

Boredom and Moral Decay

Oscar Wilde's Criticism of the Baudelairean Dandy in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of *ennui* in Dorian Gray's moral decline in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. By applying Charles Baudelaire's concept of *ennui* as the malady of the modern age and his promotion of dandyism as an escape from the "immoral" modern utilitarian society, it argues that Wilde challenges Baudelaire's philosophy since Dorian suffers from depression as a result of yielding to all of his desires. Drawing from Thomas De Quincey's arguments that the cycle of restlessness and stimulation leads to violence, this essay suggests that, according to Wilde, dandyism may lead to moral decay. Therefore, Wilde questions both Baudelaire's dandyism and the core of the Aesthetic Movement. Thus, Wilde highlights not only the dangers of sensation-seeking being promoted as an escape from monotony but also claims that dandyism can result in violence.

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Introduction

The Picture of Dorian Gray is the Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde's only novel. The book, which first appeared in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1890 and was subsequently published in an extended version in 1891, follows the young and beautiful aristocrat Dorian Gray's descent into hedonism and vice in late nineteenth-century London. When sitting for a portrait in the painter Basil Hallward's studio, Basil's charismatic friend, Lord Henry Wotton, captivates Dorian with his philosophy that pleasure and beauty are the secrets to life. According to him, one should always yield to every fantasy, and he thus persuades Dorian to indulge in his darkest desires without guilt or shame to live in the spirit of art. Basil finishes the portrait and Dorian, under the influence of Lord Henry, is horrified at the thought of his beauty eventually fading. On a whim, Dorian sells his soul for eternal youth and wishes that the portrait will age instead of him. Embracing the aesthetic lifestyle, he breaks off his engagement to the actress Sibyl Vane after a bad acting performance stating that she no longer stirs his imagination. She commits suicide, and Dorian's portrait alters to mirror his cruelty. As the years go by, Dorian's lifestyle becomes increasingly corrupt. He cuts off partners when they bore him, frequents opium dens, and uses his influence to blackmail others. When Basil confronts him about his immoral lifestyle, Dorian stabs him to death. To overcome his guilt, he also stabs the portrait, and in doing so, kills himself. The portrait returns to its original state, and Dorian's corruption and sin are now reflected on his dead body.

In the preface to *Dorian Gray*, in which Wilde presents his aesthetic views, he states that there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are either well written or badly written. Already in his early days at Oxford studying Classics, Wilde established himself as an "Apostle of Aestheticism" who preached the love of art for art's sake (Holland 9) above the notion that art should be judged on its moral value. Interestingly, Wilde remarked in response to the criticism of his novel that it would one day be recognized as a work containing a strong moral lesson (Ackroyd 234). While the novel celebrates individualism and self-expression as an art form with Dorian's indulgence in all of his passions as a subversion of utilitarian Victorian society, which valued labor and temperance, this individualism is also what leads him to his downfall. Peter Ackroyd suggests in his introduction to the first Penguin edition of *Dorian Gray* that beneath Wilde's brilliant prose lies a moralist, and occasionally even a Puritan behind his mask of the aesthete or dandy (Ackroyd 239).

It is the moralist side of Wilde that I will explore in this essay. More specifically, I will look at how Charles Baudelaire's notion of *ennui* relates to Dorian's sensation-seeking and how its consequences serve as Wilde's criticism of the Aesthetic Movement. With the publication of his poetry collection, *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), Baudelaire pioneered *ennui* as boredom with modern life characterized by anxiety, restlessness, and a disdain for modern society (Majumdar ch. 11). In

Dorian Gray, a judgment of modernity is prevalent, and sensation-seeking is considered the cure for *ennui*. Additionally, *ennui* is also the driving force behind Dorian's sensation-seeking. After his constant pursuit of passions, Dorian's numbed senses lead him to violence in order to experience new sensations. To investigate Dorian's descent into violence, I will rely on Thomas De Quincey's ideas about moral decay as a result of jaded senses presented in his book *The Caesars* (1850). Since the Aesthetic Movement's notion of pleasure for pleasure's sake was promoted as an escape from nineteenth-century utilitarianism, I will contextualize my analysis by examining Wilde's characterization of Dorian as the epitome of Charles Baudelaire's concept of "the dandy," which he developed in texts such as *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863). In addition, I will also draw from Baudelaire's descriptions of *ennui* in *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) as a consequence of modernity and how dandyism is presented as a solution to the misery Baudelaire ascribes to the nineteenth century.

My analysis will begin by establishing how Wilde characterizes Dorian as a Baudelairean dandy with a focus on dandyism as a subversion of utilitarianism. I emphasize how Lord Henry instills in Dorian that sensation-seeking results in happiness and thus rejects the Victorian ideal of self-denial to avoid monotony. Additionally, Dorian learns that sensation-seeking is his only purpose as a member of the upper class. By underlining the likeness between Dorian's characterization and the tenets of Baudelaire's dandyism, I argue that this similarity enables Wilde to criticize Baudelaire's notion that dandyism is the solution to monotonous life in the novel. With Baudelaire's interpretation of *ennui* as the malady of modern life at the center, I suggest that Dorian's fear of this state and jaded senses after his constant sensation-seeking drives him to murder Basil and thus experiences the same anguish as Baudelaire's ideal victim of *ennui*. I analyze Dorian's behavior by applying Thomas De Quincey's idea that numbed senses lead to vicious acts. Thus, I argue that Wilde criticizes Baudelaire's dandyism as a solution to utilitarianism. In doing so, Wilde challenges the foundations of aestheticism by suggesting that the blind pursuit of sensations results in violence and consequently in moral decay.

Theoretical Framework

This section begins by situating the aestheticism and decadent movements in their historical context in order to understand dandyism as a subversion of Victorian society. Both Wilde's and Baudelaire's role in the movements is explained, as well as Baudelaire's influence on Wilde. The meaning of dandyism is then defined in relation to the concept of *ennui*. The focus is solely on Baudelaire's writings on the subject in *The Painter of Modern Life* and *The Flowers of Evil* since

French decadence is central to *Dorian Gray*.¹ Lastly, Thomas De Quincey's *The Caesars* is presented to expand on the relationship between dandyism, *ennui*, and violence. I also rely on interpretations of these works by various scholars to further explain the relevance of Baudelaire's and De Quincey's texts.²

Before discussing aestheticism as a criticism of Victorian society, its definition of beauty should be established. In the book *Aestheticism*, R.V. Johnson explains that although people often talk about beauty in different contexts such as "the beauty of holiness" or of a "geometrical theorem," the aesthetic definition is different. Aesthetes not only elevated beauty above anything else but also defined the term in opposition to other values. For the Victorians, aestheticism stood for certain ideas about art and life that challenged the more conventional convictions presented in both art and society. The core of beauty's definition is a defiance of didacticism, which is encapsulated in the phrase "Art for Art's sake." Aesthetes in the Victorian age argued that the value of, for instance, a poem was not in its moral message, but in its form. Hence, form dictated what was considered beautiful, and consequently, art had to be enjoyed for art's sake (Johnson, ch. 1).

Even though aestheticism is often associated with the eighteen-nineties, the term is also used to refer to writers from the eighteen-fifties and sixties. Both Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater proclaimed art for art's sake and treated life "in the spirit of art." However, Johnson explains that aestheticism was not a movement as such, especially if it is compared to Pre-Raphaelitism, which had more definite and limited aims. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood aimed to reclaim art as a medium for fostering virtue in a traditional Christian sense, and the group maintained a tight solidarity, signing their paintings with "P.R.B." (Johnson ch. 2). According to Johnson, the reason why aestheticism was not a movement in the same sense as Pre-Raphaelitism was because writers like John Ruskin, William Morris, and Wilde, with different views on art and on life, might be

¹ *Dorian Gray* may also be considered a Gothic novel since Dorian's portrait can be interpreted as reflecting his "double." Thus, the portrait embodies the subconscious, evil side of Dorian's nature in contrast to the innocent boy he is at the beginning of the novel (Poteet 234). However, since the concept of *ennui* is linked to aestheticism and decadence, I analyze *Dorian Gray* through an aesthetic/decadent framework to emphasize the complexity of Wilde's views. Essentially, he is critical of utilitarianism. Nevertheless, he also criticizes dandyism as a solution to monotonous, modern life.

² Walter Benjamin's work on Baudelaire is essential for understanding the cultural politics of modernity (Jennings 2). Benjamin examines, for instance, Baudelaire's portrayal of the isolation and alienation of individuals in modern life (Jennings 24) and how the dandy appears as a hero in a decaying society (Benjamin 124). In my essay, however, Baudelaire's dandyism functions as a framework for understanding Wilde's characterization of Dorian as a French dandy to emphasize the contradictory nature of Wilde's aesthetic and moralist views rather than examining Baudelaire's work.

lumped together although they all believed in an elevation of beauty. For instance, although Wilde was inspired by Ruskin who was a moralist, Wilde rejected moral values in favor of elevating beauty (Johnson ch. 1).

Moreover, the Aesthetic Movement concerned a view on art, art criticism, and a way of life. For the purpose of this essay, which predominantly focuses on the characterization of Dorian's lifestyle, aestheticism as a way of life will be the most central. Transitioning from aestheticism as a view on art to a view on life implied living in "the spirit of art," meaning that the aesthetes considered life as something to be appreciated for its beauty. As a result, aesthetes often came into conflict with the puritan morality which dominated Victorian society. Johnson defines puritan morality as a code of behavior stemming from Puritanism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The code emphasized industry, temperance, and useful activity, which in other words meant labor. It was the Victorian middle class that promoted this puritan ethic, and consequently set the tone of Victorian society (Johnson, ch. 1).

Aestheticism also belonged to a wider revulsion of some aspects of Victorian society, for example, what the aesthetes considered "vulgar materialism." To the aesthetes, materialism elevated gross national product as the criterion of civilization, which according to them, was vulgar since it stood in the way of appreciating beauty in life. Materialism was embedded in puritan moralism in that it symbolized "doing good" in a material sense. The aesthetes criticized this utilitarian spirit which they argued disparaged intellectual pursuits and tolerated ugliness (Johnson, ch. 2).

In *Culture and Society* (1958), Raymond Williams discusses Ruskin and Morris who blended their social criticism with their beliefs about art to criticize industrial Britain. According to Williams, Ruskin's social criticism arose from his definition of art's purpose (Williams 150), which may be exemplified by his views on labor. Ruskin argued that in industrial Britain, the motivation behind labor was economic profit rather than fulfillment in life (Williams 152). In Ruskin's view, "whole fulfillment" partly encompassed an appreciation of beauty as a means of achieving joy in life. Hence, the rejection of the pursuit of beauty was one of the "evils" of industrialism, and capitalist labor thus made whole fulfillment impossible (Williams 154).

Similarly, Morris's opinion was that art should "destroy the curse of labour" by making it pleasurable by incorporating art into daily work (Williams 166). Morris stressed the importance of craftsmanship in labor, which would substitute exchange-value for creativity as the motivation behind work (Williams 167). Hence, Morris envisioned a kind of creative labor where pleasure was at the foundation of society (Lesjak 180).

Although this essay argues that Wilde presents a critique of dandyism and aestheticism as a subversion of Victorian utilitarianism in *Dorian Gray*, this criticism does not detract from the fact that Wilde was critical of Victorian values. In his essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891),

Wilde, like Ruskin and Morris, criticizes modern labor. He writes: “there is nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour at all, and most of it is absolutely degrading. It is mentally and morally injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure” (Wilde, 1088). As a result, Wilde argues that capitalism undermines individual freedom and that by being slaves to capitalist production, people sacrifice their potential for creativity and self-expression. Instead, each man should be free to pursue his own work (Wilde 1082).

Likewise, Wilde articulates a criticism of the Victorian belief in utility in “The Critic as Artist” (1891) and argues for the importance of art for art’s sake (Quintus 568). Wilde claims that “each little thing that we do passes into the great machine of life” (Wilde 1023), critiquing autonomous Victorian labor. Sin, however, is favorable since it “increases the experience of the race” and “through its intensified assertion of individualism it saves us from monotony of type” (Wilde 1023). Ultimately, Wilde claims that it rejects the current notions of morality as opposed to allowing self-denial to hinder man’s progress (Wilde 1024).

Despite Wilde’s critique of utilitarian values, I argue that, in *Dorian Gray*, Wilde complicates his notion of individualism by demonstrating how self-indulgent sensation-seeking may lead to moral decay. Hence, although Wilde is critical of utilitarianism, he is also critical of the aesthetic promotion of self-indulgence and therefore questions dandyism as a cure for *ennui*.

In the eighteen-nineties, decadence became associated with the Aesthetic Movement. Wilde is the best-known decadent writer whose work leaned towards squalor and disaster (Johnson ch. 2). Johnson explains that the link between aestheticism and decadence is their similar characteristics. Decadence was characterized by unconventional and exhibitionist behavior and the belief that art was superior to morality. Another attribute of the decadent was the lust for unusual experiences (Goldfarb 369-370). These characteristics were supplemented by a fascination with morbidity, perversities, and ephemeral sensualities (Goldfarb 372).

Joris-Karl Huysmans’s novel *Against Nature* (1884), with its main character Jean Des Esseintes, is often considered the ideal example of a decadent, aesthetic retreat from ordinary life (Johnson, ch. 2). Huysmans’s characterization of Des Esseintes later influenced Wilde’s portrayal of Dorian. By detaching himself from what the utilitarian nineteenth-century middle class would regard as life in the modern age, that is, personal relationships and work, Des Esseintes values leisure and freedom over the pressures of puritanism (Johnson, ch. 2). Like Des Esseintes, who is ill and secluded in his castle and eventually subverts the law for pleasure, Dorian develops from an innocent young man into a murderer and learns to go against the grain and reinvent himself as a dandy. For both of them, their adoption of dandyism is because of the influence of books that they treat as their guides to the aesthetic lifestyle. In *Dorian Gray*, it is *Against Nature*, and in *Against Nature* it is the works of Baudelaire.

Wilde was influenced both by Huysman's portrayal of Des Esseintes, who differs from the conventional Victorian heroes of the bildungsroman by disregarding virtue, and in turn by Baudelaire's defense of dandyism, which he presents in *The Painter of Modern Life*. He introduces the tenets of French decadence and creates the English counterpart to the French dandy in the character of Dorian. Similar to Des Esseintes, Dorian is completely immersed in the study of fashion, jewels, perfumery, and the rituals and messianic practices of Catholicism for the pursuit of beauty and pleasure. By the time Wilde published *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, dandyism was a recognized mode of aesthetic and moral subversion of nineteenth-century middle-class values, and Wilde, like Baudelaire, adopted dandyism to counter these bourgeois virtues (Patnaik 47).

Because Baudelaire influenced Wilde and his concept of dandyism is prevalent in *Dorian Gray*, I will analyze Wilde's characterization of Dorian as a Baudelairean dandy to illustrate how the promotion of dandyism is used as an escape from utilitarianism in the novel. In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire defines a dandy as a man who is "rich and idle, and who, even if blasé, has no other occupation than the perpetual pursuit of happiness" (Baudelaire 26). In his view, a dandy has been brought up in luxury and since he has the financial means to live a life of leisure, his only occupation is to pursue beauty and satisfy his passions (Baudelaire 26-27). The fact that dandies are wealthy and have a vast abundance of time enables them to act on their fantasies, meaning that they can live the pleasure for pleasure's sake lifestyle.

In addition, essential to pursuing pleasure for pleasure's sake is rebelling against utilitarianism. Baudelaire considered materialism and industry immoral and presented dandyism as the virtuous counterpart (Rhodes 389). Baudelaire considered all material endeavors in life vulgar, and it led to the degradation of the human heart. Thus, he viewed materialism as a form of egoism. The dandy, however, should distinguish himself by withdrawing from immoral society and cultivating beauty around him (Rhodes 391) to combat and destroy triviality (Baudelaire 28). In my analysis, I emphasize how Wilde criticizes dandyism as an escape from utilitarianism by arguing that the pursuit of pleasure and search for sensations causes Dorian's depression. Ultimately, his behavior leads him to suicide rather than positively influencing him.

Moreover, Dorian as a Baudelairean dandy will be examined in conjunction with Baudelaire's concept of *ennui*. Although Baudelaire describes idleness and boredom with modern life as a requirement for pursuing beauty, his notion of *ennui* denotes a state of desolation or forlornness as a result of the monotony of modern life. Baudelaire's first major work, *The Flowers of Evil*, contributed to the definition of *ennui* (Laffitte 1-2), and hence, I will apply the ideas presented in his poems from the book. In an examination of Baudelaire's definition of *ennui*, Alan S. Rosenthal describes it as a state of anguish which contains feelings of dejection, inaction, indifference to everything, and almost complete paralysis (Rosenthal 347). These feelings would

lead a sufferer of *ennui* to look for any passion, even horrid ones (Rosenthal 349), and as the victim's frustration grows, he may act out in the form of violent outbursts. Rebellion, however, is short-lived and gloom takes over again and the victim fails to conquer this unbearable state (Hall 97). While Baudelaire describes *ennui* as a consequence of modernity, I will argue that Wilde suggests dandyism may lead to a similar state characterized by the same anguish since Dorian ends up miserable due to his constant sensation-seeking.

Even if Baudelaire recognizes the relationship between *ennui* and violence, he does not consider dandyism and sensation-seeking the reason for these violent outbursts. De Quincey, however, examines the relationship between an earlier variation of *ennui* and violence in *The Caesars*. During the nineteenth century, different terms such as *acedia*, *taedium vitae*, and *ennui* were used to refer to the melancholy and restlessness called "the sickness of the century" or *mal du siècle* (Hall 40). The difference between Baudelaire and De Quincey is that De Quincey's *taedium vitae* denotes a restlessness that follows power, luxury, and indulgence (De Quincey ch. 3) while Baudelaire's *ennui* reflects a judgment of modernity. Hence, I use De Quincey's ideas about violence as a consequence of *taedium vitae* to suggest Wilde argues that sensation-seeking leads to moral decay.

In her study on De Quincey, Roxanne Covelo explains that decadent artists often turned to subjects of violence if all traditional subjects had been exhausted (Covelo 84). She explains that De Quincey explores this in the context of a vicious cycle that forms between stimulation and restlessness in *The Caesars*, which is an important decadent theme (Covelo 84). According to Covelo, De Quincey's comparison of the violence of London to that of ancient Rome reveals a decidedly decadent take on violence, *taedium vitae*, and entertainment (Covelo 85). Rome's culture was excessive, and its entertainment quickly became violent. According to De Quincey, the surest sign of Rome's "degradation" was the transition from drama as the main form of public entertainment to circensian violence (Covelo 95). Because of the amphitheater, audiences were "rendered callous by the continual exhibition of scenes most hideous" (De Quincey, ch. 3). Essentially, the Romans required more and more stimuli to experience the same sensation or any sensation at all (Covelo 96).

Furthermore, De Quincey examines overstimulation and *taedium vitae* on an individual scale in Caligula whose cruelties are explained in terms of the restlessness that follows excess of power and indulgence (Covelo 99). He argues that *taedium vitae* led Caligula to indulge in increasingly vicious acts such as murder because of the cycle of restlessness and stimulation. The cycle is exemplified by how Caligula required executions in both his own halls and banqueting rooms, which jaded his senses and soon rendered these forms of "entertainment" insipid (De Quincey, ch. 3). I analyze Dorian's behavior as an example of this cycle to argue that Wilde

suggests that Dorian's fear of *ennui* and jaded senses as a result of *taedium vitae* drives him to murder Basil.

Literature Review

Much research has been done on *Dorian Gray*, but for the purpose of this essay, I have chosen four articles that touch upon the themes of morality, violence, and *ennui* to contextualize these three areas that are relevant to my study. Surprisingly, it appears to be the case that only two studies have focused on the concept of *ennui* in *Dorian Gray*. My essay will contribute to the discussions about *ennui* in the novel by highlighting how Dorian's fear of it drives him to violence. In doing so, I hope to add to the notion of *Dorian Gray* as a moral tale by underlining the complexity of Wilde's criticism of Victorian society. In other words, Wilde is critical of both utilitarian values and aesthetic dandyism as an escape from everyday life.

The first article is "The Conflict Between Aestheticism and Morality in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," in which Patrick Duggan argues that Wilde's novel is a cautionary tale that represents the dangers of living a purely aesthetic lifestyle. Duggan suggests that despite personifying the aesthetic philosophy of seeking personal gratification with abandon, this behavior ultimately kills Dorian who dies unhappy, and the novel thus represents a moral lesson (Duggan 62). According to Duggan, it is often concluded that Wilde promotes a purely aesthetic lifestyle in *Dorian Gray* since Lord Henry criticizes the stifling nature of Victorian society, arguing that it rejects life's most beautiful aspects. In Duggan's view, this is a shallow interpretation and he claims that Dorian instead embodies what he calls "unbridled aestheticism." Hence, "Wilde uses *Dorian Gray* not as an advertisement for aestheticism, but rather, he uses Dorian's life to warn against aestheticism's hostility toward morality when uncontrolled" (Duggan 63). He explains that constraint and forethought are necessities in Wilde's aestheticism, and without them, one will suffer the same fate as Dorian (Duggan 63). Because Dorian regrets his lifestyle and realizes the consequences of "unbridled aestheticism" and understands that he cannot be salvaged, Duggan concludes that Wilde implies one's actions should be considered before acting on an impulse (Duggan 67).

Dorian Gray as a cautionary tale is also the theme of Paul Sheehan's article "A Malady of Dreaming: Aesthetics and Criminality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." Sheehan suggests that Wilde's novel explores the idea that aestheticism and its pursuit of beauty and sensory pleasures can lead to moral decay and criminal behavior. According to Sheehan, the dandy closes the gap between art and life, and Dorian's transformation into his own "aesthete-dandy" exemplifies this. Sheehan explains that a connection between aesthetics and criminality can be discerned in the ideology of aestheticism since both art and criminality are anti-normative. Because society exerts constraints on

individuals, artists, like criminals, are tempted to transgress the laws that regulate their behavior. Hence, to find freedom, artists look to the criminal classes for direction. Despite the dandy not being traditionally considered a criminal figure, Sheehan argues that Wilde criminalizes the dandy by asserting no essential incongruity between crime and culture (Sheehan 337).

The first article that examines *ennui* is “Gothic Ennui: On the Cultural Relevance of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *Vathek* (1786), and *Interview with the Vampire* (1976)” by Michel Pierre Laffitte. He explores how the mentioned novels show examples of *ennui* and how they raise anxieties around matters in the cultural contexts they were produced. Regarding *Dorian Gray*, Laffitte investigates the parallel between Dorian’s degenerative development and nineteenth-century class struggles. His analysis of the novel is based on Baudelaire’s concept of *ennui* and he argues that Wilde criticizes Victorian society through this notion. Laffitte suggests that by characterizing Dorian as a morally corrupt upper-class gentleman, Wilde “demonstrates the classlessness and ethnically undefinable character of such cases” (Laffitte 3). He argues that the threat of *ennui* leads Dorian to escape his monotonous life by using drugs and visiting salon parties and brothels. Ultimately, Dorian’s suicide is the social critique made by Wilde since it shows that these behaviors are not limited to the lower classes (Laffitte 3-4).

Lastly, the article “The Importance of Being Bored: The Dividends of Ennui in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” by Jeff Nunokawa also discusses *ennui* and suggests that this state is constant in the novel (Nunokawa 357). He argues that Wilde’s dandy embraces *ennui* with sophistication and accepts desire’s cessation by romanticizing it (Nunokawa 361-362). Nunokawa draws from Wilde’s statement in his defense of aestheticism, “The Decay of Lying,” that restlessness is positive and is one of the objects of dandyism. To exemplify this notion, he brings up Lord Henry’s philosophy that passions should be brief. Consequently, Wilde’s dandy expresses a “perverse preference” for the state of *ennui*. This “distaste for the state of desire” becomes anomalous in comparison to the fact that Wilde risked his life for passion. Here, Nunokawa refers to Wilde’s homosexuality and his subsequent imprisonment, and as a result, he proposes that there is a discordance between the rejection of desire in the novel and Wilde’s defense of pleasures (Nunokawa 363).

Regarding *ennui*, I hope to contribute to broadening the discussion of how the concept is presented in *Dorian Gray*. Though, for instance, Nunokawa claims that the characters express a preference for *ennui*, I suggest that the fear of it that drives Dorian’s sensation-seeking. Thus I propose a different interpretation of Wilde’s use of *ennui* in the novel. In the end, Dorian suffers from depression and commits suicide when attempting to escape the monotony of everyday life. Thus, I argue that Wilde suggests the characters fear *ennui* to avoid the cessation of desire.

Additionally, like Laffitte, I argue that Wilde criticizes modern society through Baudelaire’s notion of *ennui*. However, my interpretation focuses on Wilde’s criticism of dandyism as a solution

to escape monotony. With this in mind, similarly to Duggan, I argue that *Dorian Gray* is a moral tale since Wilde ends the novel with Dorian's death as a consequence of his aesthetic lifestyle. This is particularly so since Wilde, as Sheehan argues, criminalizes the dandy by comparing the aesthetic lifestyle to crime. Therefore, I suggest that, through Dorian's death, Wilde presents a criticism of the Aesthetic Movement's reaction to modernity.

Analysis

In this analysis, I begin by establishing how Wilde characterizes Dorian as a Baudelairean dandy. The main focus is how Baudelaire's promotion of dandyism as a subversion of Victorian utilitarianism is reflected in the novel. Essential to my argument is how Lord Henry instills in Dorian the idea that sensation-seeking leads to happiness. Through that, Dorian is able to avoid self-denial and monotony which is promoted in Victorian society. Because of the similarity between Dorian's characterization and the tenets of Baudelaire's dandyism, I argue that this likeness allows Wilde to criticize Baudelaire's notion that dandyism is the solution to monotonous life. With Baudelaire's view of *ennui* as the malady of modern life as my basis, I suggest that Dorian's fear of it and jaded senses after his sensation-seeking drives him to murder Basil. Consequently, Dorian experiences the same anguish as the archetypal Baudelairean victim of *ennui*. I analyze Dorian's sensation-seeking by applying De Quincey's argument that numbed senses lead to violence. Since dandyism leads to a state similar to *ennui*, I suggest that Wilde criticizes Baudelaire's promotion of it as a solution to escape monotony. Additionally, by demonstrating that the blind pursuit of sensations results in moral decay, Wilde suggests that an aesthetic lifestyle is not necessarily virtuous. Thus, Wilde challenges the foundations of aestheticism.

Dorian as a Baudelairean Dandy

Firstly, to understand Wilde's characterization of Dorian as a Baudelairean dandy who embodies pleasure for pleasure's sake, Lord Henry's influence on him must be examined. Through Lord Henry, Wilde captures Baudelaire's notion that realizing all of his fantasies will enable the dandy to both escape and challenge the monotony of utilitarianism. Hence, Wilde exemplifies how Baudelaire's dandyism may be promoted as an escape from a modern society that rejects beauty. Lord Henry's influence is crucial since he inspires Dorian to seek pleasure for pleasure's sake. When he and Dorian first meet, Lord Henry states that if a man is to "live out his life fully and completely ... give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream ... the world [will] gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we [will] forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal" (Wilde 18). Here, Lord Henry laments the stifling nature of Victorian society that encourages self-denial and rejection of beauty. In other words, returning to

the Hellenic ideal would involve reviving the dominance of beauty which was much prevalent in ancient Greece, and therefore defy the monotonous utilitarian spirit of Victorian society described as “the maladies of mediaevalism” whose “self-denial ... mars our lives” (Wilde 18).³ To the aesthetes, materialism, which was the result of useful labor, hindered the appreciation of beauty. By rejecting this utilitarian spirit, one begins to live in the spirit of art instead of self-denial (Johnson ch. 2). Thus, through Lord Henry, Wilde echoes Baudelaire’s notion that the sole occupation of a dandy should be the “perpetual pursuit of happiness” to challenge utilitarian morals (Baudelaire 26). In Baudelaire’s view, living out every fantasy represents what is the finest in humanity since the pursuit of beauty counters the utilitarian bourgeois virtues (Baudelaire 28). Baudelaire states that a dandy should be original and not be constrained by social or cultural norms and as a result, he is free to create his own persona and define himself however he desires (Baudelaire 27). Therefore, since Lord Henry promotes the individual pursuit of passions, Wilde characterizes Lord Henry as an advocate of living out one’s fantasies to reject Victorian self-denial. Ultimately, Lord Henry’s character praises Baudelaire’s notion that yielding to every fantasy counters the bourgeois virtues that stand in the way of happiness.

After meeting Lord Henry, it is evident that Dorian adopts his philosophy of dandyism because of his desire for passion and rejection of utilitarianism. Because of this, Wilde makes Baudelaire’s concept of dandyism central to Dorian’s characterization. Dorian as the embodiment of the Baudelairean dandy becomes clear when he states: “you filled me with a wild desire to know everything about life ... I had a passion for sensations” (Wilde 47-48). With this statement, Dorian reinvents himself as a dandy who advocates sensation-seeking. Like Lord Henry, Dorian comes to believe that chasing sensations is an escape from Victorian society. Wilde demonstrates this when Dorian reflects that, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a dandy lifestyle will “recreate life, and save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having ... its curious revival.” Additionally, Dorian’s new lifestyle should “never accept any theory or system what would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience” (Wilde 133). Thus, Dorian rejects puritanism which, as Johnson defines it, emphasized industry, temperance, and useful activity; in other words, labor (Johnson, ch.

³ It should be noted that the neo-Romantics, who strived to revive medievalism, criticized the Industrial Revolution and modernity. Neo-Romantics argued that modern life alienated people from the natural environment (Kečan 461). Despite this, it is possible to interpret Lord Henry’s rejection of the “maladies of mediaevalism” as an opposition to self-restraint (Manganiello 27). Manganiello interprets it in terms of Matthew Arnold’s Hellenic and Hebraic ideal and my essay in terms of utilitarian self-denial.

1). Hence, Wilde characterizes Dorian as a Baudelairean dandy who pursues passions in rejection of utilitarianism.

Additionally, Lord Henry convinces Dorian that because he is wealthy and has no occupation, his only purpose in life should be the pursuit of pleasure. Hence, Wilde, like Baudelaire, makes wealth a prerequisite for avoiding a nineteenth-century utilitarianism that promotes labor and temperance. I want to point out here that Baudelaire's concept of idleness should not be confused with his definition of *ennui* as the malady of modern existence. Instead, it refers to the state of restlessness that prefaces aesthetic production (Patnaik 77). Wilde exemplifies this state with his characterization of Dorian as idle. At the beginning of the novel, Lady Brandon, a friend of Dorian's late mother, explains: "quite forget what he does - afraid he - doesn't do anything - oh, yes, plays the piano" (Wilde 8). From Lady Brandon's description, the conclusion that Dorian has no occupation can be drawn. Baudelaire writes in *The Painter of Modern Life* that a prerequisite for dandyism is both wealth and idleness (Baudelaire 26). By making Dorian a wealthy and idle aristocrat, Wilde characterizes Dorian as an individual who may be susceptible to the philosophy of dandyism. With Dorian's background in mind, Lord Henry instills in him that the search for beauty is his only purpose as a member of the upper class when he states that a "*grande passion* is the privilege of people who have nothing to do. That is the one use of the idle classes of a country" (Wilde 48). Consequently, Wilde connects the aesthetic life with wealth since Dorian has the means to pursue such a lifestyle. Hence, Wilde reflects Baudelaire's notion that rather than living in accordance with utilitarianism, pleasure for pleasure's sake is the dandy's only purpose.

While aristocratic idleness is necessary for the pursuit of sensations in the novel, the *ennui* that results from the monotony of a passionless life should be avoided. In conformity with Baudelaire's description of *ennui* as a miserable state resulting from utilitarianism, Wilde makes the fear of *ennui* the driving force behind Dorian's behavior. Wilde mirrors Baudelaire's endorsement of the pursuit of passions as a solution to utilitarianism and its self-denial in Dorian. According to Baudelaire, the utilitarian modern age destroys man's happiness and ultimately leads to *ennui* (Rosenthal 344). Like Lord Henry's wish that humanity will return to the "Hellenic ideal," Baudelaire describes the ancient times in "I Love the Thought..." as without anxiety and a time where people had "not a heavy weight to bear" (Baudelaire 19). The modern age, however, is miserable and man "feels in his soul a chill of hopelessness" and the people who embrace modernity are grotesque because they worship the "implacable Utility" (Baudelaire 21). The fact that Dorian avoids *ennui* by sensation-seeking becomes clear when he describes the dangers of *ennui* to Basil who questions Dorian's indifference to Sibyl's death. Dorian explains that Lord Henry told him about a philanthropist who spent twenty years of his life attempting to set a situation right and when he succeeded, "nothing could exceed his disappointment. He had absolutely nothing

to do, almost died of ennui” (Wilde 111). Here, Dorian’s explanation shows how he believes *ennui* is horrible and should be avoided at all costs. Therefore, one may argue that Wilde parallels Dorian’s fear of it with Baudelaire’s description of *ennui* as a miserable state. As I have demonstrated above, Dorian is already characterized as a Baudelairean dandy, but this addition highlights Baudelaire’s idea that avoiding *ennui* is essential for happiness since according to him, *ennui* is the result of the horrendous monotony of everyday life that rejects beauty (Laffitte 2). In “To the Reader” Baudelaire describes that “One creature only is most foul and false” and that is *ennui* (Baudelaire 7). Consequently, by having Dorian avoid it at all costs, Wilde makes Dorian’s fear of *ennui* a driving force behind his pleasure for pleasure’s sake lifestyle.

Ennui and Violence

Dorian’s pleasure for pleasure’s sake lifestyle leads him to pursue every imaginable passion. Eventually, he tires of them and starts to consider violence as aesthetic production. Consequently, Wilde intertwines sensation-seeking with violence. Dorian is constantly in search of sensations that are “at once new and delightful, and possess that element of strangeness that is so essential to romance.” Once these sensations cease to satisfy his intellectual curiosity, he leaves them with indifference (Wilde 134). For years, Dorian devotes himself entirely to perfumes, music, the study of jewels, embroideries, and other things until he wearies of them too (Wilde 136-137). In short, Dorian finds a new passion, and when it no longer excites him, he moves on to another passion in search of feeling the sensation of something that is “at once new and delightful.” Here, I want to refer to what Covelo describes as a prominent decadent theme which is that once all “traditional” subjects of beauty have been exhausted, the artist or dandy turns to sensations not yet explored and, if need be, subjects of violence (Covelo 84). In the novel, Wilde refers to the idea of violence as realizing an aesthetic desire because the “traditional” subjects have been exhausted. Wilde intertwines stories of notorious figures such as Caligula and Domitian whom Dorian calls his “ancestors in literature” with Dorian’s own life (Wilde 146). It is described how Dorian “felt that he had known them all, those strange terrible figures that had passed across the stage of the world and made sin so marvellous and evil so full of subtlety. It seemed to him that in some mysterious way their lives had been his own” (Wilde 146-147). By having Dorian admire these figures, Wilde connects violence and sensation-seeking.

Furthermore, Wilde’s parallel between figures like Caligula and Dorian becomes clearer when he reflects what De Quincey argues is the cycle of restlessness and stimulation which leads to moral decay. Therefore, Wilde demonstrates how Dorian’s senses become increasingly numb as a result of his sensation-seeking because of his fear of *ennui*. Hence, Dorian turns to violence in order to experience a sensation again. Consequently, Wilde echoes De Quincey’s notion of the cycle of

restlessness and stimulation to suggest that sensation-seeking leads to violence. It should be clarified here that it is not necessarily a comparison between Dorian and Caligula, but merely the effects of sensation-seeking that are similar. De Quincey exemplifies this cycle of restlessness and stimulation by examining Caligula whose *taedium vitae* drove him to indulge in increasingly violent acts: “[Caligula] blend[ed] his cruelties with ordinary festivities, and his daily banquets would soon become insipid without them. Hence he required a daily supply of executions in his own hall and banqueting rooms ... Even this became insipid ... Jaded and exhausted as the sense of pleasure had become in Caligula, still it could be roused into any activity by nothing short of these murderous luxuries” (De Quincey, ch. 3). What De Quincey argues here is that a person may turn to violence as a cure for *taedium vitae*. To him, the surest sign of Rome’s degradation was jaded senses and boredom which led to violence (De Quincey, ch. 3). Wilde describes De Quincey’s cycle in *Dorian Gray* when he explains that Dorian, “as Domitian, had wandered through a corridor lined with marble mirrors, looking round with haggard eyes for the reflection of the dagger that was to end his days, and sick with that ennui, that terrible *taedium vitae*, that comes on those whom life denies nothing.” Consequently, Dorian “looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful” (Wilde 147-149). By incorporating the cycle of *taedium vitae*, Wilde may be suggesting that in avoiding *ennui*, one searches for passions in order to experience the same sensation or indeed any sensation at all. Consequently, the senses become jaded and violence is the only experience that triggers them again. After all, *ennui* “comes on those whom life denies nothing,” meaning that because of his dandy lifestyle, Dorian has indulged in every fantasy and is now left with nothing else but a crime to realize his idea of the beautiful. As Sheehan describes in his analysis of the novel, aesthetics and violent crime are compared here (Sheehan 336), and I would like to add that rather than solely arguing this is a case of a parallel between artist/criminal, Wilde highlights that the turn to violence emerges from jaded senses and fear of *ennui* as a result of dandyism.

Indeed, Dorian acts on his violent thoughts and stabs Basil in response to being confronted about his immoral lifestyle. Thus, Wilde may be suggesting that sensation-seeking and numbed senses can drive the dandy towards violence. When Dorian is confronted by Basil, “an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over [Dorian] ... The mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him, and he loathed the man ... more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything” (Wilde 161). Dorian describes the sensation as a “curious feeling” (Wilde 166) and has thus again experienced something that is “at once new and delightful, and possess[es] that element of strangeness that is so essential” (Wilde 134). In other words, Basil’s murder may be interpreted as an attempt to escape *ennui* as a result of his jaded senses to experience a new sensation. Therefore, Wilde demonstrates through Dorian’s characterization that constant sensation-

seeking results in numbed senses. Hence, a dandy may turn to violence to experience the same amount of stimulation.

Still, Baudelaire does not fail to recognize the relationship between *ennui* and violence. However, violence because of *ennui*, in his view, is characterized by a frustration with utilitarianism, which Wilde reflects in *Dorian Gray* in a way that resembles his argument in “The Soul of Man under Socialism.” Baudelaire’s *ennui* is often characterized by what Hall describes as “violent outbursts, gratuitous acts done out of caprice” (Hall 92). Nevertheless, Hall explains that these outbursts are acts of sadism and rebellion against monotonous modern life (Hall 93) and exemplifies these acts with a quote from “Spleen” from *The Flowers of Evil* where “Hope, captured, like a frantic bat” strikes “her head against the rotting beams” (Baudelaire 149). Despite efforts to escape monotony, silence and gloom take over again and *ennui* wins over hope (Hall 97). In *Dorian Gray*, violence as a consequence of escaping monotony is best characterized by Sibyl’s suicide. At first, Dorian thinks Sibyl is wonderful because she realizes the “dreams of great poets and [gives] shape and substance to the shadows of art” (Wilde 87). However, when she does a terrible performance as Shakespeare’s Juliet since she has finally found real love with Dorian and does not want to cultivate pretenses, Dorian breaks off their engagement because he is bored with the reality of who she is. In other words, now that Sibyl no longer stirs his imagination, Dorian is unable to appreciate her beauty which he believes is the result of her craft. Hence, Dorian’s abandonment of Sibyl symbolizes the aesthetic rejection of things ordinary in pursuit of beauty. Sibyl becomes distraught and commits suicide, and while Dorian initially feels guilty and afraid when his portrait reflects his sin, he buries those feelings for the sake of avoiding the *ennui* that follows boredom with reality.

While Baudelaire addresses the relationship between *ennui*, violence, and utilitarianism, he never accounts for the fact that *ennui* may result from sensation-seeking, and ultimately, dandyism. Hence, Baudelaire overlooks the possibility that sensation-seeking may lead to the same feelings when experiencing *ennui*. Consequently, Wilde is able to criticize Baudelaire’s notion that dandyism is the solution to escaping *ennui*. The reason for this is that the fear of *ennui* as a result of modern life, which through sensation-seeking is promoted as part of subversion of nineteenth-century morals, leads to an experience of *ennui* characterized by the same anguish as Wilde describes in the novel. Rather than regretting driving Sibyl to suicide, Dorian chooses sensation-seeking and manifests: “Eternal youth, infinite passions, pleasure subtle and secret, wild joys and wider sins - he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all” (Wilde 106). Here, Dorian’s portrait not only bears the shame of his moral decay but also his sensation-seeking since he chooses to pursue every fantasy rather than acknowledging his involvement in Sibyl’s death. Ultimately, it is his sensation-seeking that leads to his depression.

When attempting to avoid *ennui* by immersing himself in the study of jewels and other passions, Dorian states: “For these treasures ... were to be to him ... modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne ... the terrible portrait whose changing features showed him the real degradation of his life” (142). With this quote, Wilde suggests that not only does Dorian pursue passions as an escape from *ennui*, but sensation-seeking is also what causes his depression. Though Nunokawa argues that Wilde presents his dandy as secretly longing for *ennui* because of the satisfaction that Lord Henry, for instance, shows when he explains desire’s cessation (Nunokawa 361-362), I contend that Wilde instead suggests the characters fear *ennui* to avoid the end of a sensation in *Dorian Gray*. To Nunokawa, Wilde’s characterization of both Lord Henry and Dorian is in line with the core arguments of the Aesthetic Movement where a sense of restlessness is necessary for aesthetic production (Nunokawa 362). However, instead of experiencing happiness when attempting to escape the monotony of Victorian life, Dorian suffers from depression and commits suicide. He is frustrated and exclaims that he wishes he could love, but he has “lost the passion, and forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself. My own personality has become a burden to me. I want to escape, to go away, to forget” (Wilde 211). Consequently, Wilde rejects the notion that self-denial causes misery since Dorian realizes he indulged in every fantasy, even murder, and has now become depressed. Ultimately, Wilde criticizes Baudelaire’s notion that sensation-seeking leads to happiness since Dorian’s depression is characterized by the same anguish as Baudelaire’s *ennui*.

Although it is possible to argue that Dorian’s depression is the direct consequence of his attempt to escape utilitarianism since his behavior is in line with Baudelaire’s notion that any passion, even destructive ones, is positive when attempting to escape modernity, Dorian’s guilt suggests that he instead regrets his violent acts of sensation-seeking. Thus, Wilde counters Baudelaire’s notion that seeking every passion is positive. Baudelaire expands on passions in “Gaming” where he admits to a fascination with gamblers despite the fact that they are addicted. At least they have a passion, albeit a horrible one: “Envious of these men’s tenacious lust ... My heart takes fright to envy this poor lot” (Baudelaire 196). Thus, Baudelaire endorses pursuing any passion despite the possibility of encountering a destructive one. In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde may be reflecting Baudelaire’s notion when Dorian visits opium dens to escape the sins he has committed. On the one hand, when he reflects on Lord Henry’s motto “to cure the soul by means of the senses” (Wilde 190), Dorian’s behavior may be viewed as an attempt to escape what Baudelaire defines as *ennui* because he consumes opium to combat his depression by seeking a sensation. On the other hand, the description of opium dens as places “where one could buy oblivion, dens of horror where the memory of old sins could be destroyed by the madness of sins that were new” (Wilde 190) suggests otherwise. Dorian states that “Innocent blood had been spilt. What could atone for that? ... he was

determined to forget” (190-191). Simply put, Dorian consumes opium to escape his depression and guilt caused by sensation-seeking which led him to murder Basil. Consequently, Wilde challenges Baudelaire’s claim that any passion is good.

In addition, curing the soul by sensation-seeking is what characterizes *Dorian Gray* as a moral tale. By recognizing the dangers of sensation-seeking, that is, turning to violence and depression, Wilde not only questions Baudelaire’s notion of dandyism as a subversion of nineteenth-century utilitarianism but the essence of aestheticism as well. The reason for this is because the blind pursuit of passions is Dorian’s only role in life, and after jading his senses he resorts to violence and acts immorally by murdering Basil. Dorian suffers because of Basil’s murder since he has acted immorally to experience a sensation. Hence, Wilde also underlines that the aesthetic lifestyle leads to immorality since Dorian turns out violent because of dandyism. In “The Critic as Artist,” in which Wilde criticizes utilitarianism, he proposes that sin and sensations “saves us from monotony” (Wilde 1023). However, it becomes clear at the end of *Dorian Gray* that Dorian will not escape his depression when he stabs the portrait in an attempt to kill his past sins, which were supposed to save him from monotony, to become free. The stab “would kill this monstrous soul-life ... he would be at peace” (Wilde 230). However, instead of achieving peace, Dorian dies and his dead body now reflects all of his sins while the portrait is restored to its original, beautiful, state. Hence, Wilde challenges the aesthetic notion that sensation-seeking is the solution to monotonous life. Dorian is therefore what Duggan describes as a failed example of living a purely aesthetic life since he regrets his actions and realizes the consequences. To Duggan, this is the reason why *Dorian Gray* is a cautionary tale since Wilde implies that one should consider the consequences before acting on an impulse and thus presents a more restrained version of aestheticism in the novel (Duggan 67). Not only do I agree, but I also want to add that while presenting a cautionary tale that warns about the constant pursuit of passions, Wilde suggests that the aesthetic lifestyle is not necessarily less immoral than living a traditional utilitarian Victorian life. Despite Baudelaire’s description of dandies as virtuous because they reject modernity, avoiding the malady of modern life, *ennui*, by sensation-seeking may cause the dandy to both experience anguish similar to *ennui* as a consequence of his jaded senses, and he may also descend into moral decay by indulging in violent acts. Consequently, Wilde underlines the immorality of dandyism and the aesthetic life.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde characterizes Dorian as a Baudelairean dandy since Dorian subverts the nineteenth-century utilitarian ideal of self-denial and monotony by pursuing his passions. Baudelaire describes the effects of monotony as a state of

anguish which he calls *ennui*, and Wilde's characterization of Dorian is in line with this notion since Dorian avoids *ennui* by seeking sensations. However, Dorian's behavior leads to what Thomas De Quincey describes as *taedium vitae*, Dorian's senses become jaded when constantly stimulated. As a result, Dorian turns to violence to experience the thrill of sensations again. Ultimately, sensation-seeking leads him to murder Basil Hallward, and Dorian ends up miserable. In other words, Wilde underlines how fearing *ennui* as a result of utilitarian life may still result in experiencing the same state of anguish. Because dandyism is promoted as virtuous and utilitarianism as immoral, through Dorian committing murder and becoming depressed, Wilde suggests that the aesthetic lifestyle is not necessarily less immoral than living an ordinary utilitarian Victorian life. Therefore, by demonstrating that the blind pursuit of sensations results in moral decay, Wilde highlights the dangers of fearing *ennui* and ultimately challenges both Baudelaire's and the Aesthetic movement's notion that dandyism is the ultimate escape from modernity.

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