines both the composition and the decomposition of aesthetics, or a threating commodity endangering the certitude of beauty? The portrait appeals to both of these aspects, which could be read as Wilde's criticism of the fancy of beauty idealized and marketed by British empire-beauty given in the novel as the sublime, but causing the erosion of its own product. In this sense, the portrait does exhibit the dynamics of Dorian's soul rather than of Basil's as he puts it. We witness Dorian's insatiable appetite to consume others throughout the narrative. While art is theoretically inexplicable and interminable, but is to maintain its inherent merit, in the novel, it imprisons such ideological constructs, taking possession of power

in the dismay of beautiful Dorian. The portrait rejects projecting the artist's subjectivity, too. It functions like a television broadcasting the reality of decay in and by the capitalist culture in the late-nineteenth century Britain. Art in this respect is the embodiment of two selves, one of which seeks to erase the meaning of the commodified and materialized society, while the other, coming alive with the help of the decay that same commodification involves. Art, when performed in such a setting, has to destroy the self-indulgence it has instead of enjoying it. The degeneration of Dorian's portrait in tandem with the arbitrary, self-centered morals of the middle class is another critique magazines such as *Christian Leader* made. Wilde's heavy use of the ornaments and decorative elements Dorian ecstatically wants to own was scrutinized by the prominent aesthete, Walter Pater, too. He stated that Wilde's conflicting views with the middle class, specifically with their obsession with commodities, turns the novel into a political text (Beckson, 1997: 1-6). This fact regarding the novel's aesthetic position changes the paradigms of aestheticism claiming detachment from literary realism. Commentating on the portrait as a commodity derived from the materialized nineteenth-century culture, Pater said that it functioned as an allegory of the ugly reality of the commodified Victorian middle class, which, in turn, enabled Wilde to expose the capitalist perception fully as the middle-class obsession with the commodity underlying their industrial lifestyle became apparent with Dorian's moral degeneration growing bigger and bigger. Moreover, the details of the accessorized culture are given thoroughly in the novel, which brings in a popular mood, but the popular Victorian concept of doppelgänger is handled differently in that Wilde's doppelgänger functions as commodified object of art.

Lord Henry tends to acknowledge the initially anti-capitalist position of the portrait, which is cultivated by Basil. The thrill brought by artistic experience is contrary to the dull, singular ideology of capitalism. He feels that his perception of aesthetics reaches a new level, and Basil's ideas on art have a strong impact on it. He now thinks that influencing a person means giving them one's own soul; also, realizing one's nature perfectly is the real aim of life (Wilde, 2001: 20). He mentions the morals as "the terror of society", religion, "the terror of God", both of which are modernist discourses generated by the modern capitalist culture. Such terrors are rooted in relatively invisible but equally effective forms of governing units by which individuals are regulated. Wilde's common notion of art and aestheticism provides an alternative to perceive things by centralizing pleasure to produce

the subjective self- this, as Lord Henry states, is the ultimate aim in life (Wilde, 2001: 20). He is also focused on improving his own self in this respect; else, as an individual, he will face the terror awaiting in the outside world. The terror will bring about the descent in the self and the intellect, and indeed, for Wilde, the collapse in these two enables the establishment of modern societies. It is required that human conscious be revolutionary enough to challenge such authorial sanctions. The novel, however ironically, takes hold of this requirement superficially, and we read Dorian's launch as a member of the commodity market.

Basil's commentary on the aesthetic structure specific to Dorian also relates to a political understanding infused into the realm of art. Wilde's antagonistic attitude to literary and artistic realism bears on the capitalist culture that aims to singularize distinctions and define life by commodification. Basil expresses the need to isolate oneself from the reality and to embroider beauty in the most abstract ways possible; this is the reason why he likes to hide Dorian's portrait from people. Hallward's attitude ascribes autonomy to the artwork in that being devoid of an attributed reality, artwork carries features unique to itself. Although initially arguing against this statement, Lord Henry later on accepts that the mind of the modern man who cannot credit the abstract is no different than a bric-á-brac shop with everything in it priced above its value (Wilde, 2001: 15). Such minds lack meaning and life because they are too commodified to serve for an imaginative purpose.

In the novel, personality, too is given as an aesthetic meta that is adjacent to the strong aura of beauty, and it is a tool to beguile people. For Basil, the personality Dorian has fills him with terror since it feels like a peril attempting to exploit his artistic sentiments. Dorian, in this case, poses a threat to both Basil's feeling of (soul) and his production of (art) aesthetics. This details Dorian's positionality as servicing the process of commodification developing hand in hand with British decadence. When he tells Lord Henry that he "felt that this grey, monstrous London of [theirs], with its myriads of people, its sordid sinners, and its splendid sins, as [Henry] once phrased it, must have something in store for [him]" (Wilde, 2001: 48) while "wander[ing] eastward, soon losing [his] way in a labyrinth of grimy streets and black, grassless squares" (Wilde, 2001: 49) in his seeking for beauty, Dorian does not appear as a British elite taking evening walks on London streets, but as a voyager stuck in the industrial city. Therefore, underneath Wilde's aesthetic coverage of the novel lies the threadbare and aged in-

dustrial city with all its deformity, ultimately defiling the fanciful realm of beauty.

The novel also conducts the story of Sybil and James parallel to Dorian's. The lives of the lower-class siblings are devastated upon their meeting Dorian. Following his encounter with Sybil, who at the time earns her living as a poor actress, Dorian falls in love with her and they start a committed relationship. However, this is the first time for Sybil to experience a real relationship, and once she tastes the depth of the sensations aroused by the relationship, she is unable to perform on the stage as beautifully as before. This, in turn, causes Dorian to fall out of love. Abandoned by Dorian, Sybil commits suicide, and Jack, upon hearing the sad news, confronts Dorian, leading to the events which bring about Dorian's self-destruction. Scheible states that Dorian, his portrait and the siblings are no more than representatives of the British sensibilities of the time- these sensibilities themselves produce the threat that brings down and destroys those same sensibilities that hold the society together (2014: 141). In this respect, John P. Riquelme declares that while "the narrative [in the novel] is permeated by the aesthetic since it concerns throughout the desire to create, experience, possess or destroy beauty" (2000: 617), Wilde's identity as an Irish is readable in his conceptualization of the threat in the novel stemming from the very culture, rather than from a foreign, brutal influence. Dorian is the real threat. Basil's reflections on the first time he meets Dorian tell the way he felt he had to take out what is inside his soul, and how terrifying this experience was for him:

> A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. ... Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life (Wilde, 2001: 10).

The last chapter tells Dorian's inevitable return to basics- he is the victim of his sensual pursuits, and now he has lost both his youth and his innocence. While his plan had been to eternalize his beauty, now he is aware that "he had tarnished himself, filled his mind with corruption and given horror to his fancy; that he had been an evil influence to others, and had experienced a terrible joy in being so" (Wilde, 2001: 209). His hedonism, as fierce as it may be, gets him further away from the freedom he had wished to experience. Hypnotized by the material entities and binding his sensuali-

ty to the manifestation of infinite youth, Dorian is the outcome as well as the agent of the commodity culture. His endeavor to detach from the customed nature of life, society and time turns him into a sensational object. The concepts of the aesthetic individual overlooking the capitalist society with the claim to experience beauty, and the materialized individual contributing to the spin of the capitalist wheel overlap and merge into each other, representing the nonexistence of a healthy equilibrium between the imagined beauty and material circumstances. Dorian, instead of resisting to the catastrophic end, surrenders to the aesthetic end art brings. Indeed, all narrative by Dorian reflects an ally of individual desire and authority, two frontages between which he becomes a commodity (Psomiades, 1997: 187).

For Riquelme, the gothic convention in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is another factor that makes the modern self and effectuates the consuming individual. He argues that we should find the gothic context providing a justification of Englishness as opposed to the periphery, the other, which has to be colonially defeated. The efforts to render Englishness as the center in opposition to the colonized subjects cause a gothic distress, and Riquelme argues that the novel employs this same theme, which manifests itself in Wilde's integration of the aesthetic with the gothic creation of a modernist concept of human (2000: 618). Wilde's use of gothic conventions with an emphasis on the duplicities, whether it be a doppelgänger or the doubles of objects, also serves for the revelation of the danger of exploiting the interpolar distance (Sedgwick, 1986). Riquelme emphasizes these gothic duplicities as the initiators opening a space for the exhibition of the threats of aestheticism.

Conclusion

Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* stands on a point positioned between the commodity culture and idealized aesthetics. Indeed, at the core of the novel lies this very contradiction between what is told and what is practiced in reality. Aside from the fictional story revealing itself as a manifestation of Dionysiac aspirations and forever youth, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has a moralist ground that necessitates the catastrophic end of its protagonist. The construct of Dorian in Basil's mind, surviving with all its beauty, ultimately ends up as the objectified scapegoat of artistic creation. Interpreting this case into Wilde's context of commodification, one recognizes the soul's initial portrayal as a naïve, timeless work of art, which, as the plot progresses and reaches to an end, emerges as a motif functioning

with the dynamics of commodification, eviscerates Wilde's alleged desire, and dies away. We read Dorian as the devouring protagonist during his endeavor to both conserve and consume his obsession with commodities, which constitutes the basis to Wilde's critique of the capitalist culture. As opposed to the warnings he gives against the threats capitalism poses to the human soul in his essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism", he introduces Dorian as a devotee of commodities for consumption. This is evident, as Gagnier states, even on Dorian's face produced by modernity (1986: 65). As Kirsten MacLeod argues, Wilde places aestheticism in opposition to the class-based establishments of decadence, present in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as the manifestation of damaging impacts of capitalist culture (2006: 79.) Beneath the representation of the aesthete is the commodity culture and the promotion of it; Wilde ridicules the middle-class Englishman imagery by means of the portrayal of the artist as a commercial figure.

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