

# The Relationship between Wilde and Nietzsche's Literary Philosophy: When Morality and Aesthetics Collide

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**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WILDE AND NIETZSCHE'S LITERARY  
PHILOSOPHY:  
WHEN MORALITY AND AESTHETICS COLLIDE**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. in English Language and  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche marked the modernist era in the fields of literature and philosophy respectively. Their literary philosophies revolve around the idea that art and morality are two separate fields of inquiry, with the latter having no right to seep into the former. Criticizing the traditional norms of morality in writings, these two modernist figures revolutionized not only popular and scholarly outlook on aesthetics, they influenced the trajectory of art development. Heavily relying on traditional Greek values of morality and art in their work, they revived the spirit of antiquity in a time when the Industrial Revolution has radically advanced and changed the way people live and think. The aim of this thesis is comparison between Wilde and Nietzsche's systems of literary philosophy, and whether aesthetics and morality operate within the same realm.

Key words: Wilde, Nietzsche, modernism, aestheticism, literary philosophy, morality, aesthetics

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## INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche are two thinkers and authors who influenced and marked the era of modernity through their writings and social involvement. Their lives are wrought with controversy, sometimes even scandal. This is why their oeuvre has often been the target of harsh criticism. One being a naturalized English writer of Irish descent, the other a German philosopher, each was critical of the historical and cultural circumstances that their cultures fell into, especially with regard to the social structure and values that have been cherished. Wilde, or at least his characters in *The Critic as Artist*, thought that “the English public always feels perfectly at its ease when a mediocrity is talking to it” and that “the English mind is coarse and undeveloped” (*Intentions*: 95, 209).

His society plays like *The Importance of Being Ernest* (1895), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), and *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892) have the same tone and motivation behind them: to criticize false morality of Victorian puritanism. Puritans believed that human nature is sinful and that one should refrain from hedonism of any kind if he wished to enter the kingdom of God. Often being considered artificial and over-accentuated in its mode of expression, this mendacity served as a perfect template for the literary form of drama for which Wilde became distinguished.

Although still remaining very critical of it, Nietzsche had more sympathy for his society, claiming that the Germans “are from the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow – *they still have no today.*” (*Beyond Good and Evil*: 132). Praising J. W. Goethe and Richard Wagner for their appreciation of the Greek values of musicality, form, physicality and heroism, they can be said to have belonged to the past that Nietzsche often praises in his works, best examples being *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*.

We can assume that Nietzsche considered himself prescient of the future he was talking about, given his notoriety and his claims such as: “*Nitimus in vetitum*<sup>1</sup>: my philosophy will triumph under this sign, because it is precisely the truth that has been absolutely forbidden so far” (*Ecce Homo*: 72). He believed that the mediocrity of his contemporaries did not have enough intellectual and spiritual capacities to grasp the greatness of his writings and their undercurrent philosophy. Nietzsche was an even greater critic of false morality than Wilde, especially the morality embodied in the form of the Christian dogma. Most of his books contain accounts of criticism toward the existing ethical system, one of the literal embodiments of this being *The Anti-Christ* (1895).

Both Wilde and Nietzsche were connoisseurs of art and aesthetics with great appreciation for Ancient Greece which, for classical scholars like the two of them, represented the ideal of moral life and aesthetic accomplishments. The bulk of Wilde and Nietzsche’s writings contains ideas on both ethics and aesthetics. In the case of Wilde, best examples of this being his critical essays in the form of a dialogue, *The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying* published in *Intentions* (1891) and his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). For this reason, I will primarily focus on these three works of Wilde. When it comes to Nietzsche, it will be necessary to make reference to most of his oeuvre. However, special attention will be paid to his best known books *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *The Will to Power* (1901), and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1891).

What is the relationship between aesthetics and morality? Why have the two fields of inquiry always been intertwined in the history of philosophy? Perhaps the two best examples of thinkers who changed our perception of the relationship between the two in modern time are exactly

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<sup>1</sup> We strive for the forbidden.

Wilde and Nietzsche. Although many academic papers and theses have been written on him, “Wilde is a writer whose reputation eludes fixity and demands fresh evaluation” (Beckson 2005: 2). The same counts for Nietzsche in the field of philosophy. Often being misunderstood and criticized for his ideas, he believed to have been born ahead of time: “The time has not come for me either. Some people are born posthumously” (*EH*: 100).

Since the issues taken at hand are recurrent throughout the ages and are very much alive today, possibly even more than ever, they deserve much reflection. Perhaps a contemporary insight into the *fin de siècle* literary philosophy will shed some new light on the modernist influence on today. Not long ago, we were at our own turn of the century, or rather *fin de millénaire*. What technological advancements, such as the global spread of the internet, smart-phones and social media, brought in terms of our mind-set and psychological outlooks on mankind and nature, could be on the same scale as the achievements having emerged from the Industrial Revolution. The line between the organic and the synthetic, between the real and the virtual, is thinning more and more by each day. It is as if the modern era has never really ended. This is why this thesis deals with two of the most prominent figures in modernist literature and philosophy.

Wilde believed that art has not any strings attached to morals. In the *Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he defended himself as an artist on the charges that his novel promotes immoral behavior by stating that “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” (3). But in his confessional letter, *De Profundis* (1905), Wilde completely changed his aesthetic philosophy in the light of the sentence for the transgressions he had committed by being involved in intimate relationships with men. Wilde’s sudden repentance which marked the disharmony between his way of life and literary philosophy in *De Profundis* reaches its climax. Presenting himself as

truly inspired by Christ, seems rather forced and unnatural because he ultimately lived like an Ancient Greek rather than anything else:

“He records a wish to write of Christ as the precursor of the romantic movement in life and of the artistic life considered in its relation to conduct. Then he praises the Greeks because they never chattered about sunsets; only to cry out at the end for the Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life; a chastened Pagan reaching out for the Soul in Things” (Chislett 1915: 359).

Considered in this light, Wilde seems to have been a *split personality*, leading one way of life in an almost holy fashion and then fully denouncing it as if the history of one’s life has suddenly ceased to have meaning. But the historical and political circumstances caused him to behave so. His being a cosmopolitan and international aesthete involved in romance with men on the one hand, and of Irish descent on the other hand, Wilde perhaps could not have lived differently. Nor could he have written differently. As Fussell states: “The hyperbolic style out of which Wilde fashioned his own truth is based on what he calls “*the wilful paradox*”, a form paradigmatic of the contradictions of his own temperament and of his instinct for sensing the contradictory nature of reality” (1972: 126). This is where we can see the link between him and one of his characters: “Dorian cannot live a truly free and aesthetic life in the pursuit of pleasure because he is a split self and forever attached to the ugliness of his portrait” (Livesey 2013: 266-267). Stuck with his *immoral ways* and yet immersed into that kind of life, Wilde was a man of many personas, much like his brother by the pen, Nietzsche.

Wilde’s most notable persona is his Dorian Gray. But unlike Dorian who tried to kill his conscience to hide from it his immoral acts, Wilde did the opposite. Embracing puritan conscience of his society, he tried to diminish the value of his life with the newfound faith in Christ by repenting. He tried to be his own jury and executioner in *De Profundis*. Wilde’s life fostered the spirit of classical ideals, while his death radiates the spirit of the Christian. Although



neither he nor Nietzsche acquired the fame they thought to have deserved in their lifetime, at least the fame which would have lasted throughout their lifetime, they live posthumously as two masters of rhetoric and aesthetics. Their philosophies overflow with life and spirit, much like the Greek, and naturally so, because both Wilde and Nietzsche were inspired by the ancients. They are both strong and exuberant figures that dye human history with the liveliest colors like the very best of our kind do.

In this thesis, I will prove by presenting some strong and persuasive arguments that Wilde and Nietzsche, from their two very different starting points, arrived at analogous philosophical systems. This work will also show that not only their characters, but they themselves had awareness of the inner-power that every individual possesses, and that their vision of individuality was transcendental and more important than collectivity of any kind. Furthermore, elaboration shall show that morals and aesthetics for them represented separate spheres of reality, and that nature belonged to a lower spiritual sphere than art because of the intellectual and creative powers with which man is endowed.

In order to do that, I will firstly outline the properties of modernism and its submovements whose representatives we find in Wilde and Nietzsche. Afterwards, it will be necessary to expound Nietzsche and Wilde's philosophical systems, the points of overlap and the points of divergence between the two. Furthermore, I will closely investigate into the relationships between morality and aesthetics, between aesthetics and nature, and finally between morality and nature. In the end, I will give a conclusion as to the similarities and differences between Wilde and Nietzsche's literary philosophies. Hopefully, this work will present a humble expansion in the body of literature that delves into the literary and philosophical issues which have arisen during *fin de siècle* era and which still awake the interest for inquiry in contemporary scholars

and readers alike. Moreover, this thesis can be viewed as the celebration of Wilde and Nietzsche's talents and contributions to literature and philosophy.

## 1. Modernism

*Modernism* as a stylistic formation grew out of the French *fin de siècle* or “end of the century” philosophical and aesthetic movement. The movement derives its name from the fact that it emerged from the transition between the 1800s and 1900s. In this sense, it marks the end of one era and the beginning of another not just in historical or temporal terms but in terms of values as well. Social and individual crises prompted by the challenges of a world drastically advanced and changed by discovery and achievement of man represented the core of this era. For this reason, for thinkers and artists alike it was the individual that came into the focus of inquiry once again just as it had happened during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

At the time, many technological, scientific and social breakthroughs took place, one of the most notable being the Industrial Revolution. Due to this, modern became one of the most tumultuous periods in history in terms of both theoretical and practical consequences, with the Revolution and wars prompting artists, thinkers and the masses alike to change the way they viewed the world. In other words, “the changes in the appearance of our life ambiance, predominantly caused by technological inventions, make for the next two or three generations face discontinuity and hardships in dealing with everyday rules of civilization”<sup>41</sup>.

This state of matter triggered a shift in individual and collective consciousnesses as man was split between his old ways of thinking and behaving and the new ones (Batušić et al. 2001: 183-184). In a sense, these dramatic changes led to a wider spread of cosmopolitanism, liberalism and the sense of personal freedoms and rights, all of which being the ideas that have emerged during the Enlightenment. Thinkers lamented the drawbacks of imperialism which reached its climax at the time. Soon it would become evident that imperialism could not be upheld as a standard

aspiration in global politics anymore when World War One ensued and the last of the empires fell apart.

Drawing on these facts, one of the most important traits of modernism is *nihilism*, a philosophical position which rejects all authorities, especially the ones related to morality and religion. This critical stance came from continental philosophers such as Nietzsche who played an important role in defining the era through its system of ideas. Notably, he believed that the modern world was marked by nihilism or the “loss of meaning or direction”, which was the direct consequence of there being “less and less difference among political parties, among religious communities, among social causes, among cultural practices – everything is on a par, all meaningful differences are being leveled” (Guignon 1993: 291). Nietzsche did not see any critical reflections expounded and firmly held by either intellectuals, or consequently, the public. From this sense of loss of meaningfulness in the world, in *The Gay Science* (1974) Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, thus committing himself to ultimate nihilism which for him represented a starting point for the emancipation of man.

Modernist artists tried to erase the borderline between nature and artificiality which was embodied in the achievements of the Industrial Revolution. This tension between life (nature) and art (artificiality) dominates the modernist texts. However, modernist writers dealt with this issue in a rather unorthodox manner. As Batušić et al. (2001) state: “Literary Europe displayed two opposing passions in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: encompass as vastly as possible the areas of empirical reality, and be as much as possible in opposition with it<sup>iii</sup>”. They sought to blur the line between these two aspects of reality as much as possible to make a statement. And the statement was that nature is subdued to man and to his creative powers, leading to the reverence of all forms of artificiality. One name especially stands out in this regard: “Were we to

investigate the genealogy of the idea of artificiality, we could not but mention the author whose worldviews make the strongest connection between the Romantic period and art scene around the year 1900. Aesthetic claims of Charles Baudelaire can be interpreted as an epochal voice speaking in favor of all forms of artistic autonomy”<sup>iii</sup>.

Imagination became a prominent element in defining humanity for artists and thinkers alike. Form over content, style over substance now played the crucial role in modernist aspiration to break all strings with the old ways of thinking. Yet another main property of modernism is that it focused on the authenticity of the individual as the only true way to live one’s life and fulfill the search for whatever one finds meaningful. Although modernism at large was marked by the reverence of decor, style and ornamentation, still some more narrow aesthetic and literary submovements emerged within the modernist framework which utilized these tools more thoroughly. Aestheticism and Decadence make two of those modernist substrates that are of relevance for this work.

## **2.1 Submovements of Modernism: Aestheticism and Decadence**

*Aestheticism* as a literary movement, or rather submovement of modernism, is better known under the slogan *l’art pour l’art* or *art for art’s sake*. Since it was given birth to in France, Aestheticism found its greatest promoters in Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier and a naturalist-converted-aesthete, Joris-Karl Huysmans. The literary impact of Baudelaire’s *Artificial Paradises* (*Les Paradis artificiels* 1860) lies in its investigation of how psychedelic substances transform individual’s psyche and consciousness. This creation of new visions of reality for an artist borders with how the public views art in general as the transformation of reality.

This topic owes not exclusivity to modernism because “since the Romantic period, especially since the end of the 19th century, we are encountering evermore texts which draw the reader into the psychological worlds disfigured by sickness”<sup>iv</sup>. We can recall Poe’s short story *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Hawthorne’s *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Scarlet Letter*, or Stevenson’s novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, to name just a few. Perhaps Baudelaire’s best known work, *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du mal* 1857), transforms and redefines the opposing categories of good and evil, dealing with topics such as debauchery, eroticism, corruption and hedonism. These two works belong to yet another submovement of modernism, Aestheticism’s counterpart, Decadence. Decadents believed that nature overwhelms one to the point of exhaustion and therefore celebrated hedonism, artificiality, creativity and skepticism.

Gautier’s *Enamels and Cameos* (*Émaux et camées* 1852) is a poetry collection in which the French poet utilizes the tenets of aestheticism, thus celebrating the value system behind the “art for art’s sake” parole. Huysmans’s *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain* (*À rebours* 1884) speaks about a nobleman, Jean Des Esseintes, last of his bloodline who, despising Parisian society, retreats to the privacy of his countryside estate. He becomes inundated with contemplation and arts, deciding thus to dedicate the years he has left to philosophy and aesthetics. Des Esseintes revels in man-made beautiful things, such as philosophical and literary works, gemstones, paintings, perfumes and poisonous flowers.

Gautier’s *Enamels and Cameos* embodies Aestheticist, while Baudelaire’s *Artificial Paradises* and *The Flowers of Evil* capture the features of Decadent literature. Huysmans’s *Against Nature* encapsulates the properties of both movements. The main difference between Aestheticism and Decadence is that the latter supposedly promoted immorality and decadent ways of life in a straightforward manner. On the one hand, *Against Nature* most probably represents the *vile* book

which poisons the mind of Wilde's young Dorian Gray (*Introduction to PDG: xv*). On the other hand, Wilde directly refers to Gautier's poetry collection in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (138). All of these facts offer proof that Wilde was greatly inspired in his overall work and life by the French writers and the literary movements of Aestheticism and Decadence.

Studying the abovementioned and other works of the period, followers of Aestheticism and Decadence are said to have deemed art to reign supreme over reality, life and nature. In this sense, these two movements can be considered as responses to Naturalism which celebrated nature and therefore represented counterbalance to Aestheticist and Decadence movements. In order to propound their passion for authenticity Aestheticist writers, Wilde and Nietzsche included, tend to use "sketches (instead of drawings), suggestion (rather than statement), sensual imagery, symbol, synaesthesia, musicality, aphorisms, fragments, non-linear narratives, catalogs, lists, etc.", while at the same time they "want to distance their subject matter from "real" and "everyday" life, and they do so by conjuring distant and exotic realms, fashioning fantastic and unreal spaces, and taking on forbidden and taboo themes" (Comfort 2011: 6).

Tackling the themes of gender, morality, sexuality, beauty and sin, Aestheticist and Decadent artist wishes to gain autonomy from higher authorities, such as religion, social mores and norms, and traditional morality. In other words, Aestheticist and Decadent art represents art created outside the realm of any kind of authority and pretends not to be one. Its mission is to be regarded and enjoyed simply as art and nothing else since "its sole objectives are to be beautiful and to give pleasure" (Comfort 2011: 7). This differs greatly from Naturalism which celebrated nature as the ultimate reality, thus taking a positivistic outlook to understanding the world around us. Followers of Aestheticism and Decadence saw reality as existing within one's psyche and consciousness.

## 1.2 Wilde and Nietzsche's Modernist Stance

On the borderline between Victorian realism and modernism, Wilde makes one of the most influential contributors to the Aestheticist or Decadent movement. Although both terms are used more commonly to describe Wilde's literary counterparts in other parts of Europe, specifically France, his being a connoisseur of French literature and in close ties with the French Decadents, Wilde was often identified as one of the most eminent leaders of the movement itself. Due to his flamboyant behavior, which made him more prominent in the intellectual circles of the day, he stood as high ground for criticism. Some critics of the period found the philosophy and the implications behind the whole movement very much unsettling and in violation with traditional morality and social norms. But this is simply because "modernist texts housed the sacred in secular containers, the symbolic content carefully enclosed in increasingly abstract forms increasingly valued primarily for their formal qualities and esthetic impact" (Faris & Walker 2007: 644).

One of the most passionate opponents of the Decadent/Aesthetic movement was Max Nordau, Austro-Hungarian-French social critic and author, who very firmly denounced everything related to it. In his voluminous work of a telling name, *Degeneration* (1895), Nordau criticizes almost all spheres of intellectual endeavor, with special interest in, and focus on literature and philosophy which promoted the 'immoral' values of *fin de siècle*. Not only that, the author, being a physician as well, analyzes how the Aestheticist/Decadent movement commenced, offering prognosis for the future, and the way this degeneration should be treated. This is what he writes about the "infamous" and "ignoble" Oscar Wilde and "his" movement:



“The ego-mania of decadentism, its love of the artificial, its aversion to nature, and to all forms of activity and movement, its megalomaniacal contempt for men and its exaggeration of the importance of art, have found their English representative among the ‘Aesthetes’, the chief of whom is Oscar Wilde” (Nordau 1895: 317).

But Wilde is not the only one who is so fiercely reprobated by the author on moral grounds. Nietzsche as well finds his place among the discredited. He becomes the subject of psychoanalysis based on the distinct rhetoric employed in his writings. Not one bit fond of the self-proclaimed Antichrist and immoralist, Nordau portrays the German philosopher as a lunatic in the following words: “From the first to the last page of Nietzsche’s writings the careful reader seems to hear a madman, with flashing eyes, wild gestures, and foaming mouth, spouting forth deafening bombast (...)” (Nordau 1895: 416).

The French author believed that the rapid technological development, urbanization and decadent art with its depiction of the basic human needs and propensity for spiritualism would change the psychological make-up of the whole modern society and awaken certain primitive human characteristics, such as the belief in the mystical and the irrational. Unfortunately, Nordau still based his writings on physiognomic factors rather than the more current and scientifically relevant psychoanalysis which Freud and Jung shortly developed; therefore, Nordau confuses Wilde and Nietzsche’s writings and their characters.

Both of their philosophies, being similar in voice and motive, are primarily revolutionary in nature. Wilde and Nietzsche believed that the era of *fin de siècle* should mark a paradigm shift in the spheres of both theoretical and practical endeavors in which man invests his potentials and energy. Science and religion, politics and arts, as well as all other spheres of life have reached the pinnacle of outright decadence for Wilde and Nietzsche, which they thought to be permeated with insincerity, falseness and sense of righteousness. This decadent false morality and sense of

righteousness which seeped into all spheres of human endeavor, Nietzsche traces back to the rise of Christianity. Wilde remains within the confines of the contemporary time, blaming Victorian puritanism for it: “Wilde’s aestheticism furthers his attack on conventional morality and on the Victorian idea that art must teach an ethical lesson” (Quigley 2011: 176).

However, both Wilde’s and Nietzsche’s opponents used their own language to disparage them and their philosophies by being considered decadents in the moral sense in their own field of inquiry. They tried to reverse the scale of the traditionally accepted moral and other values in a satiric and exaggerated manner, eventually becoming victims of their own inversions. Both of them saw far beyond the present, giving birth to ideas before the intellectual and public spheres could have grasped that they represented the next link in the chain of cultural and historical development:

“It also evokes the postmodernism of Nietzsche, the philosopher with whom Wilde is most often compared, in their transvaluation of values, in the second half of the twentieth century. (...) Nietzsche revealed value as a fraud, a tool of domination of some over others, on the one hand, and promoted a radical perspectivism or scepticism, on the other. Wilde, a figure of paradox and contradiction, participated in both modern value critique and postmodern perspectivism” (Gagnier 1997: 18).

Whenever and wherever we see strivings to make radical changes to a system of values that has been present for a long period of time, the leaders of the movement turn out to be the greatest victims of their program. Traditionalists saw Wilde and Nietzsche as true decadents and immoralists, pointing to this fact by quoting lines from their own writings or by condemning their socially unacceptable behavior. Just how much the man of *fin de siècle* was in dire need for a shift in values when it comes to all spheres of human endeavor including politics, culture, science and art, echoes through this schizophrenic state of the collective mind where the

traditionally accepted values begin to lack in effectiveness and meaning. Man starts to mock but cannot discard them altogether because these values pervade his collective's psyche and patterns of behavior. Wilde and Nietzsche managed to change the outlook on the universally accepted norms of thought and behavior through literature and philosophy respectively.

However, they both used very unusual and often radical means to achieve this goal – sometimes they ridiculed human nature by bringing it to a point of the socially unacceptable and alienation in their writings, at other times through their extraordinary public appearances. They persisted in the face of all obstacles, even with the historical circumstances in mind: one could be imprisoned if he stated something or behaved contrary to the norm. Both Wilde and Nietzsche thought their moral duty to criticize the established norms of thought and behavior. They adopted the role of critical thinker. He should exist in every society and every era, for he is the guarantee that if a system turns into a tyranny of any sort, he will be there to defeat the oppressor. His weapon is inversion, contradiction and paradox, just like the era of “modernism is the art of turning theatrical negation into at least the possibility of demystified affirmation” (Altieri 2007: 67).

If this is the approach that the modernist writer and philosopher use to propound their ideas of what they find truly valuable, then it is clear how the critics, like Nordau, might have judged such a philosophy as unorthodox despite the fact that “In its more rarified, ideal form, Aestheticism is the concern with developing a heightened awareness and responsiveness to life and art” (Pease 2004: 98). But the critics thought that the movement has degenerated into its own parody, where the promoter of such a system of values begins to propagate nihilism which questions everything established as valuable and takes it as essentially invaluable, through its inversion of values, or simply negative revaluation, offering no meaningful substitute for where now stands a canyon of meaninglessness.

However, most of Wilde's writing "corresponds to what Nietzsche called an 'extra-moral' realm in which the lies of fiction-making are more meaningful than the illusions and dead metaphors used to define a solid sense of social reality" (Halliwell 2001: 37). Through this program of portraying the absurd as meaningful and valuable, and that which is universally accepted as the absurd, Wilde plays the devil's advocate, sounding the trumpet for the revival of critical thinking. In other words, "Wilde's point is clear: cultural progress derives from the labours of individuals reaching beyond, isolating themselves from, the conventions of their time" (Clifford 2013: 214). Wilde's writings, public appearances and the life that he led represented exactly this divergence from the norm. Nietzsche in the realm of philosophy counts as another exemplar of this phenomenon.

Why this resounds as revolutionary is because "from Kant to Wilde, one can see an Enlightenment faith in a universal human subjectivity yielding to a modernist/postmodernist focus on the unique, the individual not as governed by reason but by time, emotion, or random circumstance" (Pease 2004: 99). The individual's subjective judgment of moral and aesthetic values makes the focal point of Wilde's and Nietzsche's philosophical systems. The aim of their program represents incentive for the creation of an individual, a critical thinker who does not accept any values or claims as set in stone. This offers the reason why one recognizes aestheticist literature as "marked by the rebirth of a character or an individual insight, by a dynamics contained within individual consciousness. The 'outside' world is static and devoid of any supra-individual development or moral specifications" (Keunen 2007: 283). At the core of this philosophy lies subjectivity. An individual grasps reality by probing into his private world, his mind and soul, instead of searching for answers in the already laid-out philosophical frameworks

that deal with metaphysics or morality. There exist no pre-established values which cannot be questioned. One stipulates them in accord with his own intellectual or emotional sensibility.

Based on this claim, one arrives at a world where objectivity as such does not present focus of inquiry any longer; instead, subjectivity takes its position because it reveals more about the world by offering insight into the workings of our own mind than the focus on the physicality of nature. The philosophical inspiration behind this point should inform that by focusing on individual differences or subjectivities we could at least come to a conclusion that all we think and do is colored by our subjective perception of reality. The vaster the corpus of investigative evidence on this topic, the richer our knowledge and appreciation for humanity will be. The history of the battle between subjectivity and objectivity is as long as philosophy. From the earliest Western philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, through Nietzsche, this conflict remains unresolved. Modernist era represents just one example of this epic battle:

“In the nineteenth century the novel progressively becomes less of a direct “sociological” instrument and the problematic hero of the realist novel changes in shape; from the late nineteenth century on, he seems to be assailed by a subjective process of disintegration. He becomes a subject that almost frantically looks for a solid subject position in a society that is progressively considered as oriented towards objectification” (Keunen 2007: 277).

Modernist hero reflects the modernist thinker. Solid psychological ground starts quaking for the modernist hero as his aspiration is to establish himself as a constant and not one of the variables in the universe. But he does not reflect just the modernist author but the reader of the modernist text as well. As it is claimed, “just as many modernist protagonists are fallen heroes left to make sense of a world full of semantic slippage, so the implied reader of modernist literature is also fallen”; but this is not the end of the road for him, despite his world seeming to break at the seams, because “taking moral dilemmas seriously is an ethical action in itself, an understanding

gestured towards by the modernists (...)" (Halliwell 2001: 4). By experimenting with the universally accepted such as moral norms, we see the shift of focus from the external world to the internal world, world of consciousness. Externalization of that which is by nature internal should have led to a deeper understanding of the world that the fictional protagonist and the real protagonist occupy. This is where Wilde sees the power of art:

"By focusing on art's impressive rather than expressive power, Wilde, again, locates art in consciousness, this time more centrally in the consciousness of the viewer, reader, or spectator of art. (...) Art is not so much the object as it is the process of aesthetic apprehension and, in turn, self-realization..." (Pease 2004: 109).

Therefore, Wilde's much criticized *Picture of Dorian Gray* does not only reverberate with the author's consciousness, which logically follows if the process of art creation necessitates the process of self-realization. It echoes with the consciousness of the art spectator as well because by interpreting an art piece he attains deeper understanding of his own inner world. Despite the differences between the artist and the connoisseur of art, art locates itself in each of their consciousnesses because art is a matter of collective identity, much like language, myth, folklore or faith. Its language is encoded in symbols and our task is to interpret the meaning behind them.

However, we should take notice that "all art is at once surface and symbol" and that "those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril" (*Preface to PDG*: 3). Art as a creative endeavor has a wonderful aim as well:

"That effect can only be to the good, not because art instructs people to be good or because art illuminates the rarely seen connection between God and man, but because art makes of people sentient, emotional, sympathetic beings whose consciousness of beauty diminishes their capacity for meanness" (Quintus 1980: 570-571).

It is therefore not important whether *Dorian Gray* teaches the reader a valuable (morality) lesson or not. Its importance consists in its being a literary artifact which can inspire one to become more humane by self-realization. Wilde opposes traditional morality stories where the categories of good and evil stand in opposition as black and white in the color spectrum. The hero exemplifies perfection and humaneness, whereas the villain embodies the opposite both in terms of psychological and physical makeup – besides his being a psychopath, he often bears a mark of physical imperfection as well. Instead, Wilde tried a different approach: his Dorian Gray appears without a flaw. As a matter of fact, he emanates perfection of appearance and spirit until he kneels before the seductiveness of vanity expressed through his own portrait. In other words, “It is precisely in the realm of experiential morality, rather than the abstract sphere of ethics, that modernists attempted to discover a passage between personal value and social action” (Halliwell 2001: 3).

Ethical learning should be arrived at indirectly through the means of art as it was present in, for example, traditional folk tales, myths and legends. As it is stated, “Wilde’s ethics center around the idea that the imagination *is* sympathy, and that the individual imagination fosters compassion for others” (Pease 2004: 112). This is indeed Wilde’s humanist approach to philosophy, art and human nature. He and Nietzsche tried to put the man back onto the pedestal of all inquiry: in order for civilization to grow spiritually, the world had to become anthropocentric once again, as it was the case in the time of the Ancient Greeks when all creative thought, whether philosophy, myth or art, revolved around man. One can just recall the Greek gods who portrayed the best and worst of humanity, the visual arts which used human body as a primary object of inspiration and creation, or the pre-Socratic philosophers like Protagoras who said that “Man is the measure of all things” (Plato, *Complete Works*: 169).

By conflating human nature with aesthetics and morality, and dealing with them in an unorthodox manner in their writings, Wilde and Nietzsche redefine constituent elements of those aspects of our reality. To be more specific, Wilde “makes much of Baudelaire’s idea of surface beauty as a sublime distortion, as a deliberately manipulated image. (...) genius consists of seeing through a cracked mirror, a mirror that shows the world as it is not, in a distorted, perhaps even disfigured way” (Fortunato 2007: 68-69). *Dorian Gray* therefore describes a possible reality, it does not prescribe as critics, like the one of the *Daily Chronicle* from 30 June 1890, thought when he stated that Wilde’s novel is “the book which will taint every young mind that comes in contact with it” (Beckson 2003: 72). Wilde’s and Nietzsche’s love for art which is visible in most of their writings, comes from their reverence of Ancient Greeks who for them embodied humanity in its purest and profoundest form through their engagement in arts, philosophy or science. Ancient Greeks were the people who lived in accord with their nature by following their instincts, intuitions or imagination which, as one may believe, exemplify what makes man human.

Nietzsche explicitly claimed that Christianity violated this natural law and caused the downfall of the European culture and civilization, which was best embodied in the Greeks. In other words, “for Wilde as well as Nietzsche there is no transcendental redemption of the soul through Christ but instead (...) immersion in the material world accompanied by an acceptance of fate (...)” (Smith 2004: 158). From this alone we can see the convergence line between the Greeks and these two authors: they all wholeheartedly accepted determinism which bordered with fatalism. Determinists regard that by the laws of nature everything follows as the consequence of all that has occurred before. Events stand to each other in a causal chain. Whereas fatalist presuppose that one cannot escape his fate; it is only logical to yield to it by accepting it.



Those who adopt these philosophical positions would claim that the good are good by their nature as much as the evil are evil by their nature; there is no religion, dogma or ethical system which could change that. For them, people who behave the way they are “supposed to” make hypocrites who do so for their own benefits and certainly not for the benefit of others. Then at least, “evil alone, embodied by the cruel Dorian seeking thrills at any cost to others, yet remaining handsome himself, is aesthetic” (Salamensky 2012: 58). Evil, just as good, constitutes our reality – this echoes as Wilde’s assumption in his novel and Nietzsche’s premise throughout his writings. To be what one is by accepting the natural order of things and placing oneself in the world, while at the same time not feeling the need to transform or change either oneself or the other in it, is in itself aesthetic. This could be termed the *aesthetics of life*.

But evil and good do not have negative and positive values by their intrinsic nature – we have ascribed to them their worth. They are not opposite, but rather complementary to each other. In this vision of reality, one can recognize clear influence of some Eastern philosophical systems on Wilde and Nietzsche. Within the Eastern philosophy, besides dualist theories, which claim that mind and matter are seen as two distinctive aspects of reality, there exist monist theories as well. They hold that the physical and psychological worlds represent emanations of absolute consciousness. As it happens, Wilde sometimes presents himself as one of the followers of Daoism who “resist, in the name of the larger energies of the universe, the impulse to separate oneself off from their vast, transformative flow by analytic thinking, assertive action (...)” (McCormack 2017: 74). Wilde commits to a similar philosophical position when he states that “to reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim”, and again that “all art is at once surface and symbol” (*Preface to PDG*: 3).

Nietzsche's writings on morality contain many references to Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. He denounces Buddhism on the ground of it being "a nihilistic turning-away from existence, the desire for nothingness" (*GM*: 63). At another point, Nietzsche mimics what a Hindu-Vedanta believer might say: "he cannot be hurt by anything done or not done; (...) he has gone beyond good and evil, beyond both" (*ibid.*: 98). Based on this claim, one can assume that Nietzsche's book entitled *Beyond Good and Evil* draws inspiration from this philosophical account. However, it bears importance to note that Nietzsche's general dislike of Eastern philosophies lies in their spiritual aspirations whose aim is negation of the importance of physical existence (as in the case of *nirvana*, the state in which one ceases to be reborn in another life because his soul has reached the pinnacle of development) and belittlement of the empirical (as in the case of meditative introspection which leads to understanding of the world rather than the senses). In other words, his firm belief in the empiricism of reality makes Nietzsche disapprove of idealistic philosophies, although of the three predominant religions, the Eastern offers "the best piece of realism" when it comes to morality (*ibid.*).

Some critics, comparing Wilde with Nietzsche, "picture him as a lover of the virtual, the chaotic, the playful, the erotic" (Reader 2017: 13). These traits however bring him much closer to the Eastern philosophy. Whereas westerners held that the world is divided into categories of *this* and *that*, easterners saw the world as being characterized by interconnectedness of all spheres of reality. Therefore, when we talk about morality, Wilde and Nietzsche believed that "if the dividing line between nature and culture is itself a cultural construct it makes no sense to deem one moral code better on the grounds that it is more 'natural' than the next. All forms of morality are then in some sense unnatural" (Mabille 2006: 2).

Logical consequence follows then in the form of the claim that “there are, in fact, just as many ways of being moral as there were paths of sin” (Mabille 2006: 171). This will presuppose a relativizing of a system of values which has been ground in the millennia-long tradition and practice. But had this system been just and effective, would human history brim with constant need for reevaluation of values? This is exactly the question that Nietzsche and Wilde posit. They use different platforms to explore this issue, among which the greatest import for this thesis hold aesthetics, morality and nature. How do these three fields intertwine in their writings, will be given more attention in the following sections. But first, a brief presentation will have to be dedicated to Nietzsche and Wilde’s philosophical systems.

## 2. Nietzsche and Wilde's Philosophical Systems

Since Nietzsche's thought system is characterized by the complexity of ideas and writing styles, it would take much time and space to display the semantic intricacies and nuances which manifest in the readings of his philosophy. Therefore, it will suffice to focus on the most elaborated tenets of Nietzsche's philosophy. What I want to stress here are points of convergence between Nietzsche and Wilde's philosophical systems which will enable further elaboration of my thesis. Most notable Nietzsche's concepts that will be tackled in the following sections include: nihilism and the death of God, revaluation of values, overman, will to power, master-slave morality, eternal recurrence, *amor fati*, and Apollonian and Dionysian elements. The aforementioned notions bear relevance for this work as to where Nietzsche and Wilde's literary philosophies overlap.

Nietzsche believed his era to be the age of hypocrisy. Perhaps the best-known example of double standards that he is condemning is best expounded in *The Gay Science* where he proclaims that "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (181). He thought that Christianity overwhelmed Europe as a religion by postulating such high moral values which one was not able to live up to or follow in day-to-day life. Consequently, in his *Will to Power* Nietzsche states that Europe has thus fallen into *nihilism* – a state where "*the highest values devalue themselves*" (9). Its radicalized form ensues when man realizes "absolute untenability of existence" as a result of "the cultivation of 'truthfulness'" which is in turn "itself a consequence of the faith in morality" (ibid.).

According to Nietzsche, Christianity inverts the natural order of things because it is the religion of "the weak and ill-constituted" (*WP*: 95). It posits the strong as the wicked and the weak as the

elevated. This is why he requires the “*revaluation of all values*” (*AC*: 11; my italics). On the line of convergence with Nietzsche’s idea, in *The Critic as Artist* Gilbert claims that what is usually referred to as sin “is one with the higher ethics” because of its “assertion of individualism” and “its rejection of the current notions about morality” (*I*: 129). Gilbert’s assertion could be regarded as an attempt to reevaluate the upheld traditional values of morality by inverting the categories of good and bad, where the bad acquires worth and the good becomes worthless. In this constellation of values, the hypothetical death of God logically follows.

Analyzing the philosophy behind the Christian ethical system, Nietzsche unearths the roots of what he calls the *master-slave morality* (*GM*). This idea implies that a man who says ‘no’ to all that is outside himself acts simply in order to react. His actions do not entail creation but only opposition. He follows slave morality. His ‘no-saying’ is a psychological phenomenon arising from the social order in which the master, the stronger individual, creates rules which the slave, the weaker individual, blindly obeys. At the same time, the master does not follow any rules but the ones he creates for himself. Such a social order necessarily creates psychological order of the same nature – the weaker individual will think and act like a slave and the stronger one will think and act like a master.

Nietzsche believes that true morality should inspire one to say ‘yes’ to everything inside him. The difference between the two is that the one who always says ‘no’ is negative in his approach to reality; he is ‘outside-oriented’. Whereas the one who always says ‘yes’ has a positive and vigorous approach to life; he is ‘inside-oriented’. In *The Critic as Artist*, recalling Aristotle’s thoughts about the proper function of a biological system, Gilbert states: “To have a capacity for a passion and not to realise it, is to make oneself incomplete and limited” (*I*: 117). Furthermore,

he continues so as to claim that “self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress” (ibid.:130).

This absolute acceptance of one’s nature leads us to another of Nietzsche’s notions: *amor fati* or love of fate (*The Gay Science*). In order to overcome slave morality and develop a potent and vigorous approach to life, one has to accept his destiny and the laws of nature without any emotional reaction to reality no matter how grievous or gay it may seem. Nietzsche remarks:

“I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer” (*GS*: 223).

In *The Critic as Artist* Gilbert makes a similar statement to that of Nietzsche. He exclaims: “Ah! it is so easy to convert others. It is so difficult to convert oneself” (*I*: 188). Not only is it hard not to be oneself, but it also requires strength to change what one is. Or as Nietzsche’s Zarathustra said: “Become who you are” (*Z*: 192). Although it sounds as an oxymoron, as if one could be not what one already is, Nietzsche tells his reader that he should free himself from the shackles of traditional morality and social norms which the common man has been taught to follow.

The concept of the love of fate is closely tied with Nietzsche’s notion of *eternal recurrence* (*Gay Science, Zarathustra*). Eternal recurrence entails the idea that history repeats itself infinitely. In other words, since time by its nature is infinite and events by their nature are finite, everything that is happening has occurred and will occur again infinitely many times. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche hypothetically challenges the reader to imagine a situation in which a demon tells him:

“This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, an in the same succession and sequence (...). The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!” (273).

Wilde does not speak of eternal recurrence, but there is an episode in *The Decay of Lying* when Vivian describes the three stages of interaction between art and life. He states that art starts as “abstract decoration” conveying the “unreal and non-existent”; life then “asks to be admitted into the charmed circle”; and finally in the third stage it exiles art “out into the wilderness” (I: 21-22). Wilde’s idea that this phenomenon occurred numerous times throughout history could be loosely compared to Nietzschean eternal recurrence, only with regard to man’s creative endeavors, specifically art history (Vivian mentions drama, novel and decorative arts going through these three stages). Wilde’s character states that one can always go back to the first stage where art is regarded as an abstraction and fancy, because “the proper school to learn art is not Life but Art” (ibid.: 26).

Drawing on the idea of eternal recurrence, another Nietzschean concept arises, the concept of *overman* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). Nietzsche’s character of Zarathustra, an ancient philosopher and prophet, is based on the Persian religious leader Zoroaster, founder of Zoroastrianism. This early monotheistic faith, predecessor to Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions, based its metaphysical and ethical beliefs on the dualism between good and evil, truth and falsity. To be united with the Creator, one had to choose the path of good and truth which conflate in terms of value. In the section 3 of “Why I am Destiny”, Nietzsche praises Zoroaster for taking “truthfulness to be the highest virtue” (EH: 145). Nietzsche’s character of Zarathustra is a prophet appearing once again in the loop of eternal recurrence to share with humanity his

invaluable lessons on morality and metaphysics among other things. According to Zarathustra, overman represents an overcoming of man; a creation that goes beyond all what man is and does; a creator of new values. He tells the people to “*remain faithful to the earth* and do not believe those who speak to you of extraterrestrial hopes!” because “they are despisers of life” (Z: 6).

Speaking through Zarathustra, once again we see Nietzsche lauding earthly life and one’s passion for it, instead of hopes for eternal life in the afterlife which the Christian faith assures to bring. Wilde’s idea of the overman is best encapsulated in the artist. In the *Preface to Dorian Gray* he states that “the artist is the creator of beautiful things” who “can express anything”; he has no “ethical sympathies” because “vice and virtue” are his “materials for an art” (3). Nietzsche’s overman should “write new values” (Z: 14). Wilde’s artist can “create a new world if he wishes” (I: 100). However, unlike Nietzsche’s overman who would substitute man, Wilde does not claim that the artist represents the embodiment of the overman, although he does consider him to be the elevated individual or “the *creator* of beautiful things” (*Preface to PDG*: 3; my italics).

What Nietzsche’s overman is characterized by is his *will to power* (*The Will to Power*). The notion of will to power represents the “driving force” of life because there exists “no other physical, dynamic or psychic force” (WP: 366). As it can be seen, the existence of the will to power as a constituent element of our reality is not only a metaphysical claim. It is also a psychological claim. One way for this potential to be utilized, as Nietzsche believes, is through the practice of art. In section 794 of his *Will to Power*, Nietzsche remarks that “Our religion, morality, and philosophy are decadence forms of man. The *countermovement: art*” (419).



In *The Critic as Artist* Gilbert remarks that “emotional forces, like the forces of the physical sphere, are limited in extent and energy”, but that “it is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection” (*I*: 168). Wilde is not preoccupied with the will to power, but with the imagination as a creative force. Furthermore, in *The Decay of Lying*, Vivian claims that “imagination is essentially creative and always seeks for a new form” (*ibid.*: 34). And in *The Critic as Artist* Gilbert resolutely affirms that “it is the imagination that enables us to live countless lives” (*ibid.*: 174).

One of the most important aesthetic notions that Nietzsche introduces in his philosophical system is the distinction between *Apollonian and Dionysian* elements which represent the “*artistic drives of nature*” (*BT*: 19). Much like nature is consisted of opposites, so is the art and artist. On the one hand, Apollonian artistic drive is characterized by the “static, contented, will-less contemplation” which creates “the world of *individuatō*” (*ibid.*: 104). On the other hand, the Dionysian force is best embodied in “intoxicated reality, which has just as little regard for the individual, even seeking to annihilate, redeem, and release him by imparting a mystical sense of oneness” (*ibid.*: 19). The Apolline artist is the epic poet, while the Dionysiac is the musician. Although Wilde does not utilize this terminology, his education in classic literature and his creative inspiration by the Greeks represent sensible incentives to compare his ideas on art and creativity with Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian creative forces.

At one place in *The Critic as Artist* Gilbert remarks that “the longer one studies life and literature, the more strongly one feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual” (*I*: 123). At another spot, he speaks of contemplation as “the noblest form of energy” (*ibid.*: 170). These two examples might be considered part of the Apollonian element Nietzsche elaborated in his writing. Contrary to that, in the *Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde

stresses that “from the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician” (3).

At one point in *The Critic as Artist* it is stated that in art connoisseurs art awakes “a form of divine madness” (*I*: 190). At another time, Gilbert claims that “emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art” (*ibid.*: 169). These three examples could be regarded as a Dionysian inspiration in Wilde’s writing, although we can see the Apollonian element imposing on it when Gilbert concludes that the intellectual criticism “will annihilate race prejudices, by insisting upon the unity of the human mind” (*ibid.*: 212). Wilde’s Dionysian force is therefore not altogether divorced from rationality or contemplation.

### 3. The Marriage between Morality and Aesthetics

Victorian period sought to impregnate art with morals and exhortations of good conduct because of “the puritan, philistine, and prosaic forces that dominated Victorian middle-class culture” (Evangelista 2009: 74). Victorian literature thus “expressed fears of social decay through racially coded metaphors” (Seshagiri 2007: 579). However, in the philosophical and aesthetic circles, Hellenism, as part of the Romanticist legacy, has just waxed and waned. Matthew Arnold, English essayist and critic, addresses this issue in his essays *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-68). He contends that the Western history and the English culture have been most influenced by two cultural spirits: the Greek and the Hebrew. The author maintains that “*strictness of conscience*” marks the Hebraic force, while “*spontaneity of consciousness*” exemplifies the Hellenic force (Arnold 2006: 97).

Arnold believes that the two forces constantly reemerge in the wheel of cultural development depending on what man needs more in terms of his spiritual growth. This is best corroborated by his statement that on the one hand, “Christianity was a triumph of Hebraism and man’s moral impulses”, while on the other hand, “the Renaissance was an uprising and re-instatement of man’s intellectual impulses and of Hellenism” (ibid.: 103). Wilde and Nietzsche took two of the most prominent positions among the promoters of this fresh Hellenism. Wilde contradicted Victorian propensity for moralizing because he believed that there was nothing morally wrong, or right for that matter, in art. As Nietzsche in his *Beyond Good and Evil* observes:

“(…) same holds for the aesthetic of “disinterested contemplation,” the seductive guise under which the castration of art is presently trying to create a good conscience for itself. These feelings of “for others”, of “*not for myself*”, contain far too much sugar and sorcery for us not to need to become doubly suspicious here and ask: “Aren’t these perhaps – *seductions*?” (33).

Art is therefore amoral – it has no moral but only the aesthetic status. Wilde likewise remarks: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.” (*Preface to PDG*: 3). For Wilde art is either appealing or not. When unappealing, art is badly wrought; when it charms, it is finely wrought. An art spectator might deem a certain character or his actions immoral, such as Dorian Gray, but this makes no relevance to art or the artist. Morality exemplifies right or wrong in isolated abstract conditions, but life and art involve specific experiences and one’s subjective impressions of them. Therefore, when the artist is creating his work of art, he is already participating in this act as a moral subject. But his is the position of superiority in that he can, unlike the connoisseur of art, divorce himself from the moral tradition that he has been raised in by inventing a fictitious world with its fictitious morality for the purpose of art.

Art thus subsists as fictitious, even when it resembles reality. And the realm of the fictitious eludes the categories of morality. The narrator, as a storyteller, as immersed in his *fictitious reality*, should not take any moral stance toward his characters and their actions. In that instance, he is *amoral*, indifferent to any sense of ethical duty to others. As Wilde claims, “No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style” (*Preface to PDG*: 3). Moreover, the artist is the creator of the world in which his characters abide. He can ascribe value to anything he considers worth ascribing value to. In other words, “the artist remains outside the dictates of social custom and is therefore free to use good and evil as colors, as material, for the purpose of creating a successful work of art, not for the purpose of affirming or denying or preaching” (Quintus 1980: 562). On this line, Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* reports that:

“(...) art – and *not* morality – is the true *metaphysical* activity of man; (...) the existence of the world is *justified* (*gerechtfertigt*) only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Indeed the whole book acknowledges only an artist's meaning (and hidden meaning) behind all that happens - a 'god', if you will, but certainly only an utterly unscrupulous and amoral artist-god who frees (*löst*) himself from the dire pressure of fullness and over-fullness, from *suffering* the oppositions packed within him, and who wishes to become conscious of his autarchic power and constant delight and desire, whether he is building or destroying, whether acting benignly or malevolently” (8).

Far from it that the artist is immoral; he has a vision of what a good society is or should look like. But he, as the narrator, is not a moral authority or a religious leader. He is not just a philosopher, (*philosophia*, gr. love of wisdom), but more so a fact- and truth-lover, *philaliteist*, (*philaliteia*, gr. love of truth). The artist states the truth even if it comes from the realm of the fictitious. Lord Henry makes a similar claim to Wilde's statement in the *Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all.” (183).

Wilde goes on and remarks that “all art is quite useless”, but that “the only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely” (*ibid.*: 4). Therefore, art should not be regarded as containing moral precepts, although Wilde sometimes seems to be utilizing his characters to achieve a moral impact by burlesquing his society through the words of Lord Henry who maintains that “art had a soul, but that man had not” (*ibid.*: 181). If this presents itself as a morally provocative statement to the reader, then Wilde's aesthetics is not completely void of ethical judgment, especially because his “*Dorian Gray* explores the risks of transposing art and life, of applying aesthetic judgements to people and conflating beauty with virtue” (Livesey 2013: 266).

In the *Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde warns that “those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming” (3). For Wilde, ugly meaning or an immoral streak cannot be found in anything beautiful. Those who do find the immoral in the beautiful are the true immoralists. The beautiful and the virtuous conflate into one and the same thing. This claim resonates Plato’s dialogue *Symposium* in which Socrates narrates about his teacher Diotima who taught him that when one “looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen—only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he’s in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with the true Beauty)” (Plato, *Complete Works*: 494). Furthermore, through Gilbert in *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde argues on the relationship between art and morality:

“Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. Even a colour-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong. Aesthetics, in fact, are to Ethics in the sphere of conscious civilisation, what, in the sphere of the external world, sexual is to natural selection. Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change” (*I*: 214).

On the similar line of reasoning, talking about the Apollonian and Dionysian elements, Nietzsche claims that “there are two conditions in which art appears in man like a force of nature and disposes in him whether he will or no: as the compulsion to have visions and as a compulsion to an orgiastic state” (*WP*: 419-420). Furthermore, the philosopher sees “art as freedom from moral narrowness and corner-perspectives; or as mockery of them” (*ibid.*: 435).

Through the character of Vivian in *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde states: “The only portraits in which one believes are portraits where there is very little of the sitter and a very great deal of the artist” (*I*: 48). Roland Barthes’s idea of the death of the author in Wilde finds its antecedent

opponent. Even in *De Profundis* Wilde repeats: “I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet” (2000: 57). Wilde occurs therefore as what could be termed a *decadent of literature* not a literary decadent, just as much as Nietzsche is a *decadent of philosophy* not a philosophical decadent. The two men privatized literature and philosophy by introducing subjectivity of their personas through their rhetoric and philosophical ideas in their respective fields of endeavor. My claim is nevertheless much contested: “Wilde’s perspective is resolutely affective, not expressive and Romantic, in its orientation toward the artwork, stressing the audience, not the artist, as the source of meaning” (Riquelme 2013: 133). Wilde himself observes that “it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (*Preface to PDG*: 3). But the artist is also the spectator of art, even if he himself created it:

“The only character that Wilde created—Dorian Gray—is himself. The only dramatic situation that he described—the sinner threatened by punishment—is his own. The only moral thesis that he seriously upheld—the necessity for forgiveness—is the only one that is of interest to his own case. The only denouement that he foresaw from his anguish—downfall and quasi-voluntary death—is his own destiny” (Merle 1948: 489–90).

Wilde once remarked intriguingly: “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks of me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages perhaps” (1962: 352). Dorian is keeping a secret from the rest of the world and is fearful that people might find out. The author is also keeping a secret from the world knowing that if it ever became public, he would be shunned and put into prison.

Wilde portrays art as imbued with power. Dorian Gray’s portrait has the capacity to absorb all the consequences of immoral acts that the protagonist commits. In this respect, Wilde converges in motif with his Celtic contemporaries, like Shaw, Yeats and Stoker. Long Irish tradition of

mysteries, mysticism and old folk tales becomes prominent in his novel and its macabre atmosphere evokes the spirit of Gothic literature. Wilde and Nietzsche believe in the power of art. So does Lord Henry who acts as the devil's advocate, instilling unorthodox ideas in Dorian's mind:

“Whereas common sense maintains that we keep morally pure by resisting temptation and avoiding sin, Lord Henry claims that the opposite is true. Self-denial poisons; sinning purifies. (...) It is only in Lord Henry's speech that action is a mode of purification; in the plot of the novel, it remains a mode of defilement” (Niederhoff 2011: 116).

Lord Henry's words converge with the Aestheticist and Decadence claims, especially with regard to the inversion of traditionally accepted values. Wotton's influence turns Dorian into a self-revering immoralist. He is the real master of words, a true sophist who knows that ideas can seduce if clothed in beautiful wording. Lord Henry plays the role of the critic. If his words and ideas could rewrite someone's life, then he is the true artist, the true creator. In his own way, he embellishes Dorian's life with spirit where there was only physical beauty. And what he leaves behind is his philosophy that perpetual activity makes life and art worthwhile. Even Dorian's portrait exemplifies this constant movement whenever it changes due to his acts. Lord Henry represents the critic Wilde is talking about in his *Intentions*:

“Against the superficiality, stasis and silence of the painter, the critic offers depth, flux and the linguistic music of ideas. Lord Henry's rhetoric is emblematic of the critic's power over art, and exemplifies the way in which the critic reinterprets and recreates both life and art, and therefore surpasses his 'brother of the brush'” (Mendelsohn 2007: 154).

When he decided to show Hallward the workings of his hands, Dorian said: “One day you introduced me to a friend of yours, who explained to me the wonder of youth, and you finished a portrait of me that revealed to me the wonder of beauty” (PDG: 132). This would imply that one



starts to feel vain because of the outer influence, not from an egotistical inclination or need for self-loving. The artist (Hallward) and the critic (Wotton) represent the two sources of constant nourishment for Dorian Gray's insatiable ego. And when the artist realizes what he has done, being the one thing that he had admired most, beauty arrests his life. But Dorian kills because he is dominated by a force different than that of the artist. This is the force of the critic, the aesthetic and moral philosopher Lord Henry whose words have the effect of a spell on Dorian Gray's consciousness:

“There are moments, psychologists tell us, when the passion for sin, or for what the world calls sin, so dominates a nature, that every fibre of the body, as every cell of the brain, seems to be instinct with fearful impulses. Men and women at such moments lose the freedom of their will. They move to their terrible end as automatons move. Choice is taken from them, and conscience is either killed, or, if it lives at all, lives but to give rebellion its fascination and disobedience its charm. For all sins, as theologians weary not of reminding us, are sins of disobedience. When that high spirit, that morning-star of evil, fell from heaven, it was as a rebel that he fell” (*PDG*: 160).

Dorian Gray's destiny is that of a beautiful immoralist. There need not have been anyone in Dorian's life who would 'charm him into immorality', because he was already his own person. As Nietzsche's Zarathustra would say, he became who he was (*Z*: 192). The contradiction that arises from Dorian Gray's character replicates the tenets of the aestheticist philosophy of art which Lord Henry expounds in his conversations with him.

One could ask himself: Is that which is moral beautiful? Through the character of Socrates, as was mentioned several pages earlier, Plato maintains that it is. Kant shares the same sentiment when he claims that “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good” (*The Critique of Judgment*: 228). When someone does something moral then it is beautiful on the account of it being appraised and approved by the society. But there is nothing aesthetically valuable in 'doing the

right thing'. There is only a sense of duty, pride and gratitude. The probability of these sentiments arising when one enjoys a musical masterpiece or revels in a beautiful sunset is rather low. Therefore, morality and aesthetics are not at opposite sides of a spectrum, but represent completely distinct perceptions of reality. Nietzsche in his *Will to Power* elaborates on this point in detail:

“That which is instinctively *repugnant* to us, aesthetically, is proved by mankind's longest experience to be harmful, dangerous, worthy of suspicion: the suddenly vocal aesthetic instinct (e.g., in disgust) contains a *judgment*. To this extent the beautiful stands within the general category of the biological values of what is useful, beneficent, life-enhancing (...). Thus the beautiful and the ugly are recognized as *relative* to our most fundamental values of preservation. (...) The beautiful exists just as little as does the good, or the true” (423).

In *The Critic as Artist*, Gilbert expresses a similar opinion when he asserts that “it is not merely in art that the body is the soul. In every sphere of life Form is the beginning of things” (*I*: 201). Therefore, beauty for the sake of beauty as much as art for art's sake does not make space for its own growth because it is empty of content and meaning. Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* serves as the prime example of this. On the same line of reasoning, being moral for the sake of being moral then counts as equally invaluable. *Dorian Gray* represents the prototype of the criticism targeted at the Victorian society's false morality. In other words, “Dorian Gray participates in the building of Victoria's Empire by proxy, by trying to establish his very own 'Empire of the senses'. (...) In this he is hardly to be distinguished from the rest of his society. He finds himself as part of a world that prefers form to substance” (Mabille 2006: 12).

It is frequently portrayed in the arts and popular culture that the female egotism would best be expressed in eternal youth and beauty which only immortality could assuage. Contrary to that, the male egotism is best exemplified in the search for wisdom and power which only immortality

could satiate. Wilde defies this traditional analysis of male and female vanity and presents egotism and self-obsession as the same for both sexes. But this yearning for immortality is not a modern phenomenon. Dorian acts as an alchemist who attempts to find the mystical philosopher's stone or elixir of life to trade his soul for everlasting youth and beauty. Lord Henry explains to him that "nothing makes one so vain as being told that one is a sinner. Conscience makes egotists of us all" (*PDG*: 88). This makes Dorian revel in his sinning. But Lord Henry, and not Dorian Gray, possesses the philosopher's wisdom:

"Unfortunately, since Dorian can never grow older, never, in other words, move beyond the youthful stage to the fully matured, passive, philosophical stage of the Charmides Self which his mentor has attained, he, ironically, cannot share Lord Henry's ultimate philosophical point of view, that of a contemplative observer of culture (...)" (Nelson 2011: 136).

Dorian Gray illustrates that eternal youth and beauty, if they could be attained, would only ruin the one that possesses them. Self-absorbedness caused his self-hatred, and in turn brought him to his ruin. The scene where Dorian comes home after the argument with Sybil and realizes that there was something evil about his portrait, demonstrates Wilde's belief that art reveals our flaws and immorality before our very eyes because it represents the best means for self-realization. But art *just* states, it does *not* generate value judgments. Art does not teach morality lessons until we internalize it and filter it through different modes of reflection. For this reason art does not function as a mirror in which the reflection reveals our flaws. The reflection serves as proof of the continuity of one's existence because the piecemeal of change makes it unnoticeable to the onlooker. However, art operates as a vision of reality and a vision of the future. It shows us the discontinuity of existence or how change in us occurs without leaving an immediately apparent mark.

In the language of C. G. Jung, art is our *collective unconscious*. The Swiss psychologist asserts that “the collective unconscious is a part of the psyche”, consisting of “definite forms (...) which seem to be present always and everywhere”, and which “have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence exclusively to heredity” (Jung 1968: 42). Analyzing world mythologies, Jung found a number of these mental representations or figures which the human creative traditions abound with, such as the child, great mother, father, god, the hero, the trickster, devil, wise old man, flood, apocalypse, birth and death, etc. He calls these “archetypes” or “primordial images” (ibid.: 57). Dorian Gray’s portrayal is neither that of the traditional hero figure nor that of the traditional villain figure. He possesses the traits of both: he is beautiful on the outside, but corrupt on the inside. When Dorian repents he acts as a hero. But transience marks this noble moment because shortly afterwards the fate of all villains befalls him – he dies infamously. In the case of *Dorian Gray*, consciousness and conscience are once again mutually related.

Disregarding for a moment the Aestheticist tenet that art and morality do not coincide, one could claim that in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, much like in any other story, moral implications follow. The argument being that our millennia-long tradition of telling stories, myths and legends with a message on what makes one moral has inscribed in literature as normative. In this respect literature obtains simply a different status in comparison to other art forms because it possesses both the diegetic and the mimetic function. And its medium, the natural language, makes the reason for this. Compared to other art forms which use different media to convey and express their message, the form of the literary medium can be mistaken to concur with its meaning. But one should bear in mind that as all languages so is the language of literature the language of symbols. Much like any art, the form of literary art depends as much on the expression of the

artist as it derives its meaning from the impression of the connoisseur of art. Therefore, once again Wilde warns that “those who read the symbol do so at their peril” (*Preface to PDG*: 3).

#### 4. The Marriage between Aesthetics and Nature

When we discuss the issue of aesthetics, we often discuss its relation to nature as well. It is not just art that is the subject of aesthetic judgment, but the world around us as well. Why nature is the object of aesthetic claims can be answered in two ways. Firstly, there is a theological view which claims that nature is either beautiful or sublime because it is among the “products of divine art” (*The Critique of Judgment*: 279). Deeming nature to be beautiful or sublime depends on whether we ascribe to it, respectively, “intrinsic” or “relative purposiveness” (ibid.: 439). In the first case it is judged based on the reflection of its form, while in the second case it is judged based on its possible intuitive use. Secondly, there is a secular view which claims that nature is beautiful because it embodies certain aesthetic standards that can make it be seen as a work of art of contingent natural processes. Not only that, naturalist theories of aesthetics see nature as an artwork in its own right which was is to be mimicked in art. According to this theory, we derive aesthetic standards from nature herself. In other words, art should mimic nature “since imitating is in accord with our nature, as harmony and rhythm are” (Aristotle, *Poetics*: 23). When it does not do so, the spectator is in disharmony with his perception or interpretation of the work of art.

The relationship between aesthetics and nature is the relationship between representation and reality. This creates a point where we can relate *Dorian Gray* to this ongoing philosophical debate. The conflict between representation and reality is of special interest to Wilde, this being the fact traceable not only in his *Dorian Gray*, but even more prominently in his critical essays. To him, nature is empty of its own creativity. Art is there to beautify the world through subjectivity, creativity, and human imagination. In *The Decay of Lying*, Vivian proclaims that “nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life” (I: 41).

If interpreted literally, this statement could be regarded as a form of idealism which Nietzsche does not appropriate in his philosophical system. In *The Critic as Artist*, Gilbert condescends on the naturalist aesthetics by saying that “to be natural is to be obvious, and to be obvious is to be inartistic” (ibid.: 201). Furthermore, Vivian presents nature as a nemesis of creativity and individuality, claiming that “out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal. One’s individuality absolutely leaves one. (...) Nothing is more evident than that Nature hates Mind” (ibid.: 5). On this last point, Nietzsche in his *Human, All Too Human* sides with Wilde in the following passage which is worth quoting in its entirety:

“In regard to knowledge of truths, the artist possesses a weaker morality than the thinker; he does not wish to be deprived of the glittering, profound interpretations of life and guards against simple and sober methods and results. He appears to be fighting on behalf of the greater dignity and significance of man; in reality he refuses to give up the presuppositions which are *most efficacious* for his art, that is to say the fantastic, mythical, uncertain, extreme, the sense for the symbolical, the over-estimation of the person, the belief in something miraculous in genius (...)” (80).

Therefore, it is not that the aestheticist artist exaggerates for the sake of exaggeration, despite the fact that “Wilde’s commitment to distortion, lying, and superficiality is what is central to his work (...)” (Fortunato 2007: 141). He does so for the betterment of nature and life, which to him, the aestheticist artist, are void of creative beauty when divorced from human nature. For, as Nietzsche spiritedly proclaims, artist “is after all a piece of reality, truth, nature: how should he not also be a piece of *genius in lying!*” (*WP*: 452).

Here is the space where the artist takes on the role of a god-like creator in the world freed from god. To achieve this one needs to use imagination or “expression being the means by which he as an artist declares his existence, the more artistic the expression, the more enriched the truth it conveys” (Buckler 1989: 112). And Nietzsche progresses into his fierce argumentation by

pointing out that Greeks, being the only real role-models for both him and Wilde, in their art “do not deceive themselves, but they deliberately and playfully embellish life with lies” (*H*: 82). And not only are nature and life then bettered, they become perfected realities, richer and more fanciful than they were.

Furthermore, in *The Decay of Lying*, Vivian says that “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life” (*I*: 55). This is where modernist critics found Wilde to be guilty of promoting immoral behaviors in his *Dorian Gray*, creating a fictional model for people to follow in the non-fictional realm. Nonetheless, Wilde would probably agree that what art presents as ugly in society has already become part of our character. Once again, art does not offer moral precepts; it is rather a vision of reality. Human nature does not change depending on historical circumstances but is constant and predictable. The artist, being an insightful individual, a visionary, recognizes this fact. Art can just push in the right direction which represents the path on which one becomes who he is. Or, as Vivian would put it: “Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose” (*ibid.*: 35).

But behind Wilde’s constant need to create tension between nature and art are more profound philosophical intentions. He is opposing the mechanistic philosophical current which postulates that there is an objective inquiry into the nature of things. In other words, “the extended ‘proof’ of the ‘law’ that Life imitates Art (...) is an engaging parody of that pervasive factualism against which Wilde’s essay is directed” (Morris 1993: 516). Wilde and Nietzsche fearlessly fought on the side of subjectivity using the methods of mockery, exaggeration, inversion, parody, burlesque, deception and condescension which characterize their rhetoric (Mabille 2006). But their opponents used their own tools to denounce their project of giving subjectivity rule over reality.



What is considered to be the greatest flaw of Nietzsche's philosophy is the fact that in his program *objective* or natural sciences have "given the subject power over the objective world, and the moral subject has been reconciled with the physical world"; however, as it is pointed out, "it is impossible to convert the object-constituting subject into an object itself: the fount of objective knowledge transcends the status of objecthood and cannot be made transparent" (Mabille 2006: 33). But this is what Nietzsche and Wilde claim – there is no such thing as *objectivity*. All we do is colored by subjectivity. This is the only factual claim that can be said of our reality. No science has the privileged status of being more objective than all others. The likes of Wilde and Nietzsche pointed to this social, epistemological and moral paradox. This is where subjectivity was to figure into the picture – aesthetic judgment, divorced from objectivity, was to be at least the one space void of any objectivity.

From there, subjectivity should have spread into all pores of human endeavor, including the objective sciences. But this task of Wilde's is not in conflict with the scientific world. As a matter of fact, it is scientifically inspired because the motivation behind it is inquiry into the human nature, specifically the mind, spirit and consciousness. In other words, "Wilde has merged the aesthetic with issues that regularly arise in Gothic writing, issues that are anthropological, aesthetic, and scientific: the creation of the new and the character of the human" (Riquelme 2011: 79). Once again, Wilde's inspiration is humanist in nature. This is best exemplified in the following quote:

"The reason that art does not hold up the mirror to nature in Wilde's aesthetics is that the prism of the mind is too absorbing, too interesting, not to become the central focus of art itself. Furthermore, the history of art is the history of consciousness in contact with its environment, including other art" (Pease 2004: 108).

From this complex relationship between nature and art, arises an aesthetics which finds and postulates its value standards within its own realm, not in relation to anything else. Based on that line of reasoning, that art and nature make separate kingdoms of value standards, Vivian strongly furthers that “Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror” (*I*: 30-31). Dorian Gray’s portrait is therefore not only a representation of him, but a curtain behind which lies the ‘real’ world that we have much questioned. It is the world of our own consciousness which leads one to self-realization through the process of introspection. As it is claimed, “the idea of volitional consciousness that gives form to encountered material is central to Wilde’s aesthetics. It is the interpretation of the world, not the world itself, that matters” (Mabille 2006: 51). The critical approach to life, or the utilization of one’s own consciousness, is the goal that art wishes to achieve.

Exemplifying on this subject, I will use an example from the contemporary world where nature and aesthetics intertwine to a point of virtual erasure of the boundary between the two. Plastic surgery has become an omnipresent occurrence in the past thirty years that very few of its supporters and practitioners question what it does to the person’s psyche in the long run. Not only that, one shows himself and nature disrespect when he nonchalantly meddles with what she has created. Social media have made it possible for everyone to make themselves look better by using, for example, the so-called photograph filters. Dorian Gray uses his portrait as a filter for his immoral acts. And he uses it in the best of his capacities if “art is supposed to *conceal* or *reinterpret* everything ugly” (*H*: 255). If this is the most sensible usage of art then, depending on the moral ugliness of the world that one inhabits, the equal of amount art is required.

## 5. The Marriage between Nature and Morality

When we inquire on the relationship between nature and morality several questions might arise: How are we to behave – in accord with our nature, or only under the roof of socially accepted ethical precepts? Do societal mores really influence, or more precisely, inhibit our drives to behave ‘as we were made to behave’? Research in the field of behavioral psychology is not conclusive on this issue. On the one hand, some people incline to behave in the manner they find most suitable regardless of whether they possess full freedom or the established laws prohibit their potential behavior. On the other hand, others base their behavior by calculating the ratio between the benefit and the punishment that their action could produce. If the benefit is greater than the punishment, they will opt for such an action. If the punishment outweighs the benefits, they will refrain from it. Yet others behave morally because they believe they have an inherent sense of moral duty to others.

It is maintained that those who wish to do harm to others will do so regardless of the circumstances. The assumption behind this claim is that some people are inherently good, while others are inherently evil. In other words, we all behave as our particular nature incites us to behave regardless of the moral norms that we were taught. We could rather say that our moral norms emerge from our inherent sense of empathy which is cultivated within the family unit and then transferred onto the greater, societal scale. They are shaped in concord with the progress and development of culture and civilization, thus reflecting our inner and collective needs. Moral norms are then thus adjusted so as to ensure maximum freedom for everyone, while establishing the legislative criteria which impede the abuse of one’s expression of personal freedoms at the expense of others.

But the question remains: Is human nature kind, warm and empathic, or rather ruthless, cold and selfish? It all depends on what attitude one takes to human nature. We can judge people solely on the basis of our encounters and experiences with them, or we can analyze the findings of history, arts, science, psycho-pathology, and other records on the workings of the human psyche and behavior and make an inference. Most commonly, we tend to combine the two approaches. Otherwise one would suffer from blind faith in mankind which could cause him disappointment and pessimism about life and the world. But how do Wilde and Nietzsche perceive the marriage between nature and morality in their writings?

Nietzsche offers much more explicit argumentation in this respect. To him, the main property of nature marks its “magnificent *indifference* to good and evil” (*WP*: 448). In other words: “*there are no moral phenomena, there is only a moral interpretation of these phenomena*” (*ibid.*: 149). What we deem to exist as *morality* is nothing else but the workings of our mind onto nature: “Indeed, humans gave themselves all of their good and evil. Indeed, they did not take it, they did not find it, it did not fall to them as a voice from heaven” (*Z*: 43). Through his relativity and defiance of all that is universally accepted as a norm in most societies, Nietzsche can allow himself to reverse traditional categories of good and evil and claim that “active sin is the true Promethean virtue” (*BT*: 50).

But this is not a doctrine of ruthlessness and inhumanity. He calls for ‘higher morals’ where people accept who they are and take responsibility for their actions, no matter how grave those might be, because that shows “*health of soul*” (*WP*: 135). For, as Nietzsche proclaims: “No deed can be undone by being regretted; no more than by being “forgiven” or “atoned for”. (...) every action is of identical value at root (...)” (*ibid.*: 136). Nietzsche’s perspective on the world is of pessimistic nature compared to all religious systems that he criticizes. But he is not interested in

false hopes and consolatory believes, but the truth. He states something with which only individuals of his caliber, interested in the truth, would agree: “If we look for the signs of moral light in the world around we will find “no justice in history, no goodness in nature (...)” (ibid.: 448).

Both Wilde and Nietzsche are essentially ‘relativists of necessity’ (due to rigid and, in their opinion, *false* and *unnatural* social and historical climates of their era) in terms of all things epistemic, moral, and aesthetic. Wilde’s philosophy borders more than ever with Nietzsche’s when he states through the character of Gilbert in *The Critic as Artist*:

“The mere existence of conscience, that faculty of which people prate so much nowadays, and are so ignorantly proud, is a sign of our imperfect development. (...) Self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress, and self-sacrifice a survival of the mutilation of the savage, part of that old worship of pain which is so terrible a factor in the history of the world, and which even now makes its victims day by day, and has its altars in the land. Virtues! Who knows what the virtues are? Not you. Not I. Not any one. It is well for our vanity that we slay the criminal, for if we suffered him to live he might show us what we had gained by his crime” (*I*: 130).

And what has Dorian gained by his crimes? He gained conscience, thus developing a soul. But this is a fault because it led him to his ruin. Paralleling it with Nietzsche’s philosophy, we realize this from the following: “All instincts which are not discharged outwardly *turn inwards* – this is what I call the *internalization* of man: with it there now evolves in man what will later be called his ‘soul’” (*GM*: 57). Therefore, due to his inability to externalize his urges and become what he thought himself to be, an overman, Dorian remains just a man, a mere mortal with his awakened humaneness coming into focus. Adopting Nietzsche’s viewpoint, we witness the downfall of the protagonist because the morality that Dorian Gray develops contains the “will to negate life”, which Nietzsche locates specifically in Christianity to which he opposes the Dionysian element,

the embodiment of artistic force and will for life (*BT*: 9). In other words, art – an emanation of life – stands in opposition to traditional forms of morality exemplified in predominant religions and philosophies.

Under this philosophical roof, Dorian dismisses the creative life-force in him and starts clinging to the acceptable norms of behavior which, had he understood the aesthete in him, denied his individuality, his propensity to become an overman. He discards the philosophy of the “(...) *sovereign individual* as the ripest fruit on its tree, like only to itself, having freed itself from the morality of custom, an autonomous, supra-ethical individual (because ‘autonomous’ and ‘ethical’ are mutually exclusive) (...)” (*GM*: 37). He becomes, as so many of the lot, *poisoned by herd mentality*, not realizing that “moral judgment and condemnation is the favorite revenge of the spiritually limited on those who are less so” (*BGE*: 111). Far more than that, “it is more comfortable to follow one's conscience than one's reason: for it offers an excuse and alleviation if what we undertake miscarries – which is why there are always so many conscientious people and so few reasonable ones” (*H*: 225).

Again, in Nietzsche, just as much as Wilde, we see an intellectual criticizing collective and individual moral hypocrisy which, combined with the lack of individual utilization of one's intellectual, spiritual and creative potentials, leads to personal and societal disintegration. Instead of becoming a critical thinker or creative individual like artist, one often chooses to conform to what the majority have established and accepted as valuable or true rather than create one's own values and truths. This extreme inactivity of the human mind and disregard for one's individuality lead to retardation or total cessation of mankind's cultural and spiritual progress. Among their other contributions, Wilde and Nietzsche fought against this mental and spiritual inertia as well through their writings and philosophy.

## CONCLUSION

Wilde and Nietzsche classify as members of the modernist era in literature and philosophy, more specifically its movements of Aestheticism and Decadence. What aestheticist and decadence followers held is that human nature as expressed in society and nature herself, are plain and meager in comparison to the power of human imagination. Artistic creativity improves nature and man by imbuing them with life and spirit. Another property of the movements echoes through their criticism of the widely accepted moral norms, as well as the celebration of natural instincts and indulgence in the beautiful. In other words, human nature divorced from all forms of repression represents the focus of inquiry for aestheticist artists and thinkers.

In this philosophical program subjectivity, individuality and creativity of human imagination carry the greatest value. One observes then that the artist or the creator of new realities plays the role of the hero or a higher being in such a universe. This new creative cosmos is liberated from the omnipotent being; he is altogether exiled from the metaphysical reality. Unlike god who failed to fulfill his promises of earthly justice and eternal life in the otherworld, creative individual, the artist, can bring new hope for life. Once again, as in the time of the Ancient Greeks, man becomes the most powerful force of nature.

For this reason, when we discuss aesthetics we frequently reflect on the topic of morality as well as nature. We could either say that aesthetics sometimes represents the bridge between nature and morality, while at other times morality serves as the bridge between nature and aesthetics. But it is important to notice that the aestheticist authors like Wilde and Nietzsche in their writings developed philosophical blueprints which separate these three fields of inquiry, each having its own set of pertaining criteria. They wished for them to become and remain individual

metaphysical spheres, where the laws from one reality cannot annul or diminish the laws in the other two realities. In the case of Nietzsche however, moral reality is reduced to or equated with natural reality. To achieve this aestheticist goal, we are to focus on the descriptive, subjective or imaginative aspect of the human mind rather than the normative, objective or the logically justified. But this was in disharmony with the intellectual and academic norms of Wilde and Nietzsche's time, which is the reason why the two of them can be considered revolutionaries in the literary art and philosophy, especially with their creations in the form of Dorian Gray, and Zarathustra and overman.

The question one might ask is whether Dorian Gray embodies Wilde's villain or Nietzsche's overman. Dorian Gray may represent Nietzsche's overman who, under societal influence, becomes Wilde's villain. Dorian uses a lot of strength to be loved and admired by everyone, and his beauty and charm are almost supernatural. His perception of himself, in Nietzsche's terminology, is that of an overman who did not have the capacities to follow his own life philosophy and aesthetics. His perception and interpretation of the world were very often in accord with the nature of the overman, but he does not manage to remain as such. He lived like an overman who turned into a man. This makes the opposite of Nietzsche's precepts. Be at least he inarguably became what he was.

Once again, what Wilde and Nietzsche's philosophy emanates is the spirit of the Hellenic beliefs and ideals. This spirit has been revived many times in the cultural history of the Old Continent whenever there was a lack of inspiration in the European cultural development. Based on the celebration of the corporeal, the material and the hedonistic in popular culture, one could observe the rise of the tide of the old Hellenic spirit. Our society bears much resemblance to the one in which Wilde and Nietzsche lived. Technological progress has helped man overcome both nature



and god; but he has not yet managed to overcome himself. Today, transhumanism presents one of the possible choices for those who believe that man can and should be improved. Hopefully, our *fin de millénaire* will not resemble Wilde and Nietzsche's *fin de siècle* in terms of political perturbations. More than a century ago, Wilde and Nietzsche managed to bridge the virtual gulf between the analytical and the continental philosophies. They stand as paragons for creative minds of their caliber to do the same today. For we have our own chasms to overpass.

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## ENDNOTES

\*For quotes from the original texts whose parts I have italicized, it is explicitly stated so in the brackets. Otherwise, the italics appear in the original.

\*The following represent original quotes from the Croatian text *Književni protusvjetovi: Poglavlja iz hrvatske modern* by Batušić et al. (2001) which I have translated for the requirements of this thesis:

<sup>i</sup> „Te promjene u pojavnosti našeg životnog ambijenta, izazvane mahom tehničkim izumima, dovode do toga da već u slijedu dvaju ili triju naraštaja nastupa diskontinuitet i nesnalaženje u svladavanju svakodnevnih civilizacijskih pravila“ (Batušić et al. 2001: 27).

<sup>ii</sup> “Književna Europa očitovala je u drugoj polovini 19. stoljeća dvije suprotstavljene strasti: obuhvatiti što šira područja iskustvene zbilje, i biti što više u opreci s njom“ (Batušić et al. 2001: 27).

<sup>iii</sup> “Istražuje li se misaono rodoslovlje načela artificijelnosti, nezanemariv je književnik čiji pogledi tvore najsnažniju sponu između razdoblja romantizma i umjetničkih zbivanja oko 1900. godine. Estetički sudovi Charlesa Baudelairea mogu se tumačiti kao epohalni glas u korist svih oblika umjetničke autonomije“ (Batušić et al. 2001: 176).

<sup>iv</sup> “Od doba romantizma, a pogotovo od kraja 19. stoljeća, sve su, međutim, češći tekstovi koji čitatelja vode u psihičke svjetove izobličene zbog bolesti“ (Batušić et al. 2001: 79).



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## **Appendix: List of Abbreviations**

PDG: The Picture of Dorian Gray

I: Intentions

BGE: Beyond Good and Evil

EH: Ecce Homo

H: Human, All Too Human

GM: On the Genealogy of Morality

AC: The Anti-Christ

BT: The Birth of Tragedy

GS: The Gay Science

WP: The Will to Power

Z: Thus Spoke Zarathustra