

# Juxtaposing Aesthetic Principles in Joris-Karl Huysmans' *against Nature* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2016

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet u Rijeci**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:186:609488>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-03-15**



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**JUXTAPOSING AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES IN JORIS-KARL HUYSMANS'  
*AGAINST NATURE* AND OSCAR WILDE'S *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY***

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and  
Literature and German Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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Rijeka, September 2016

## ABSTRACT

Even before Oscar Wilde revealed under cross-examination that Joris-Karl Huysmans<sup>1</sup>, *Against Nature*<sup>2</sup> was a major influence on his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the moral downfall of its eponymous protagonist, similarities have been noted between the two narratives and their similar aesthetic principles. Together they form a unison declaration of the *fin-de-siècle* aesthete who questions the hypocrisy of a society that hides under masks of refined social behaviour. Both novels question conformity, morality and the role of art, often causing enmity among their critics that emerge from all social classes. However, despite their similarities, both works show a unique understanding in depicting the aesthetic experience caused by interacting with objects of aesthetic value, or even creating such items. The protagonists are striving to actively explore the senses and various sensations in order to enhance their experience of life, which ends up evoking *ennui* in both. This exploration of Aestheticism, the study of beauty, is thus brilliantly merged with Decadence in its exploration of the artificial and self-indulgent behaviour, becoming an in-depth analysis of the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic Decadent.

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<sup>1</sup> Born Charles-Marie-Georges Huysmans, with Joris-Karl being the Flemish translation of his name (Hartnett 1977: 367)

<sup>2</sup> The original French title of Huysmans' book is *À rebours* with its English translation being *either Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*. Within this study, the work will consistently be referred to as *Against Nature*

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## INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde's stance on the role of art became perfectly clear when he stated that: "Art was made for life, not life for art", showing that art was, according to him, equal to a living force, and Wilde thus strived to express the genius of life in a form that was as real as any living being. (Sloan 2003: 17) To him, art was a way to create a reality in a form that was more permanent than life, and, indeed, Dorian Gray, after his wish had silently been granted that his portrait shall suffer the scar of ages and sin, while he remained eternally young, merged with a work of art. Wilde loved to distinguish the world of art from the real one by saying that the real world needed not to be talked about, since everyone was able to see it and, therefore, did not need to be talked about, while the artistic must be talked about because otherwise it would not even exist. (Gide 1905: 28)

Nonetheless, Oscar Wilde was a devoted Aesthete and social figure to such an extent that, like Dorian, his life seemed to have merged with art, and he was certainly being talked about as he appeared on his American tour wearing shorts, usually holding a lily or sunflower, and on top of it all having an equally eccentric hairstyle. (Hergešić 2005: 261) He even lamented to his friend André Gide that he put all his genius in his life, while his works only benefited from his talent. (Gide 1905: 49) However, he was not satisfied with such a limited success, and he constantly expressed his disappointed for being known more because of his mode of life than his works. (Hergešić 2005: 270) He needn't had worried long about this, for soon a scandal erupted in the event of the publication of his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that had cemented his presence in literary circles for many years to come.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* was directly influenced by the book<sup>3</sup> of the French Decadent author Joris-Karl Huysmans titled *Against Nature*, whose protagonist remains the ultimate representative of the aesthetic Decadence. Huysmans' protagonist Des Esseintes was partially based on Comte de Montesquiou-Fézensac, but he also embodied an idealized version of Huysmans himself, a version which was affluent enough to afford making all of his decadent phantasies come to life. (Hartnett 1977: 367) Many believe that the 'yellow book' that Lord Henry gave to Dorian in Chapter X, was indeed Huysmans' work, as after reading it Dorian completed his transformation into a Decadent, and started showing interest for perfumes, jewels and ecclesiastical vestments, similar to that of Des Esseintes, and ended up fully giving himself up to the world of the sensual aesthetic experience.

As it was already stated that Des Esseintes was actually an idealized version on Huysmans himself, it needs to be noted that Des Esseintes' childhood was, in some elements, presented less harshly than the bitter reality of Huysmans' early life. His biography mentions teachers that were antagonistically mean and who "bullied their young charges without mercy", while in the book those same teachers were transformed into docile monks, always willing to help and who never punished the children. (Baldick 2006: 28) Huysmans himself was a child that was never able to fit in with the children of the rich *bourgeois*, as his mother and stepfather were less well-off, so he was constantly shunned "on account of his patched and faded clothes." (Baldick 2006: 30) For such a child, the unattainable luxuries of Des Esseintes were only a far-off dream.

Through *Against Nature*, Huysmans was able to change, at least the artistic reality of his miserable childhood, which would certainly seem as a bargain to Lord Henry, an important character in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, because this Aesthete highly regarded the value of

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<sup>3</sup> Edith Hartnett stated in her article „J. K. Huysmans: A Study in Decadence“ that to call Huysmans' work a novel would be „a torture to the word“, while claiming it rather had the form of a „manifesto without a programm., (Hartnett, Edith (1997):“ J.K. Huysmans: A Study in Decadence“. In: *The Americal Scholar*. Vol. 46, No. 3, p. 367)

words, stating that they were more real than anything else: “Mere words! Was there anything so real as words?” (Wilde 2001: 19)

## 1 FIN-DE-SIECLE: THE TURNING POINT

„Nowadays all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors like married men.“

"*Fin de siècle*," murmured Lord Henry.

"*Fin du globe*," answered his hostess.

"I wish it were *fin du globe*," said Dorian with a sigh. "Life is a great disappointment."

(Wilde 2001: 142)

The French term *fin de siècle* which is used to refer to the end of the century could denote a multitude of prevalent concepts, as its meaning is rather ambiguous. Its meaning can range from a term that depicts something that is fashionable and modern, to its antipode definition which combines morbidity, decline and decadence, and in some cases even refers to Aestheticism with its well-known slogan '*l'art pour l'art*'. (Laqueur 1996: 5) Indeed, it seems as if in the aforementioned quote the term has more meanings as well, since Lady Narborough, the hostess, seems to be referring to the modernity of the time, which seemed to stir away from the strictly conventional decorum of previous ages, with a possible hidden connotative meaning of such a turn of events as being a downturn. On the other hand, Dorian's understanding of *fin de siècle* seems to embody the pessimism of a time concerned with morbidity, since he wishes for the end of the world.

Dorian's reaction displays the *ennui* that took over an entire generation that was bored with the time they were living in. (Laqueur 1996: 6) Many saw such a worldview as a crisis of humanity that had to be solved in order to prevent terror in the upcoming ages, as was the case with Max Nordeau, who characterized this pessimistic generation in his *Degeneration* as one



that abandons customs, morality and empathy, and he blamed the city life with its debauchery and sin for such an outcome. (Laqueur 1996: 12-13)

Both in France and Britain the prototype persona of the *fin-de-siècle* society was “the weary dandy with the cult of the self”, a fashionable figure that paid special attention to style. (Laqueur 1996: 10) Dandyism was at first solely about taste and simplicity”, but it evolved and was given a spiritual purpose as the “outward manifestation of the inner perfection of the self” by Charles Baudelaire, Theophile Gautier and J.K. Huysmans. (d’Hamilton: 3) Dandyism has also become a weapon which was deployed to shock, and now those writers did not only shock the audience by the obscenity of their writings, but also through an eccentric and innovative fashion style, as was the case with Oscar Wilde. (d’Hamilton: 3)

However, despite this gloomy predicament about the end of century, it seems that from a more distanced point of view that the atmosphere of the *fin-de-siècle* was not as dreary as it might seem. Humans often have a tendency to idealize the past right before major changes are to take place, and the general atmosphere in society of that time, was far from pessimistic since most editorials and magazines expressed optimism because of the scientific progress that enabled this generation to feel as if they were in a much better position than their ancestors, who could only have dreamt of such progress.

For the majority of Parisians *La Belle Époque* was the synonym for prosperity and they would remember it as a time when the Eiffel Tower was built in record time, the Lumière brothers’ made the first film and Baron le Coubertin revived the antic Olympic games (Laqueur 1996: 21-22) Therefore *fin de siècle* was for the Parisians not *fin du globe* as was the case with Dorian Gray, but rather *elan vital*, as the time was considered one of evolution filled with optimism for the future.

Nevertheless, despite this general feeling of optimism, it seems as if a minor, but highly influential minority took part in the remodelling of society, including affluent intellectuals and fanatics. (Laqueur 1996: 16-17) Most of them were described as either Aesthetes, Decadents or Symbolists. As time progressed the terms became more and more intertwined, and it can be said that the great interest in art and beauty of Aestheticism has gotten a new meaning and expression in form of the Decadent art “which presented the *fin-de-siècle* malaise (or the *maladie fin-de-siecle*) that haunted European intellectuals.” (Roth: [www.english.uwosh.edu/roth/Decadence.htm](http://www.english.uwosh.edu/roth/Decadence.htm))

## 2 THE AESTHETIC MIND

At this point it is necessary to define the main characteristics of an Aesthete, with consideration to the fact that the term often comes together with the term of 'Decadent' and ends up forming the 'aesthetic Decadent'. The reason why those two terms are often used together is that both Aesthetes and Decadents share a certain degree of alienation from the norm of society, combined with a great inclination toward aesthetic objects. However, the Aesthete devotes his whole life to the exploration of beauty and does so regardless of society, which he sometimes uses as an inspiration, but does not depend on it in his "amoral realm of art". (Cohen 2012: 214-215) This happens because the life of the Aesthete usually focuses more on the form of an artistic object than on the content, while attempting to explore the value of the artistic object in a detached and 'objective' manner, as *l'art pour l'art*. (Cohen 2012: 214-215) For the Aesthete morality is irrelevant, and comes second to the exploration of what is beautiful, and such a stance often leads to negative reactions from society, but despite the enmity, the Aesthete still keeps a somewhat good-natured approach toward society, finding beauty within it if it is present.

Oscar Wilde, who developed his love for Aestheticism in Oxford, left Oxford in order to carry his message of Aestheticism on to the society. (Sloan 2003: 9) But Wilde's very role as an Aesthete was paradoxical, as was everything with Wilde, because he tried to reveal general truths by putting them in opposition, with the purpose of questioning their validity. The paradox was that despite his opposition to a commodified art, he actually sparked the interest of the public for the acquisition of status symbols, and his role as an Aesthete soon evolved into spreading his aesthetic knowledge in a way similar to that of a trader helping a customer. (Sloan 2003: 10) It seems as if one of the many roles that Wilde had played in his life was that of an "Aesthete in the marketplace". (Sloan 2003: 10).

On the other hand, what was characteristic in shaping the aesthetic mind of J.K. Huysmans, was his complicated childhood characterized by the lack of attention from his widowed mother, and his troubled relationship with his mother was mirrored in his work in an peculiar fashion, as he in an act of revenge does not make mention of her at all in his autobiographical novel. (Baldick 2006: 27-28) This is relevant for the understanding of the mind of this author because Huysmans always felt a void within himself, that he often embodied in his characters, as was the case with Des Esseintes, and this void was filled later in life as he devoted himself to the “Mother of Christ” and only then “did Huysmans come to know that sense of security and tenderness which was so conspicuously lacking in his childhood and youth.” (Baldick 2006: 28)

For Huysmans, art was a way to escape the mediocre time he lived in, and before finally yielding to faith, he even probed the spheres of the occult in his desperate attempt to find novelty in it, but the Aesthete in him saw the lack of beauty in the occult unsettling, so he later on gravitated, but never fully conformed, to the standards of religion. (Hartnett 1977: 374) What is so remarkable about Huysmans is that regardless of whether one was fond of the content of his works, it was impossible not to notice the special attention he paid to Aesthetics and style in general. As Paul Valéry nicely put it:

“He forged a style that was peculiarly suited to his nerves: a language that was always striving after the unexpected, and the extreme, overloaded with adjectives perverted from their usual meaning; an elaborate monologue, a curious mixture of rare words, peculiar overtones, and poetic *trouvailles*”.

(Hartnett 1977: 367)

What made Huysmans stand out from many others, and what contributed to the fact that his *Against Nature* is now considered the ultimate representation, even manifesto of the Decadent

movement, is that although he was influenced by Charles Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval, he added to their Symbolism and Aestheticism the final ingredient of Decadence, which made Huysmans the missing link between the early *l'art pour l'art* writers and the new generation. (Hartnett 1977: 367) His aesthetic Decadent style can also be described as “a unique blend of the universal idiom of terror and his unique sense of the Flemish grotesque”. (Hartnett 1977: 368)

But what are the prerequisites for nurturing an aesthetic mind? Is such a mind a seemingly God-given gift or can anyone become an Aesthete? Well, the answer, as one might suspect lies somewhere in between. The reason why it is hard to understand the aesthetic mind is that aesthetic experience heavily relies on subconscious brain activity, and the fact remains that humans instinctively prefer a work of art that they have already seen before, whether they specifically remember seeing it or not. (Kieran 2011: 35)

However, the relativity between what is considered beautiful in different cultures goes to show that there is a certain amount of cultural knowledge necessary in order to recognize something as beautiful. The true Aesthete, therefore, learns about past times and different cultures, about Impressionism and Pre-Raphaelites, and even explores other cultures in order to be innovative. The more knowledgeable the Aesthete, the more he will be able to appreciate the underlying beauty of an aesthetic object:

“Aesthetic objects designed to reward appreciative activity are typically complex and dense so small differences in tone, marking, or articulation can affect the aesthetic character of a piece. Hence the more discriminating and flexible an appreciator is, the more likely she will be able to pick up on aesthetically relevant features of a work—ones the less discriminating among us might miss.”

(Kieran 2011: 33)

It is unlikely that one can encounter a better depiction of an Aesthete that pays special attention to nuances, while reviewing the aesthetic value of an object, than Des Esseintes. Whether one needs to discriminate between precious stones, beverages, paintings, perfumes or artificially looking flowers, one needs to look no further than this eccentric aristocrat. He himself despised those “whose gross retinas are capable of perceiving neither the cadence peculiar to each color, nor the mysterious charm of their nuances of light and shade”. (Huysmans 2004: 7) It is also important to mention that where his interests stopped, his ability to discriminate between nuances disappeared, as was the case with musical harmony: “but he was ignorant of harmony, of the technique needed really to understand a nuance, to appreciate a finesse, to savor a refinement with full comprehension.” (Huysmans 2004: 65)

Dorian Gray, who was a more simple man before succumbing to the deadly influence of the notorious Lord Henry, only started to express such artistic discrimination in Chapter XI, years after being given the ‘yellow book’ by Lord Henry in the previous chapter, the book that was deemed to be the influence on his change of character into a true Decadent, and which his critics took as evidence of books poisoning people, but which Wilde later on dismissed in his Preface by stating that: “There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (Wilde 2001: 3)

Huysmans’ influence was most noticeable in the change of tone after the chapter, as well as Dorian’s sudden interest for the study of perfumes, which at no way measured Des Esseintes’ extensive theory, but Dorian still displayed a praiseworthy knowledge of jewels and ecclesiastical vestments. However, it seems as if Gray’s greatest efforts in discriminating between nuances was given to the investigation of his aging portrait, as he would “examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead, and crawled around the heavy sensual mouth.” (Wilde 2001: 103)

## 2.1 Role of Art

“The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless.”

(Wilde 2001: 4)

The very role that art had for Wilde and all the aesthetic Decadents becomes clear while reviewing the abovementioned quote that was taken from the Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and that is akin to the French credo *l'art pour l'art*. The Aesthetes attempted to silence all their critics with this simple slogan, declaring with it that they had a right to use whatever they believed was beautiful, regardless of any moral boundaries of society, as long as it served the ultimate purpose of depicting beautiful things. In order to really enable such an ‘objective’ consideration of art, it was necessary for the artist to take distance from the work, and many sought to achieve this by ridding their works from autobiographical elements.

Wilde began his Preface with stating that: “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim.”, and later repeated this idea through the voice of Basil, when the artist who painted the portrait of Dorian, tried to explain why he would not make his painting of Dorian public by saying he put too much of himself into it, and expressed his anger with the tendency of art being overloaded with autobiographic elements and lamenting that: “We have lost the abstract sense of beauty”. (Wilde 2001: 3; 13) This stance is also metaphorically represented in the reversed roles of Dorian and the portrait, as the portrait represents his soul and becomes the diary of his life which “never leaves the room in which it was written”, as he told Basil only moments before leading the poor painter towards his death. (Wilde 2001: 122)

Numerous Wilde’s correspondences from the 1880s mirror such a prevailing attitude about the role of art in the writer, and show that “Wilde’s aesthetic ideal called for a new kind of reader, one who could look beyond the work of art as a mere reflection of the writer’s life or

opinions or of existing morality” (Sloan 2003: 17) But despite claiming that his art was concealing the artist, it seems he did put too much of himself into the novel as certain elements of the novel were used as evidence of his tendency towards Uranian love at his trial. After leaving prison and meeting with his friend André Gide, Wilde told him he had read his work and gave him an interesting opinion of it:

„Listen, my dear friend, you must promise me one thing. Your *Nourritures Terrestres* is good, very good, but promise me you will never write a capital "I" again.' And as I seemed scarcely to understand what he meant, he finished up by saying, 'In Art, you see, there is no first person.' „

(Gide 1905: 73)

Whether this statement was a continuation of Wilde’s firm belief in his aesthetic principles, or an advice in order to help his friend avoid the path he had taken, remains open.

In *Against Nature* Huysmans also followed the tenet of *l’art pour l’art*, and without a blink of the eye went about to write about women in a sexist manner, delved into the occult and displayed his terrible cruelty toward his tortoise that he decorated with such heavy jewels that the poor creature died under its weight, with the tortoise likely presenting a symbol for the uncultivated *bourgeois* that Des Esseintes despised: “Doubtless accustomed to a sedentary existence, to a humble life spent underneath [their] poor shell“, which made them „unable to support the dazzling luxury imposed on [them]“ (Huysmans 2004: 18)

For Huysmans, to spiritualize, mythicize and aestheticize were practically synonyms, so he ended up invoking spiritual experiences by means of Aesthetics. (Hartnett 1977: 368) This is why Des Esseintes constantly created and crafted like a true artist, giving himself to sensual delights which sheltered him from the ‘stupidity’ of the outside world. His style was rare,



exquisite and eccentric at the core, with a strong dislike for anything worshiped by the masses, and he had “a desire to have nothing in common with the profane, who were, for him, the utilitarian and the imbecile.” (Huysmans 2004: 23)

This is why his literary diet consisted mainly of Latin and French Decadent writers. He valued uniqueness, and imagined himself in past ages, where he believed society was not as brainless as at his time. In his works he also showed that he cared little for the accurateness and historicity of an event or whether something was considered to be beautiful or ugly, staying true to the *l'art pour l'art* views, and what was really important to him was that an object would “lend itself to aestheticizing”. (Hartnett 1977: 372) Due to his intellect and endless imagination:

“(…) he desired a work of art both for what it was in itself, and for what it permitted him to endow it. He wished to pass by means of it into a sphere of sublimated sensation which would arouse in him new commotions whose cause he might long and vainly seek to analyse.” (Huysmans 2004: 57)

The passage that really stood out in the book in terms of sensually affecting Des Esseintes was his depiction of Gustave Moreau's paintings of Salome<sup>4</sup>, in which Huysmans allowed Des Esseintes to transform the visual work by means of words, into a new experience of the painting by presenting to the audience the necessary background story and possible interpretation for its better understanding, thus expanding its original function.

## 2.2 Snobbish Mannerisms

The aesthetic mind, like any other, is human, and therefore prone to error. It is indeed possible to place some wrong judgements upon reviewing the value of a work of art. This often

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<sup>4</sup> Wilde also wrote a play „Salome“, however it was banned due to its controversial depiction of a biblical theme (Hergešić 2005: 263)

happens when a person tries to project the image of belonging to a higher social class since belonging to a certain class meant (and still means) following the style and aesthetics that separate that class from a lower ranking one. In such cases the aesthetic judgement can go awry, because the real aesthetic value can be clouded by an illusion of worth, and in this case we are dealing with snobbery, which means that irrelevant factors are considered in the appreciation of a work of art for the purpose of showcasing prestige and intellect. (Kieran 2011: 36)

In Oxford, Wilde seemingly transformed into an Englishman, with a specific Oxonian feeling of superiority: Wilde once stated that it was too easy to become a popular novelist because the readers are so uncultivated that it is almost too easy to write to amuse them, but hard to write a quality novel and he, therefore, prefers poetry since it has a more elite audience. (Mason 2011: 5) This feeling of Oxonian superiority, and the tendency of Wilde's family to attempt to make itself seem more upper class, made it almost too easy for Wilde to endow Dorian Gray with seemingly snobbish mannerisms, and his actions can thus be seen as those of a wealthy heir, who after becoming too vain, thought he was above both the law of people and God, just like Wilde himself ended up seeming to the judge during his trial.

However, what distinguished Dorian from the average snob was his habit of frequenting lower-class theatres, showing that regarding art he indeed was not such a snob as one might be too quick to judge, because he did recognize Sybil's artistic talent regardless of her lower social status and the dilapidated state of the theatre into which most upper class members would never venture. Dorian was thus a person who was feeling superior to others, but still a true Aesthete, who would not let irrelevant factors, cloud his aesthetic judgement.

It is, however, important to note that despite him feeling above most people, he never seemed to be superior to Lord Henry. What is more, the three male characters of the novel seem to be

going through a constant cycle of admiration: Basil admires Dorian's beauty while Dorian admires Lord Henry's strange intellect, and admiration can indeed give power to the person being admired, which is visible as Dorian seems to dominate over Basil, while being humble next to Lord Henry, who, in turn, seems indifferent to everyone. (Prinz 2011: 82)

Huysmans' *Des Esseintes* seemed even more intent upon being as much separated from the masses as he possibly could, and as a result he chose his aesthetic role models rather selectively. Being the last of his aristocratic family must have, despite the miserable state of his family line, have given him a feeling of being above others, which only further developed as he ended up getting the upper hand over most of his peers in terms of artistic and intellectual endeavour. He constantly expresses his bitter regret over never finding an intellectual match in his life, and he ended up hating everything that was in touch with those he found inferior. So what really prompted him to seek his inspiration in the Middle Ages was not only that he valued those precious aesthetic artefacts, such as paintings and sculptures, but also the fact that the *bourgeois* showed a lack of enthusiasm for it. (Hartnett 1977: 374)

He also showcased his feeling of superiority over what the masses enjoyed by describing Dickenson's romances as „those charming novels which are so satisfying to invalids and convalescents who might grow fatigued by works of a more profound and vigorous nature.“ (Huysmans 2004: 33) When those same novels did have a positive effect on his mind he highlighted that it was only because they evoked in him, by the mind's tendency to put things in opposition, not the representation of the English prude, but its opposite: debauchery and sin. Therefore, it appears that for *Des Esseintes* social factors did contribute to his aesthetic judgement, and that he was very biased, ridiculing anything that did not comply with his expectations. So, in the case of *Des Esseintes* it appears that it was primarily his Decadence “arising as it did in a disordered post-industrial world, [that] caused him to recast medieval

beliefs, or rather the artefacts produced by those beliefs, into a modern cult” (Hartnett 1977: 368)

### **2.3 The Aesthetic Experience**

The main feature of an aesthetic mind is its ability to enjoy and experience an artistic object more deeply than those minds that are unaccustomed to seeking the nuances that differentiated them. Even though the actual engagement with an artistic object is a primarily personal experience, it is still possible that the aesthetic experience becomes a social act. Depending on the type of aesthetic experience two different types of Aesthetes can emerge in the world, the first being Aesthetes who are outwardly oriented, as is the case with Dorian Gray.

Beauty is very important in the life of Dorian Gray, just like art itself is. His interest in aesthetic appreciation is noticeable in the décor of his rooms, as well as his interest in frequenting theatres and operas, which he often does not visit alone. However, after his transformation into a true Decadent, he is slowly slipping towards a more solitary behaviour, but not to the magnitude of Des Esseintes who embodies the extreme, one could say, even ‘over-exaggerated’ stereotype of the introverted artist. This introverted artist makes up the second group of aesthetically introverted individuals, who prefer to isolate themselves from society, and to appreciate beauty alone.

In his paranoia and neuroticism, Des Esseintes prefers to be in his private asylum outside of Paris: “sufficiently far away to prevent Parisian throngs from reaching him”, but he did not choose his location too far away from the capital for he knows that it is “the impossible, the unachievable that arouses desire.” (Huysmans 2004: 5) An extremely sensitive individual, who reacts to the slightest disturbance, he even made his servants wear noiseless shoes, in order to create the illusion that he was indeed completely alone in the world. The external

world disgusts Des Esseintes, as he had already found out that there was nothing of interest for him in its reality, so he “immerses himself entirely in the invention and dissection of the most esoteric fantasies of which his over-wrought imagination is capable.” (Hartnett 1977: 367)

He decorates every room to match a certain mood, making an impressive aesthetic experiment out of his dining room, in which he created a room within a room: “Like those Japanese boxes which fit into each other, this room was inserted in a larger apartment” in the middle of which he placed a long aquarium. (Huysmans 2004: 8) Such a placement isolates Des Esseintes even more than one could possibly imagine was possible from the outside world, and illustrates the many walls that he builds around himself to protect himself from the mediocre.

Huysmans was well-known for depicting his hatred for society and he famously did so in his introduction to *Certains*, where he blames the depraved environment for creating alienated artists that: “retrace their steps down the centuries and, out of disgust for the shameful promiscuities which they are forced to suffer, throw themselves into the abyss of the ages, into the tumultuous spaces of dream and nightmare.” (Hartnett 1977: 369)

Similarly, Huysman’s character Des Esseintes’ longing for past ages, led him to live like a monk, except that he had not a monk’s ability to endure suffering, and while decorating his room like a model of a monk’s room, he only created the illusion of its simplistic apparel, while using valuable materials instead.

### 3 HAVEN FOR THE DECADENT MIND

The Decadent, while often being both an Aesthete and intellectual, uses art in order to wage a war against the culture that prevails, aggressively expressing his deeply rooted contempt for society, his only communication with the outside world being the work of art he creates to express his abhorrence for the world. (Cohen 2012: 215) The Decadents went against what was considered natural in an attempt to distance themselves from the crude natural mode of men, praising artificiality instead: from drugs used to invoke artificial states, cosmetics to hide the natural face and unnatural carnal practices among other things. (Baldick 2001: 70)

After his visit to Paris, Wilde became acquainted with this French Decadent literature in which former Symbolism was merged with a strong dislike for the dominant systems, as the resistance to established system was seen as a means of expanding humanity's spiritual progress. (Sloan 2003: 15) This introduction into the Decadent movement had changed Wilde's perception of art, changing his aesthetic spirit so that he became critical of the crude society that needed thorough reconstruction because it lacked intellectual stimuli (Sloan 2003: 17) The publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890, which was inspired by this critical voice of the decadent Aesthetes caused outrage among the Puritans and Philistines, who noted the hidden ideas behind his paradoxes and were shocked by them, whereas connoisseurs and artists were happy to be freed from the "the hum-drum accounts of afternoon tea parties and the love affairs of the curate". (Mason 2010: 4)

*Ennui* and trying to escape the reality of one's life were not by chance a problem of the seemingly overly-pessimistic Decadents, but a symptom of a disease that was hidden under the Victorian pretence of a wonderful life. (Hergešić 2005: 274) The rage of the Decadents towards modern society becomes more understandable as one takes into account the strongly

utilitarian atmosphere governed by hypocrisy that prevailed, and it is no coincidence that the intelligentsia was among the seemingly oversensitive posers and snobs of the Decadent movement. (Hergešić 2005: 274) Wilde was blamed for bringing this deadly influence of the French Decadent Movement to England, even though his work was rather benign in comparison to Huysmans' strong misanthropic work. (Hergešić 2005: 274-275) As Dorian Gray swapped places with the painting, he became one with an aesthetic object, and became as artificial as the human form could possibly be. (Feldman 2008: 197) While realizing the fantasy of every Decadent by merging himself completely with an artistic object, this has obviously taken away all positive aspects of humanity from him, leaving a cold, but beautiful exterior where once a person had been.

The Decadent literature was also unique in its incredible attention to detail, as obvious in Chapter XI of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the protagonist demonstrates his obsessively detailed interest in precious jewels and ecclesiastical vestments in such a detailed manner, that one loses the sense of the whole of it. (Hartnett 1977: 372) However, this is nowhere near the extensively detailed aesthetic studies of Des Esseintes, who devoted the most of his chapters to such explorations with Chapter IV presenting his favourites from the Latin Decadence period, Chapter VI his favourite painters and his collection of artificial flowers in Chapter VIII.

### **3.1 Artificiality over Nature**

Des Esseintes fights against the human natural condition, and he opposes nature with the culture of the artist. (Hergešić 2005: 275) He shamelessly declares his hatred for nature and its sameness. The Decadents believed that a work of art was always unique, as it was forged by the original genius of the human brain, whereas nature never made anything durable, and in order to survive had to repeat itself constantly. (Gide 1905: 30) A replica is needed for the

survival of nature, while good art remained durable in its beauty, overcoming both the temporal and spatial limitations of the world. (Gide 1905: 30)

Des Esseintes argued that there was nothing that the human being with its modern technology was unable to recreate, and as his examples he lists that moonlight could be replaced with electricity, a waterfall by hydraulics, rocks by pasteboard, and flowers by papers. (Huysmans 2004: 9) As his most peculiar example he lists that women could easily be replaced by locomotives due to their similar “plastic beauty”. (Huysmans 2004: 9) His efforts to rid himself completely of everything that was natural were very meticulous, and he even paid attention to the fact that when choosing the colours of his new settlement, he carefully examined how the colours would change under the artificial light, since he preferred the night to the day because he felt more alone during the night.

Even his preference for darkness is unnatural, as it opposes the natural human instinct sleeping during the night, and Des Esseintes ended up living at night like predator, giving him certain vampiristic elements. Wilde shared to some degree Des Esseintes scepticism towards the sun, but this scepticism was milder than that of the protagonist of *Against Nature*. Wilde did state that: “Nowadays all thought is driven back as far as Norway and Russia, places where the sun never goes. The sun is jealous of art.” (Gide 1905: 46) Here the sun represents nature, whereby the opposition and constant feud between nature and art is again at the focal point of study.

### **3.2 Art and Morality**

“Now, the value of an idea has nothing whatsoever to do with the sincerity of the man who expressed it. Indeed, the probabilities are that the more insincere the man is, the more purely intellectual will the idea be, as in that case it will not be



coloured by either his wants, his desires, or his prejudices.”

(Wilde 2011: 11)

The late Victorian society was shaken by statements like the abovementioned one by Lord Henry, since it was not used to their presence in literature, and the question started to be raised whether literature could corrupt its readers. People feared that they and their children might be corrupted by *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the same way that Dorian Gray was led towards his demise by Lord Henry’s immoral statements and the ‘yellow book’ he gave him, from which he “could not free himself”. (Wilde 2011: 102) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was, likely, not really the best example of an immoral book because at the end, the evil gets punished, but that did not matter, since the critics and masses believed that Oscar Wilde crossed the line with uttering senseless paradoxes and implications of Uranian love. (Hergešić 2005: 263)

Wilde was famous for questioning the established order of society by using paradoxes to discover lies in truths. Throughout the novel it has been mentioned again and again, that people did not believe that Dorian Gray was engaged in any kind immoral behaviour because he always had a “look of one who had kept himself unspotted from the world.” (Wilde 2001: 102) It was indeed a common Victorian belief that sin and debauchery would show themselves on the face and outer exterior of a person, and sciences of physiognomy and phrenology existed that tried to prove the direct connection between the psyche and the physique, and it was such untruths that Wilde wished to uncover. (Gomel 2004: 83)

One can only imagine how certain people were of those beliefs after hearing about the *objet d'art* death of the notorious Decadent Joris-Karl Huysmans, as his face was gradually falling apart, becoming thus himself a grotesque image from his works. (Hartnett 1977: 376) Huysmans’ book was filled with such immoral and misanthropic worldviews that Barbey d’

Aurevilly has said about *Against Nature* that: “After such a book it only remains for the author to choose between the muzzle of a pistol or the foot of the Cross” (Hartnett 1977: 368) Indeed, it seems that he was right because both Des Esseintes and Huysmans sought refuge within religion at the end of their lives, even though both were unlikely to ever fully embrace any religion. Next to Huysmans book, Wilde’s seems almost tame, but it seems the latter paid the bigger price for living up to the mantra *l’art pour l’art*, and questioning the morality of his time.

## CONCLUSION

As Oscar Wilde said in his essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism*: "The moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist." (Mason 2011: 5) Both Wilde and Huysmans questioned the limits of art in a time when doing so was considered dangerous. Indeed, it seems that both these Decadent writers took no notice of the criticism that surrounded them, standing true to the aesthetic slogan *l'art pour l'art*. Nevertheless, it seems that the protagonists of both novels found out that their decadent aesthetic experiments ended up ruining them. As Dorian Gray tried to completely kill his consciousness, he ended up killing himself instead, while Des Esseintes' physical exterior was not strong enough to keep up with his decadent life with its exploration of the senses, and succumbed to maladies and neurosis due to his long-time isolation. Both of these novels represented the pessimistic *fin-de-siècle* mood with its main movements of Aestheticism and Decadence, while exploring the mind of the Aesthete that lived a decadent life.

Both novels are great representations of the period, and a more thorough engagement with Aesthetics through a comparative international approach to literature is in order, due to the fact that resources on *Against Nature* were sadly lacking in comparison to the novel it helped shape.

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