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ABSTRACT

This work seeks to display Wilde's art, aesthetic and moral principles and the practice of these concepts in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well as in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde's art and morality cannot be separated and have to be assessed together to understand his approach to art and morality clearly. In this study, Wilde's art, aesthetics and moral vision are discussed in relation to the Victorian period and are depicted as a protest to the aesthetic and moral views of the period. Evaluation of Wilde's moral vision and aesthetics in this respect illuminates his discussion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and provides a useful approach to the interpretation of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In accordance with this target, the depiction of the social dynamics of the Victorian Era is followed by a brief discussion of Victorian moral values, which developed under the influence of this social structure. Later Wilde's moral principles that appeared as the antithesis of Victorian morality are assessed and then prior to the literary exploration of Wilde, in order to contextualise him in the period, the observation of Victorian literature is included in the discussion. Subsequently, Wilde's art and aesthetics, which developed in this period, are analyzed bearing his relationship to aesthetic and decadent traditions in mind. Later on, the aesthetic and moral values he adopted in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are analyzed as a rejection of Victorian moral and aesthetic values; his refusal of conventional Victorian values is investigated by utilizing details from his works as a source for the argument.

ÖZET

Bu çalışma Wilde'in sanatı, estetik anlayışı ve ahlak anlayışı ilkeleri ile onların uygulamalarını *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ve yine kendi oyunu olan *The Importance of Being Earnest*'ta incelemeyi amaçlar. Wilde'in sanat ve ahlak anlayışı birbirinden ayrılamaz ve Wilde'in sanata ve ahlaka yaklaşımını net bir şekilde anlayabilmek için birlikte değerlendirilmeleri gerekir. Bu çalışmada Wilde'in sanatı, estetik ve ahlak anlayışı Viktorya Dönemi ile olan bağlantısı çerçevesinde tartışılır ve yine dönemin estetik ve ahlak anlayışına karşıt bir duruş olarak incelenir. Bu bağlamda Wilde'in ahlaki görüşü ve estetik anlayışı, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'deki tartışmaya ışık tutar ve *The Importance of Being Earnest*'in yorumlanmasına faydalı bir yaklaşım sağlar. Bu hedefle bağlantılı olarak, tezde Viktorya Dönemi'nin ahlaki ve estetik yargılarını şekillendiren sosyal dinamikler betimlendikten sonra bu sosyal yapı etkisinde gelişen Viktorya Dönemi ahlak anlayışı kısaca irdelenir. Daha sonra Wilde'in Viktorya dönemi ahlakına karşı sav olarak ortaya çıkan ahlak anlayışı değerlendirilir ve Wilde'in edebi açıdan incelenmesinden önce, onu kendi dönemi içinde bir bağlama yerleştirmek adına Viktorya dönemi edebiyatı incelemesi irdelemeye dahil edilir. Akabinde Wilde'in bu dönemde gelişen sanat ve estetik anlayışı onun estetik ve dekadan hareketlerle ilişkisi göz önüne alınarak incelenir. Sonrasında, Wilde'in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ve *The Importance of Being Earnest*'ta benimsediği estetik ve ahlaki değerler, Viktorya Dönemi'ne ait estetik ve ahlaki değerlere bir ret olarak çözümlenir; alışılmış Viktorya değerlerini reddi ise eserlerindeki ayrıntıları kullanarak sava kaynak olacak şekilde mercek altına alınır.

I. INTRODUCTION

Interpretation of Oscar Wilde's moral vision and aesthetic principles has always been a challenging task that creates a great deal of controversy. The difficulty comes from the divergence between his own theories and the values of the period he lived in. In the exploration of Wilde, it is crucial to be aware of the fact that his moral values and aesthetics, which will be explored in this study, depict his rebellion against Victorian expectations of ethics and aesthetics. In order to understand Wilde's art and aesthetics, the two should be studied together. As they cannot be separated, in order to contextualise Wilde, a clear analysis of Victorian period is necessary.

For this reason in this study, exploration of Wilde begins with the general overview of Victorian social background. Victorian Era (1830-1901) can be considered as a transition process that involved many opposing notions that were found within each other. The Era, spanning a long period, was host to unfamiliar changes in many realms like the economy, politics, and science. These rapid changes led to the creation of different dynamics in the social life and, eventually a rigid moral code, which was known as "Victorian morality", developed.

Wilde feverishly criticised Victorian morality and refused to be a part of this system. Because of his rejection of the conventional codes, he was accused of being immoral. Despite these accusations, he developed his own moral vision which was the exact opposite of Victorian ethics. As his morality is considered as a rejection to Victorian morality, in this study, Victorian ethics is observed prior to Wilde's moral vision. Victorian morality revealed an oppressive sense of ethics which burdened people with its unbearable load. The rigid and dogmatic rules of Victorian ethics were simply a façade. Victorian morality was all about appearances judging people according to their looks and manners. Wilde protested against Victorian ethics which was seen as the sign of his immorality. However, he had serious concerns about people's morality, which caused him to react against the hypocritical Victorian ethics. Therefore, in this study Wilde's ethics is portrayed as a direct refusal of Victorian Puritan ethics and conventional codes of conduct.

In the fourth chapter that deals with Wilde's moral vision, his rebellion against Victorian pressure on art as well as on people will be studied in detail. He clearly refused to judge and to be judged according to shallow and superficial dogmatic codes of the period. He did not accept imposing social and moral responsibilities on his art. Wilde's art and moral vision were interdependent; thus, they have to be assessed together in order to understand what he tried to accomplish. In both his critical and creative works, he challenged Victorian ethical approach together with Victorian

interpretation of art, as Victorian ethical codes surrounded art with moral expectations. Therefore, exploration of Wilde in this work includes the observation of his art and aesthetics. Hence, to assess his art and show where it used to stand in Victorian literature, firstly a quick overview of Victorian literature is provided.

Accordingly the fifth chapter focuses on Victorian literature. Victorian literary world consisted of different works and divergent attitudes towards art. Yet, generally under the influence of Puritan ethical codes, Victorian art was required to have a social and moral mission of shaping the society according to conventional codes of the period. Prior to Wilde; Arnold, Ruskin and Pater were among the leading figures who shaped Victorian literary world. Ruskin and Pater were the two crucial symbols in the aesthetics movement in Victorian literature who also influenced Wilde. They represented two different attitudes prior to Wilde and their assessment is essential in placing Wilde in the aesthetic movement. While Arnold and Ruskin laid stress on the importance of the literary work in shaping the society, Pater emphasised the importance of experience and freedom of the work of art. Wilde was among the leading figures of the aesthetic movement but he refused the Victorian aesthetic interpretation that associated beauty with morality. Wilde also took part in the decadent movement that represented his dislike of Victorian approach to art. Wilde and his art were stigmatized as immoral by Victorians because of his rejection of the aesthetic interpretation that developed under the influence of dogmatic morality.

In his art and aesthetics, Wilde reflected his criticism of Victorian point of view. He supported freedom of art from moral and social boundaries, he expressed his dislike of *vulgar realism* in art and promoted creativity, use of imagination and beauty in art. He refused to accept art as a social and moral tool and struggled for the notion of *art for art's sake*. Analysing Wilde's art and aesthetics in line with the information derived from "The Decay of Lying", "The Critic as Artist", "The Soul of Man under Socialism" and the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is central to apprehending his aesthetics principles.

As it has been argued before, Wilde's morality and art supported each other and they were interconnected as he believed that a higher ethics could only be attained through art. The theoretical analysis of Victorian approach and Wilde's attitude depict that his moral and aesthetic interpretation and Victorian assessment of these concepts are diametrically opposite points of view. While he was in favour of freedom, Victorian interpretation was dogmatic and oppressive. Wilde's refusal of Victorian values through his art and morality is present in his creative works as well. So thus, second part of the discussion deals with the exploration of Wilde's ethics and aesthetics in his two

works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

The analysis of Wilde's moral vision in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* justifies his moral approach as the novel criticises hypocritical Victorian moral codes that judged everything according to appearance. The novel itself was marked as corrupt but Wilde did not accept this accusation and divided the sphere of action and art. He stressed that only action could have moral consequences. Wilde believed that art did not involve action, it should be free from ethical review. Pressure of Victorian morality was criticised by using gothic features like dark alter-ego motif and opposition between private and public lives. Wilde's moral concern for humanity was so deep that in all his works, even in the ones that he describes his aesthetics, Wilde's references about ethics can be seen. After the moral assessment of the novel the study observes the expression of Wildean art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The aesthetic exploration of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* depicts Wilde's refusal of viewing art and aesthetics according to Victorian norms. His novel is the practice of his aesthetic philosophy and justifies his theories about the importance of the work of art, its beauty and ability to make people live all types of experiences while emphasising Wilde's reaction to vulgar realism of the Victorian period.

Wilde bitterly criticised Victorianism in his novel and exemplified his own principles as well. Also in *The Importance of Being Earnest* he attacked Victorian morality and satirised the hypocritical application of these moral codes. He trivialised the concept of *earnestness* in Victorian age and depicted the shallowness of the whole Victorian ethics with his emphasis on the term *earnest*. *The Importance of Being Earnest* provides important clues about Wilde's aesthetic vision besides his humorous depiction of Victorian ethics. The shallow and void Victorian attitude towards art and literature was mocked and criticised in this play. He ridiculed Victorian point of view by making empty and dogmatic characters support Victorian literary approach. Wilde's rejection of realism can also be found in the play.

As explained previously, first five sections about Victorian social background, Victorian moral values, Wilde's moral values, Victorian literature and Wilde's art provide the theoretical foundations of this study. They supply the necessary grounds for defining Wilde, his morality and his art in Victorian period. Victorian moral values also had ethical demands from art and led to the creation of Victorian assessment of art that measured art through its moral value. Wilde's moral values manifested his resistance to Victorian ethics. His aesthetic principles and art stood out as an

antithesis of Victorian interpretation of art. His aesthetic attitude and moral perspective were so intertwined that they could not be examined as separate notions. Wilde's relationship with aesthetic and decadent movements of Victorian epoch strengthened his resistance to Victorian ethical and social codes while his theoretic resistance in critical works were also supported by his creative works. On this issue, Wilde's aesthetic and ethical approach in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Ernest* depicted and supported his vision of art and morality as well as severely criticising Victorian ethical approach and interpretation of art and aesthetics.

In the concluding chapter of the study, the opposition between Wilde's approach to art and morality and Victorian attitude towards them are emphasized. It is stressed that placement of Wilde in the period is achieved through the information derived from Victorian background, morality and literature. Later Wilde's art and morality that developed as the refusal of Victorian values and their application in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Ernest* are briefly stated.

II. VICTORIAN SOCIAL BACKGROUND

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way- in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only (Dickens, 1).

As put forward by the famous passage from Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, Victorian Era had a tremendously contradictory nature. It was a transition epoch which embodied different figures together. The many opposing concepts like wisdom and foolishness, hope and despair, light and darkness found together in this period as Dickens suggested, contributed to the characterization of the Victorian frame of mind and influenced the nature of literature and literary works of the period. Since these contradictions present such significance, the big picture depicting Victorian social dynamics, the results of these sharp contradictions and the nature of oppositions are crucial in our analysis. As suggested by Gilmour: “[...] Victorian Britain [was undergoing] a revolutionary change without revolution. The price paid, culturally, was a deep ambivalence about past and future[...].” (22).

The British Empire had been going through radical changes when Wilde was born (1854-1900). Life in England was changing rapidly. Reader mentions these changes that took place during this period in *Life in Victorian England*: “The ancient social order of countryside, with its roots running back to prehistory was giving place to a strange, new town-based society of machinery and mass production, looking to twentieth century and beyond” (15). It is always difficult for mankind to adjust to quick changes and, similarly, that was the case in the Victorian Era; the old and accustomed was unavoidably creating contradiction with the new and unfamiliar. Matthew Arnold's poetry illustrates the shocking effect of these changes on people:

For what wears out the life of mortal men?
 'Tis that from change to change their being rolls;
 'Tis that repeated shocks, again and again,
 Exhaust the energy of strongest souls. (*The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 980)

Following the Industrial Revolution, Victorian England faced a new social order which was unfamiliar for both England and the rest of the world until then. Use of machinery in mass production enriched the Empire but it also gave rise to many social and cultural issues that affected

art and literature as well. Reader argues that factories were hugely affecting the lives of people, especially the poor and the working class. Factories came to symbolize the mechanical way of life; “the work was hard, regular and monotonous” (76). Such a mechanization infiltrated the lives of people and imposed these characteristics on them. Anything that comes between man and his work was considered sinful. Reader emphasizes the importance of hard work in Victorian life: “If pleasure was sinful, that was mainly because it came between a man and his work, and the virtuousness of working hard was correspondingly exalted. Work lay at the centre of middle class life” (142). The effect of the monotonous life and the emphasis attached to work resulted in the rejection of pleasure and revealed the tendency to mark everything else as immoral. Even art took its share from this way of thinking. To illustrate such worshipping and refusal of everything else other than work itself, Houghton depicts one writer’s comment of art and philosophy in *Victorian-Anti Intellectualism* as:

[...] he would be “glad to be informed, how the universal pursuit of literature and poetry, poetry and literature, is to conduce towards cotton-spinning.” Art is defended, if it is defended, as an ornament or a recreation. Philosophy is a waste of time, or worse, a distraction from work (295).

The quote above illustrates the Victorian expectations that put a heavy burden on art as well as on people. Moreover, it depicts the point of view which looked down on art that did not contribute to industrial manufacture. Many people were satisfied with the new system of making money and they did not consider the ugliness and misery. However, the richness and ugliness that were found together were realised and stressed by some people. Urgan also uses Alexis de Tocqueville’s comment to show the striking contradictions in the Victorian Era:

It is in the midst of this foul drain that the greatest stream of human industry has its source and goes out to fertilize the whole world. From this filthy sewer flows pure gold. It is here that human nature reaches towards perfection and to brutishness; that civilization works its miracles and civilized man reverts almost to a savage (950).

The most influential social stratum in this period was the middle class. The rising middle class, which was brought to power by the new industrial order, left its mark on the Victorian Era. The middle class was far more strong and effective than merchants of previous epochs; moreover, they were the masters of industrial England as they had enough money to live like the gentry. There was an interesting relationship between the middle class and upper class that was based on admiration and rejection. The middle class had the economic power but they had to balance this new material power with some values and principles. The problem emerged as the middle class became rich

enough to live like the gentry but could not adopt certain features of the noble lifestyle to their own lives. Under the influence of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria they developed characteristics like devotion to their work and bigotry. They embraced Puritan attitudes which imposed a strict moral code. Reader emphasizes the fact that Puritanism was a success of the Victorian middle class: “The puritan and serious tone which the Victorians take pride in having re-introduced into English life is perhaps the greatest part of the middle-class triumph” (132). Thus, the Puritan attitude that marked the Victorian stage was supported and fed by the middle class.

As it was described above, making money was very important for Victorian society and they were greedy on this matter. Apart from their ambition to make money, Puritan morality was another characteristics of the middle class. The class developed rigid rules that tended to judge everything according to moral values. These supposedly moral attitudes created unbearable pressure on people, triggering the famous Victorian hypocrisy in return. They seemed to avoid “easy going attitudes” but Reader again argues that this avoidance was not at all sincere. He claims that, “Behind this iron orthodoxy, there was no doubt, a good deal less inhibited behaviour” (141). This strict morality covered up the Victorian hypocrisy and played the most important role in many people’s rebel against and the rejection of Victorian values.

John Morley’s portrayal of Victorian England depicts the blindness and the implication of double standards behind this powerful empire.

[...] a community where political forms, from monarchy down to the popular chamber, are mainly hollow shams disguising the coarse supremacy of wealth, where religion is mainly official and political, and is ever ready to dis sever itself alike from the spirit of justice, the spirit of charity, and the spirit of truth, and where literature does not as a rule permit itself to discuss serious subjects frankly and worthily- a community, in short, where great aim of all classes and orders with power is by rigorous silence, fast shutting of eyes, and stern stopping of ears, somehow to keep social pyramid on its apex, with the fatal result of preserving for England its glorious fame as a paradise for the well- to -do, a purgatory for the able, and hell for the poor (Buckley, 4).

In the Victorian Era, Britain was the largest, most powerful and the wealthiest empire. England, leading the British Empire, was getting richer through industry to become the hegemonic power of both politics and the economy globally. In other words, on the one hand it was the “best of times,” (Dickens, 1), but on the other hand the same period was “the worst of times” (Dickens, 1) owing to the radical changes that gave rise to the middle class competing with gentry, a poor working class which was rapidly getting crowded in the outskirts of the boroughs, together with competition and emigration arising from this new order. Such developments horrified the Victorians and, in order to

cope with their fears, they cling to dogmas and a strict and insincere sense of morality which will be discussed in next chapter.

Ugliness was another frequently discussed subject of the Victorian period that surrounded Victorian life during this process of transition. In her book about English literature, Mina Urgan uses a quote from D.H. Lawrence that describes this ugliness:

Although perhaps nobody knew it, it was ugliness which really betrayed the spirit of man in the Nineteenth Century. The great crime which the moneyed class and promoters of industry committed in the palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness, ugliness, and ugliness: Mean and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly clothes, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationships between workers and employers. The human soul needs beauty more than bread (948).

Thus, it can be concluded that the changes in the production process led to the creation of a new order which shocked the majority of people. The middle class was the winner of this new economical order and money shaped their route. As long as they were making money, they were not interested in the ugliness that people had to face. Together with this material hideousness that decreased the quality of life, people had to live with the spiritual ugliness which corrupted their soul with the oppressive and rigid moral rules of the period. These people that were girded by ugliness from every corner needed beauty in their lives to purify their souls. Lawrence's words clearly highlight this need for beauty. The excessive ugliness that beleaguered Victorian period made the search for beauty obligatory for many artists including Wilde and provided grounds for their overemphasis on the 'beautiful'.

Like Lawrence, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold showed their dissatisfaction from the material and spiritual ugliness. Carlyle was completely aware of the situation in Victorian England: "My heart is sick to look at the things now going on in England" (Urgan, 1444). He criticized the inequality, misery, and ugliness which were in juxtaposition with prosperity and wealth. Ruskin also reacted to the terrible ugliness as a result of uneven industrial development: "That great foul city of London- rattling, growling, stinking- a ghastly heap of fermenting brickwork, pouring out poison at every pore" (Urgan, 1459). Both Ruskin and Carlyle emphasized the ugliness that surrounded Victorian period.

Arnold's poem successfully illustrates the Victorian dilemma:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,

The other powerless to be born.
With nowhere to rest my head. (Urgan, 1510)

Victorian period was a transition process that embodied the old and the new, the accustomed and the unfamiliar with the beautiful and the ugly. These different and inconsistent concepts influenced the epoch and caused restlessness and fluctuation among people.

Writing and creating during such a period, Wilde was widely influenced by the situation. The hypocritical nature and Puritan morality of this period were very important as they had unreputed influence in shaping his aesthetics and moral vision, as well as the development of the Victorian literature and emergence of literary movements such as aesthetics and decadence. For Wilde, art was the most effective weapon to get rid of the ugliness that surrounded Victorian period. In this study, Wilde's aesthetics and moral vision and insistence on beauty will be viewed as a rebellion against the social and spiritual hideousness of the period which was discussed above. Victorian literature that developed in such a period also holds an essential position in placing Wilde in Victorian literary world. Before moving to the assessment of Victorian literature, the strict Victorian moral code will be discussed in order to grasp Wilde and his vision.

III. VICTORIAN MORALITY

Victorian moral codes were inseparable from the Victorian social life and grew out of the social conditions that were mentioned in the previous chapter. Assessment of the Victorian morality is essential in the interpretation of Wilde's moral codes as his ethical vision was absolutely dissimilar to Victorian ethical approach and could be interpreted as a reaction to Victorian moral codes. The term *Victorian morality* is used to describe the moral conditions in England during Queen Victoria's reign. As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, Victorian moral values consisted of a strict code applied hypocritically. Sexual repression and intolerant social ethics were ostensibly accepted and approved in the public life; however, people violated these rules in their private lives and, as a result, Victorian morality caused a wide gap between the private and public lives of people. In literary works, this hyperbolic difference between private and public life reflects itself with hero's anxiety of revealing his secret self, dark double or double life motif which will be examined in detail in the following chapters.

Business ethics or hard work was a crucial factor that shaped Victorian moral values. As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, the vital importance attached to work was a dominant belief in the society. This was in accordance with the Puritan morality which required discipline and hard work. Houghton depicts this notion in his essay as follows:

From the beginning Puritan ethics had harmonized with business ideals, so much so that the former has been traced to the rise of capitalism. This may be debated, but it is certain that Puritanism laid great stress both on moral discipline (the prerequisite for business efficiency) and on hard work and well-earned profits (the latter rationalized as the reward of God upon industry); and consequently neglected, or viewed with suspicion, the intellectual and artistic life (303).

Any kind of pleasure that distracted people off their work was viewed as sin. Such an approach to business in Victorian ethics blessed hard work and defined laziness as one of the biggest sins.

Sexual repression was another appropriate behaviour in the Victorian morality. Women, in particular, had to face harsh sexual restrictions, and although avoiding sexual desire was seen as a sign of purity, prostitution was very common. Sexual judgement was used as a tool in disgracing people and labelling them as corrupt and perverse.

The transitional characteristics of the Era structured its moral and social values. The accustomed and the unfamiliar co-existed and were striving to find a place in this new order which caused the

period to become extremely contradictory. As it is described in *The Victorian Temper*, they were both Tartuffes and materialists who gave importance to money more than anything else. They deeply cared about the humanity but also could not hide their enthusiasm in “free enterprise”. An excerpt below from the same analysis shows the contradictory situation of Victorian England:

While they professed “manliness,” they yielded to feminine standards; if they emancipated woman from age-old bondage, they robbed her of a vital place in society. Though they were sexually inhibited and even failed to consider the existence of physical love, they begat incredibly large families and flaunted in their verses a morbidly overdeveloped erotic sensibility. Their art constitutes a shameless record of both hypocrisy and ingenuousness. And their literature remains too purposeful, propagandistic, didactic, with too palpable a design upon the reader; yet it is clearly so romantic, aesthetic, “escapist,” that it carries to posterity but a tale of little meaning (Buckley, 2).

The Victorians despised Wilde’s moral vision; his ethical approach that will be explored in the following chapter depicts a totally divergent attitude towards ethics. Buckley crystallizes the Victorian temper in general terms, and reveals the conflicting nature of the period which was hidden under the hypocritical ethical norms. In Victorian period, people avoided tolerating other ideas and tried to preserve the moral values by rejecting everything that differed from the mainstream perspective. Fanaticism, hypocrisy and narrow-minded, materialist and excessive morality marked the Victorian England. Social and moral rules that defined the Victorian life were so unnatural and repressive that people could not handle the pressure. In his essay, Long describes the characteristics of Victorians as:

They sacrificed sincerity to propriety. Second and worse, they pretended to be better than they were. They passed themselves off as being incredibly pious and moral. They talked noble sentiments and lived quite otherwise. Finally, they refused to look at life candidly. They shut their eyes to whatever was ugly or unpleasant and pretended that it didn’t exist. Conformity, moral pretension, and evasion, those were the hallmarks of Victorian hypocrisy (1).

Victorian hypocrisy was the result of the effort to stay within the boundaries of the social rules. Instead of protesting, many people seemed to accept and obey these rules and cold-heartedly criticized others who broke them. Idiosyncratic features of Victorian period prompted strict and harsh Victorian moral codes which were almost impossible to apply in daily life. The impossibility of applying these moral rules led to a superficial and hypocritical morality. Throughout this research; the term “Victorian morality” will be used to describe the contradictory and hypocritical ethics of Victorian society.

Victorian ethics that praised Puritanism and hard work and refused pleasure, spread every part of

life including art. The dogmatic moral codes which were imposed on art caused a rebellion against the pressure of ethics in the perspective of art. This resistance was widely misunderstood and referred to as immoral. Many authors of the era including Oscar Wilde criticised and sometimes satirized Victorian morality. Because of this criticism the corrupt and perverse label was used for these intellectuals. Oscar Wilde who was accused of being immoral according to Victorian norms had an utterly different attitude towards morality. He severely criticised the pressure on art which was created by the hypocritical moral rules and he proposed a different type of morality which was enriched and flourished with art. Next chapter will focus on Wilde's moral vision which reflected his rejection of hypocritical morality.

IV. WILDE'S MORAL VISION

The previous chapter dealt with Victorian moral values that were hypocritical, “vulgar” and oppressive. Despite being stigmatized as perverse, Wilde’s moral vision rejected the conventional and repressive morality. The relationship between Wilde and morality created controversies in Victorian period that made its way to the contemporary discussions, which still continue today. Wilde’s provocative and paradoxical approach contributed to the misinterpretation of his principles and he was condemned as a symbol of corruption.

Wilde himself and his works were accused of being corrupt and immoral. He was considered as immoral although being moral according to the conventional norms was easy for him. By depicting the ease of being good according to Victorian values, Wilde stressed how low the Victorian standards were. Wilde had worries about the rigid content of superficial morality and promoted attaining higher standards with art. In his moral assumptions, he submitted the idea that being good according to the average criteria required little effort. His interpretation of being good should be considered within the Victorian perspective: “‘To be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle class respectability’” (“The Critic as Artist”, 1015). Wilde refused being good according to Victorian standards and his art was associated with his private life that was immoral according to those criteria, causing him to be condemned together with his art. However, this research will work on Wilde’s moral vision from the point of its relationship with his art and his criticism of the conventional values.

Wilde's art was labelled as immoral. At this point, the major question that should be asked is “what makes art immoral?” According to Wilde, nothing could make art immoral. Thus, his statement, “‘All art is immoral’” (“The Critic as Artist”, 995), emphasised the fact that art could not have a moral duty. He was concerned about the shallow moral condition of the society and his moral principles can be detected in an essay that he expressed his aesthetics. His morality and aesthetic theories are interdependent and have to be observed as a whole. His first assumption was that ethics, dealt with action, in order to make an ethical assessment, there must be an action to observe. “For action of every kind belongs to the sphere of ethics. The aim of art is simply to create a mood” (The Critic as Artist”,999). However, he argues that art does not involve action so it is not in the realm of ethics; thus, it cannot be judged by the standards of morality. Therefore, a safe area in life free from moral constrains, which is the artistic sphere, is created, and according to these principles, the artist should be free in performing his art. What Wilde did was to provide total freedom for art and the

artist. He saved art from moral boundaries and social expectations while making moralistic judgement of art impossible. Cohen's argument clearly illuminates Wilde's moral perspective:

Wilde's speculations develop within the context of three sets of opposites: life and art, action and inaction and contemplation, and morality and amorality. Members of the sets lend themselves to obvious alignments; life, action and morality belong together, as do art, contemplation, and the escape from judgement (108).

It is obvious that art for Wilde saves humankind from moral corruption. From his moral perspective art offers a free zone in which people can do anything without hurting their souls. Thus, artist is free to choose his subject in art and he cannot be judged according to ethics. These subjects, no matter how strange and evil they may be, do not corrupt art or the artist. Nasaar's view depicts Wilde's approach that advised experiencing every kind of feeling through art so as not to lose the beauty of the soul:

An art that delves into the dark caverns of the soul and fully explores and celebrates the evil within can remain beautiful, but a way of life that seeks fully to translate inner evil action will finally cease to be beautiful and become an inescapable nightmare. This is Wilde's position he never abandoned (71-72).

As Nasaar depicts, an art or an artist cannot be condemned for being immoral regarding the theme he/she chooses, as art is the only sphere where one can stay intact and unharmed. This idea does not indicate immorality. Instead, Wilde accepted that action had consequences but he refused to apply these consequences to art which was not action.

The leading principles in Wildean morality indicate action as the subject of moral judgement and free art from ethics as they do not involve action. He also put forward the idea that art allowed people to taste all kinds of dark experiences free from moral judgement. He offered art as an antidote for the pain caused by judgement while experiencing dark side of the feelings. Consequently, art in a Wildean sense cannot be subjected to moral judgement as it does not involve action but it is a *form of contemplation*.

Wilde's suggested that ethics and aesthetics had different missions in life and he depicted the hollowness of Victorian interpretation of art that judged beauty according to the morality it contained. In "The Critic as Artist", Wilde argued that "ethics like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, makes life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, give it progress and variety and change" (1015). Ethics makes existence possible and aesthetics

enriches and improves it by adding meaning to it. Wilde claimed that art created the chance of improving ethics. As it was argued previously, Victorian ethics judged everything including art and the artist according to moral codes. Wilde, however, presented art as a free sphere where everything, including immoral concepts, could be experienced without action, thus, without getting hurt. He also claimed that when one reached perfection, he/she could do everything without hurting the soul which makes sin impossible. This state of perfection was staying unharmed and beautiful while having all kinds of experiences. Wilde aimed to reach that perfection through art. This vision is stated in “The Critic as Artist” as:

When we reach the true culture that is our aim, we attain to the perfection of which the saints have dreamed, the perfection of those to whom sin is impossible, not because they make renunciations of aesthetic, but because they can do everything they wish, without hurting the soul, and can wish for nothing that can do the soul harm.... (1015)

Wilde found a solution to the problem of immorality. As art is free of ethical judgement, Wilde’s morality was able to make use of the experiences and emotions that were created by art to attain the pure and perfect moral state in which people could be free of guilt, conscience, remorse and sin. Suggesting that aesthetics is at a higher place than ethics implies that art holds the potential force of transforming ethics. The true interpretation of Wilde’s moral principles, then, is not the total refusal of moral values but includes freeing art from the rigid constraints that are imposed by conventional morality. Brown states the same notion in her work as:

Wilde asserted the centrality of the aesthetic imagination, but not as something divorced from moral and spiritual life. His claim that aesthetics is “higher” than ethics, as the context in which it is uttered makes clear, is based on definitions of both terms that understand the aesthetic to transform, rather than transcend, the ethical. Thus the serious work of art can never be directly “moral” in its effects, as many of Wilde’s contemporaries wished it to be; it could never bolster conventional ways of thinking, although it could spiritualize the individual and, unlike a self-deceiving philanthropy, help to develop the “simple and spontaneous virtue that there is man” (xvi).

It is obvious that Wilde’s moral vision developed in relation to his aesthetic principles which has a complementary nature that becomes meaningful together. Aesthetics had the ability to elevate ethical standards by saving people from committing sins while allowing them to test different senses including the dangerous ones. People who found the opportunity to live their emotions fully through a safe way would not have to act in order to gain experience and, therefore they would be safe from corruption, their souls could stay pure and beautiful and they would not feel the desire to commit sins. As it was depicted, Wilde’s reaction was not to idea of morality itself. He deeply cared about the moral condition of people. This is the exact reason for his rebellion. He refused to accept

repressive moral impositions. Instead, he was in favour of a different type of ethics which would respect people and their individuality. He believed that people could reach that kind of ethics with the help of art. By setting art free from morality, Wilde did not despise morality but he allowed art to escape from hypocritical ethics. Wilde's moral concerns are depicted in *A Companion to Aesthetics* as:

Wilde had a deep concern for the moral condition of humanity and believed that art had a vital role to play in improving it. More generally, his jibes at "the ethical" are attacks on what passes for morality in a society he despises. "The Soul of Man under Socialism" is, in fact, a thoroughly moral manifesto for Wilde's ideals of freedom. "Art is the most intense mode of individualism," since it embodies a person's "unique temperament," thereby offering an escape from "tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine". Wilde urges us to view our own lives as works of art to be constructed. Society is tending to "make men themselves machines (Cooper vd., 593).

From this point forth it can be concluded that free art is the first step in freeing human soul and it enriches this soul with higher ethics. Art also provided an escape from stereotypical, rigid and dogmatic pressure of hypocritical Victorian ethics. Thus, art saved the individuality of people which allowed them to escape from being a prototype Victorian. Furthermore, a good artist needed freedom and individuality to perform his art. Hence, art and morality fed each other and was supposed to be in harmony with each other. This moral vision was surely dissimilar to middle class Victorian values. Wilde's rebellion against hypocritical morality of the middle class is depicted by Brown as follows: "It is clear that even his animadversions against morality refer to the puritan and philistine moralities of the period" (xvi). He was accused of ignoring ethics but in fact he was trying to show the emptiness of the harsh rules of Victorian values. The Victorian moral perspective did not create humanitarians but instead it manufactured more stereotyped people. "England's degraded conception of ethics elevates the greatest majority of people [...] to the dignity of machines" (Brown , 64).

The real sin for Wilde was to surrender to these dogmatic moral codes of the period. So, adhering to hollow virtues of Victorians was the biggest sin for Wilde and thus, what was considered as sin for Victorian morality was a virtue for Wilde. He questioned and challenged conventional rules although they were depicted as sin. Refusal of common moral rules was a sin and Wilde asserted that sin according to Victorian interpretation were beneficial and allowed people to get rid of being a Victorian stereotype and to become themselves: "By its curiosity sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from the monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics" ("The Critic

as Artist”, 979). This moral vision involved acquiring a better ethical perspective through art. Wilde believed that sin in this sense enriched people and led to better moral standards by questioning the morality of the period.

Wildean moral assumption requires the acceptance of the fact that actions in life have moral consequences but art is an area where one can live every sorts of experiences and feelings without getting harmed or corrupt; thus, it is free from the burden of morality.

Contrary to the general belief, Wilde did not refuse morality but he despised strict, intolerant and dogmatic rules which oppressed art as well as people. He pointed out the fact that people could attain better moral standards by rejecting the conventional ethic codes and he stressed the importance of art in reaching this higher morality. His moral values as well as his art and aesthetics emerged as a reaction to Victorian interpretation of art and morality, and attempted to elevate the known codes of art and morality.

Wilde’s moral vision and Victorian moral perspective displays serious differences. Against hypocritical and dogmatic Victorian ethics, Wilde’s suggestion includes the notion that art is a free zone and it cannot be judged according to morality. These safe experiences could save people from committing sins and therefore moral judgement. The higher state of soul would make it impossible to commit sin and help people attain higher ethics. He is in favour of higher ethics that can be reached through art and in this higher morality people are not restricted by the fear and pressure of ethical codes. Wilde’s works should be assessed under the light of this understanding. Unless perceived in relation to his moral codes, his works including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* will simply be understood as “poisonous book” or “trivial comedy”.

After the exploration of Victorian ethics and Wilde’s morality, Victorian literature which developed under the shadow of Victorian ethical values will be examined in order to place Wilde in the literary world of the period he lived in. His aesthetics that developed in relation with his ethics depicts his refusal of Victorian interpretation of art, inspired by Victorian morality. Thus, literary exploration of the period is essential to examine the art of Wilde accurately.

V. VICTORIAN LITERATURE

This chapter examines Victorian literature with the aim to highlight the relationship between ethics and aesthetics of the period. The effect of Victorian ethics on literature can be clearly observed because Victorian literary interpretation views art as a tool for shaping the public mind according to the ethical motifs of the period.

Prior to Wilde, several authors such as Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin and Walter Pater reflected their perspective on art and ethics and criticized this epoch. Assessment of such figures is crucial in understanding Wilde's motives in the development of his art and aesthetics. This chapter intends to provide an insight to the role of literature in the Era. Correspondingly, aestheticism and decadence of the late Victorian period, which is also known as *fin de siècle*, will be analysed so as to appreciate the background that shaped Wilde's theories.

Among the various genres, novel was the leading literary form in Victorian literature that “[sought] to represent a large and comprehensive social world, within the variety of classes and social settings that constitute a community” (*The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume 2, 994). Social relationships and middle class life were among the frequently mentioned themes in many novels. As it is stated in *The Norton Anthology*, the protagonist of the novel was generally trying to find his/her place in the social system.

Victorian writers in general aimed to shape people's ideas during this rapidly changing period. As it is mentioned in *The Norton Anthology*, “despite diversity of styles and subjects, Victorian prose writers were engaged in shaping belief in a bewilderingly complex and changing world” (*Ibid.*, 998). Thus, prose was used as a tool to create a common mind in the public in the unsteady Victorian times. The period witnessed great progress in many areas and the writers of the Victorian Era were trying to place literature among these rapidly changing realms: “Victorian prose writers were claiming a place for literature in a scientific and materialistic culture” (*Ibid.*, 998).

The general mission of art, including literature, was to structure the public mind and impose opinions on the community. This suggestion was also supported by the royal power Prince Albert:

For Prince Albert “the morality of art”- its religious content- lay in its relationship to the full experience and its power to speak to mankind in the language of universal emotion. For it was the artist's first duty to communicate, and the substance of his message was necessarily of social and, therefore, a moral significance (Buckley, 10).

Matthew Arnold, one of the renowned and esteemed figures of the Victorian literature, contributed to the field with significant theories. Arnold's theory about the function of literature is regarded as an important interpretation of Victorian values in literature. Like many other authors of the period, Arnold emphasized the meaning of culture and appreciated literary works as essential steps in the discussion of culture.

Arnold defended Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "the breath and the finer spirit of knowledge" (*The Norton Anthology*, 1405) and asserted that as it held such significance, high standards for poetry should be set. He put forward his ideas in *The Study of Poetry* as follows: "Yes; constantly in reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read" (*Ibid.*, 1405). In his work, Arnold supported that it was crucial to define the truly excellent poetry. This excellent poetry is the one which "do[es] us most good". According to Arnold's assessment, poetry should consider the ideal and use it to form the work of art. In *The Study of Poetry* Arnold stood by Aristotle's argument about virtues that poetry requires "high and excellent seriousness" (*Ibid.*, 1411).

Arnold's interpretation involves a moral perspective. He claims that the "the breath and finer spirit of knowledge offered to us by poetry" (*Ibid.*, 1405) should be praised and that resting on poetry, religion and philosophy would be hollow without it. Furthermore, the ultimate aim of literature and his assessment of literary works are a moral experience. This point of view can be regarded as a general reflection of Victorian evaluation of literature.

Although Arnold chose a moral perspective in his interpretation of art, he criticized the philistine middle class that represented Victorian moral values. As Pollard quotes, Arnold argued that the middle class "[...] had a defective type of religion, a narrow range of intellect and knowledge, a stunned sense of beauty, a low standard of manners" (72). On the other hand he was "[...]too inclined to identify the serious with the solemn (like other Victorians)" (*Ibid.*, 80). Matthew Arnold reflected the general moral assessment of literature but he also made a severe criticism of the middle class morality with the belief that art could shape and change these middle class values.

Victorian society viewed art as a tool to shape public mind according to desired norms. As it was observed in the previous sections, Victorian mind compared art to the production process and labelled it as useless as it did not contribute to mass production. In a similar vein, they despised art

that did not foster common values. Victorian approach to art did not accept art without a purpose and burdened it with the duty of strengthening social rules.

The term *fin de siècle* which is used to describe the period towards the end of nineteenth century, and the aesthetic and decadent movements developed in this period are essential in the analysis of the Victorian period. As it is suggested in *The Victorians*:

The phrase *fin de siècle* was applied to a wide range of trivial behaviour, provided it was sufficiently perverse or paradoxical or shocking. Yet insofar as *fin de siècle* refers to a serious and consistent cultural attitude, it had two essential characteristics: the conviction that all established forms of intellectual and moral and social certainty were vanishing, and that the new situation required new attitudes in life and art; and the related belief that art and morality were separate realms and the former must be regarded as wholly autonomous; hence the aesthetic doctrine or ‘art for art’s sake’. (Pollard, 465)

Pollard’s statement indicates that *fin de siècle* embodied the aesthetic and decadent movements together with many other concepts and movements of the time. What they had in common was the rejection of Victorian values. Purchase claims that “in Victorian literature these concepts are best understood together, and certainly with the rise of Oscar Wilde circle in 1850s they became interchangeable” (37). Aestheticism and decadence of *fin de siècle* cannot be separated and they are united in the art of Oscar Wilde. Therefore before moving to Wilde’s art it will be beneficial to observe the aesthetic and decadent movements that were often intertwined and interpreted together.

The aesthetic principle of *art for art’s sake* was initially put forward by Teophile Gautier with the notion that “beauty can only exist in unconditional freedom” (Eczacıbaşı, 24). Gautier’s preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835-36) stood for this philosophy and put forward the idea that art had no aim apart from the creation of beauty.

In order to assess aestheticism prior to Wilde, the aesthetics of Ruskin and Pater should definitely be understood. Although they interpreted aesthetics from different angles, Wilde’s two predecessors Ruskin and Pater had significant roles both in the aesthetic movement and Wilde’s notion of aesthetics. Like many other writers of the period in favour of the moral function of art, John Ruskin argued that art should be informative and didactic:

The purpose of art, according to Ruskin, was to teach and reflect on society. Yet it should also be highly individualistic in its retreat from the decay of industrial modernity into the energy and ‘beauty’ of nature, largely because there was ‘morality’ in ‘beauty’ (Purchase, 38).

Ruskinian interpretation of beauty was associated with moral beauty; a work of art that lacked moral values, then, could not be classified as beautiful. Landow's suggestion in his essay affirms this notion:

Art can be didactic by being beautiful in two ways. First, perception of certain modes of beauty exercises moral sympathy; and, second since according to Ruskin, the beautiful is a symbol of God, its perception becomes an essentially religious act which "indirectly and occultly" informs the beholder of the nature of God. (1)

According to Ruskin, beauty was a reflection of the creator, thus, morality and beauty were inseparable. He provided a religious basis for beauty and proposed a division between the two aspects of beauty, namely "animal 'Aesthesis' and moral 'Theoria'" (Gilmour, 203). In his conception, without the moral component of 'Theoria', beauty could not be saved from degrading to the level of lust. Likewise, he strongly stressed the social side of art: "Art, he insisted, was born of a distinct social milieu, and it served directly and indirectly the society that produced it" (Buckley, 152). Ruskin's point of did not separate art from social responsibilities but instead, in his vision, art involved a positive moral function in order to be considered as beautiful. The idea of art with a moral mission was valid for some Victorian aesthetes and Flint supports this thesis in her essay as:

[...] the idea, prevalent since the Renaissance, that art must deliberately serve a didactic end as well as pleasing the eye, persisted, above all through the writings of Ruskin and his followers. Aesthetic production was repeatedly related both to an individual's state of mind, and regarded as an effective guide to the collective moral condition of the society in which it was produced. Despite the idealistic protests made by Wilde and others towards the end of the century that 'The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate',² the majority of Victorians continued to assume that art, in its broadest sense, had particularly powerful affective properties (59).

As it was observed in the previous sections, art had a responsibility of shaping the public according to Victorian perspective. In accordance with this target, a beautiful work of art should have been morally beautiful. In either way, art was required to have a moral or social function. These Victorian aesthetes tended to associate beauty with moral beauty. Their attempt to assess aesthetics together with its ethical message created the Victorian aesthetics which cannot be regarded separately from ethics. Appreciating this side of Victorian perspective is crucial as what Wilde, with his own aesthetics perspective, refused Victorian interpretation of art and beauty. Buckley describes the moralistic interpretation of aesthetics by Victorian aesthetes as:

[...] most early Victorian aestheticians strove to relate the beautiful to some fixed pattern in the harmony of nature, to an unchanging truth beyond the immediate object of contemplation.

If art was to mirror a larger totality its function, they thought, must be at least implicitly “moral”; the Picture or the poem, the play or the statue was to edify as well as to delight by its reflection of an immutable design. (143)

The main assumption was that art had the power to influence people for the good and bad. The effect it created was surely expected to be for the good and, therefore, good art should have fostered the appropriate ethical concept of the period. Within this approach, good works of art were the ones that promoted moral values and those which were not interested in shaping the public moral were labelled as immoral or corrupt. This judgemental Victorian point of view towards art convicted many works of art and authors to immorality including Wilde. This argument went far more than the ethical meaning of a work of art and encapsulated a moral assessment of the artist. This vein of argument is exemplified *The Companion to Aesthetics* as:

Moralists have given a variety of arguments in favor of their view. An argument from friendship holds that artistically evaluating a literary work is akin to evaluating its implied author as a friend; since a person’s moral goodness counts toward him being a good friend, the moral goodness of works contributes to their artistic worth. (Booth 1988). The moral beauty argument holds that if a person has a morally good character, then she possesses a kind of inner beauty; so the moral worth of the author, as manifested in a work, counts under certain circumstances as an aesthetic excellence in the work (Cooper vd, 429).

As summarized above, this exaggerated ethical approach to art evaluated the artist along with the work of art. Wilde was a victim of Victorian judgement of art and the artist which declared the corruption of his art and himself through the assessment of his private life. At this point, a major question of ethics should be asked: According to which ethics could people or their work be judged? The desired ethical norms were the Victorian ethics and those who wished for different ethics or criticized these moral codes and reflected their objection in their works or lives were, without a doubt, labelled as corrupt or immoral. Results of these objections will be exemplified with Oscar Wilde's works in the following chapters.

Walter Pater, another important figure of aesthetics supported another approach to beauty that involves art’s freedom. Pater’s aesthetic assumptions were based on the idea that art should be free of “Ruskinian borders of social and political commitment, instructiveness, and above all ‘usefulness’” (Purchase, 38). Pater clearly supported the ideal of *art for art’s sake* that frees art from its ethical burden, as well as the necessity of being meaningful. Art was developing only in its own line; therefore, it did not have to express anything.

Walter Pater also influenced his readers with the inspiration that the major responsibility in life was

to enjoy life and sensations. A comment from *The Norton Anthology* about Pater supports this idea: “Pater reminded his readers that life passes quickly and that our only responsibility is to enjoy fully “this short day of frost and sun- to relish its sensations, especially those sensations provoked by works of art” (1506). Pater’s *The Renaissance* became a well-known book mostly for its conclusion, which can be regarded as a summary of his aesthetic views. In the conclusion of the book, Pater put forward the importance of experiencing: “Not the fruit of experience but the experience itself is the end” (Pater, 236). Again in the conclusion he commented about what people should do in their lives:

What we have to do is to be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, or Hegel, or of our own. Philosophical theories or ideas, as points of view, instruments of criticism, may help us gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us. “Philosophy is the microscope of thought.” The theory or idea or system which requires of us any sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us (237).

Pater emphasized the importance of pursuing sensations and the need to appreciate the experiences that resulted from these sensations. Pater’s and Ruskin’s diverging opinions provide valuable insight to the aesthetics of Victorian period. Pater’s aesthetic principles that praised experience and enjoying sensations was very important for Wilde as he used these principles as the backbone of his own theories which will be examined in detail in the following sections. Observation of Victorian aesthetics that combines beauty and morality is crucial in assessing Wilde’s aesthetics because it clearly shows what he refused in art.

Along with aesthetics, another important literary movement was the decadent movement in Victorian literature. The last decade of the nineteenth century which is usually referred to as *fin de siècle* witnessed the decadent movement in English literature, the major figure of which was Oscar Wilde. Prior to its emergence in England, decadence was an influential literary style in France. Some French authors including Baudelaire, Gautier and Flaubert share some similarities in their work that are labelled as decadent. As Macleod suggests, these common features are:

[...] the insistence on the autonomy of art; a disgust with bourgeois philistinism and utilitarianism; an interest in complexity of form and elaborate and arcane language; a fascination with the perverse, the morbid, and the artificial; a desire for intense experience and a seeking after rare sensations in order to combat a feeling of *ennui* or world-weariness (1).

Huysman's *A Rebours* in particular is extremely important as this novel inspired British decadence as well as being a crucial influence on French decadent movement. Oscar Wilde was also highly affected by the novel, reflections of which can be found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Decadent literary movement was a revolt against Victorian middle class culture and used certain images such as bohemian or aristocratic dandy so as to reflect this dissatisfaction. Macleod describes these images as:

The Decadents, exploiting the enhanced visibility of the artist, adopted personae that signalled their resistance to Victorian middle-class consumer culture. In so doing, they looked to two models, the bohemian and the dandy. Though the bohemian and the dandy are radically different in class terms – bohemians are represented as poor and garret-dwelling, while dandies, though typically not aristocrats adopt an aristocratic hauteur – both aimed to shock the bourgeoisie (12).

The decadent choice was in favour of inaction, the unnatural and strange which can be regarded as the opposite of Victorian tendencies. Goldfarb supports Ryals' suggestion in his article by stating that: "Ryals says much the same thing: Victorian decadence is characterized by "an emphasis on the pleasure of the senses; a fascination with the morbid, the strange, and the un- natural; the tendency to remain passive in the face of action and to preconceive reality"(372- 373). Decadent approach dwelled on ideas such as dark pleasures and strangeness that were neglected and despised by Victorian values Thus, like the aesthetic refusal, decadent movement represented the dissatisfaction from Victorian values and stood as the antithesis of Victorian merits. Macleod depicts the same idea with a notion of Gagnier which follows as, "the basis of Decadence -its central feature, more important even than stylistics according to Regenia Gagnier is precisely its rejection of middle-class life".

It will be fair to mention that not all the people in Victorian England welcomed and embraced decadence and decadents. Decadents were accused of being corrupt, morbid, perverse and sexually deviant. As Adam depicts, "For hostile critics 'decadence' was focused in the sexual audacity of the novel and drama" (394). The general belief was that decadence was poisoning English literature. As suggested earlier in this section, Victorian point of view on art was moralistic and included the moral assessment of the artist together with the work of art. Oscar Wilde was the leading figure in the decadent movement, thus, controversies about his sexuality which was followed by the trials gave the expected opportunity to those opponents:

Through 1894 and 1895, the Bodley Head's publications and its authors were repeatedly

identified as Decadent and criticized for being sex-obsessed, lurid, morbid, revolting, nonsensical, cynical, nasty, and self-promoting. The attacks against Decadence reached a boiling point in early 1895 when the arrest, trial, and prosecution of Oscar Wilde for acts of gross indecency gave counter-Decadents the ammunition they needed to bring down the movement. The press linked Wilde's crimes with his art and used his status as the most high-profile of the Decadents to indict the whole movement (Macleod, 6).

Wilde's scandal devastated the decadent movement and strengthened its opponents. He was accused of being a homosexual. A note was left for him by the Marquis of Queensberry, "To Oscar Wilde, posing as somdomite[sic]" (Belford, 249) Queensberry wanted his son to end his friendship with Wilde but he could not manage to persuade him. So he harassed Wilde in his daily life, and to put an end to Marquis' insults, Wilde sued him for libel. The trials gave Wilde's enemies the opportunity to prove his immorality. The Wilde trials turned into a serious scandal in Victorian England. His private life was declared as immoral and this immorality was associated with his art. Belford describes the case as:

Carson went on to analyze Dorian Gray, probing for its homosexual content, hoping to prove Wilde an immoral author, putting him in the awkward situation of defending dialogue he had written for fictional characters. The intolerant Victorian mind condemned the criticism of the dogmas of the period (252).

Wilde was convicted and spent two years in prison. He rebelled against Victorian standards with his art and his life. He was the victim of the Victorian values and symbolised the refusal of the values. Like the aesthetic movement, decadence he supported was still regarded as a revolt against the Victorian middle class culture. In fact, with the expression of the dark side of feelings, decadent reaction to Victorian values was sharper and decadent criticisms were stricter than that of aesthetes:

Decadents exhibited even more animosity toward the middle class than had their predecessors and their art reflects this disdain in a more powerful way than Aestheticism does. In Decadence, moral conceptions of art gave way to immoral ones and the cult of beauty was replaced by the cult of the beauty of ugliness and sin. Decadents interested themselves in the artificial, unnatural, morbid, perverse, and neurotic. In distinguishing themselves from the bourgeois middle class, the Decadents insisted on doing so in a more provocative manner than had the Aesthetes (Macleod, 28).

Literature for Victorians was a tool for shaping society and imposing morality. However, those who were against this attitude and objected to this kind of approach were labelled as immoral. Aesthetic and decadent traditions can be examined as a part of the refusal of Victorian ideals and aesthetics.

Aesthetic refusal and decadent dissatisfaction of Victorian life examined so far is also reflected in Oscar Wilde's art. Next chapter aims to place Wilde as an author in this literary setting. Wilde's art and aesthetics which were developed in the light of this literary background will be analysed and his art will be shown as a rejection of the Victorian interpretation of art that was examined in this chapter.

IV. WILDE'S ART AND AESTHETICS

In the previous chapters, it was argued that Wilde's moral vision and aesthetics are interdependent and they become meaningful when interpreted together. Therefore his aesthetic principles both reveal the meaning of his art and they can be used as a guideline to approach his morality. In his moral vision, art is depicted as an escape from committing sins and frees art from the burden of Victorian moral responsibilities. In this chapter Wilde's art and aesthetics will be explored in relation to his ethics.

In his art, Wilde rejected the Victorian expectations of art and protested Victorian values. Oscar Wilde's theories about art and aesthetics are essential in understanding his works. His art and aesthetics principles that he put forward in his critical works and the practice of them in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be interpreted as a refusal of the Victorian values of art. How and why Wilde criticized the Victorian values will be discussed together with his theories. Furthermore, Wilde's approach to certain concepts like morality and beauty in relation to aesthetic and decadent traditions and how he applied them in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* depicts his criticisms and his ethical vision which was dissimilar to Victorian morality.

As it is suggested previously, appreciation of the aesthetic movement of the Victorian period is crucial in the analysis of Wilde's aesthetics. According to Eczacıbaşı, "The aesthetic movement of nineteenth century was a reaction to Victorian morality, social philosophies, and the pollution as a result of industrial revolution, the dirt and ugliness of the Victorian era" (24). Additionally, Gilmour's definition of Aesthetic movement depicts the strong relationship between Wilde and this rebellious movement: "The Aesthetic movement was a mixture of straightforward rebellion against Victorianism, new theorizing, and extravagant posing- all meeting in unstable fusing in the symbolic rise and fall of Oscar Wilde" (237). Wilde's principles were inspired by many authors such as Kant, Gautier, Huysmans, Baudelaire, Ruskin and Pater.

In the previous argument it was mentioned that, at university Wilde was fascinated with attitudes that were supported by Ruskin and Pater. Ruskin was an aesthete but he believed that morality and beauty could not be separated since he regarded beauty as a symbol of God. Wilde refused the moral burden on art and did not accept the moral Victorian interpretation of aesthetics. The other influential figure for Wilde was Walter Pater with his work, *The Renaissance*. In the conclusion of this book, Pater put forward many notions that praised the experience, the importance of new

sensations and the need to escape from all kinds of systems that kept people away from experiencing. The impression of these notions is frankly present in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde used Pater's ideas in some of his works which will be analysed in the following parts of the discussion. Oscar Wilde had a deep devotion to the aesthetic movement and he transformed the theory into a course of conduct against Victorian morality. He believed that beauty was the only thing that made life sacred. His inspiration by Pater is described as:

In Wilde's hands Pater's view meditations on aesthetics are transposed into witticisms and aphorisms: 'It's not the spectator and not the life that art really mirrors' Wilde's typically blasé attitudes to imitation is illustrated spectacularly here in aphorism that encapsulates Pater's views on the relationship between art and its subject (Hext, 1).

As it was discussed, the doctrine of aesthetic movement, *art for art's sake*, can be regarded as a motto which manifests art's freedom. Wilde was also a follower of aesthetics but his interpretation was different from moralist Victorian interpretation. The suggestion in *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction* can be viewed as an example of his perspective: "Aestheticism per se had emerged on the European continent in the early nineteenth century and embraced the principle of 'art for art's sake', a phrase that embodied the belief that it was not the place of art to instruct on social, political, or moral matters, but rather to exist autonomously" (Kingston, 15-16).

Victorian interpretation of aesthetics included the combination of beauty with morality however, the Aesthetic movement was sometimes misinterpreted as it was believed to have rejected morality altogether. However, rather than a complete refusal, there was an obvious reaction to the pressure of conventional morality. Appreciation of the difference between Victorian and Wildean evaluation of aesthetics is crucial in contextualisation of Wilde's art in Victorian period:

At first glance, art of art's sake may seem a direct rejection of morality in favour of pleasure, but the Aesthetics Movement in fact took a far more complex view of the relationship between the two. Rather than denying a place for ethics within an aesthetic experience (the either/or choice), it instead denied primacy to conventional value systems and bluntly asserted the validity of alternative moralities (Gillespie, 142).

It is, then, very important to understand and judge aesthetic movement fairly. It should be kept in mind that Wilde's theories on art which are considered as a part of aesthetic tradition also depict his objection to Victorian values on its own. Wilde's reaction to Victorian pressure was not limited to the area of art. He also refused the pressure on people and criticised this oppression in his works: "He believed always and fervently in the intrinsic value of the individual; he denied the right of society to condemn any of its members to misery, or to wrap their lives by its demands. He hated

authority, cruelty, ugliness, in life as in art” (Ellmann, 168).

Together with his support of aesthetics, Wilde’s refusal of Victorian values can also be observed in his enthusiastic participation in the decadent movement, another crucial movement of the *fin de siècle* period. Reaction towards decadence was harder and its opponents linked the movement and its artists with every kind of moral perversity. However, decadence continued to reflect the dissatisfaction from Victorian middle class culture:

The Aesthetic Movement gave way to the Decadents who held that Art occupied a position totally opposed to Nature—both in the sense of nature as a physical force of biological change and in the sense of nature as a metaphysical condition presenting standards of morality. With a self-conscious and restless curiosity, the Decadents placed art as supreme to Nature, and they attacked accepted standards through over-refined sensibilities and an aggressive perversion of convention (Gillespie, 142).

Wilde's relationship with the aesthetic and decadent movements represented his revolt against conventional Victorian values but increased his notoriety. The basis of his art and aesthetics are clearly found in *Intentions*, the collection of his essays. To conceive Wildean art and aesthetic principles, three important essays from his *Intentions*, “Decay of Lying”, “The Critic as Artist” and “The Soul of Man under Socialism” should be examined. The preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is also an essential source to understand these principles.

Wilde employed dialogue form in the “Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist”. His application of dialogue is significant as it allowed Wilde to express both his opinions and the opposing Victorian attitude. With skilful and witty remarks, Wilde’s dialogues emerge as a crucial weapon in his revolt against realism, oppressive Victorian morality and hypocrisy as well as his defence of art, aesthetics, beauty and freedom. As Ezcacıbaşı suggests, Dialogue was his “weapon” and paradoxes were his “bullets” (72).

The first essay that will be reviewed is “The Decay of Lying” which was written in the form of a dialogue taking place between two debaters, Cyril and Vivian, both named after Wilde's sons. He characterised Vivian as his mouthpiece and reflected his disapproval of realism and support for beauty, creativity and freedom of art.

The debate starts with the claim that art emerges as a result of the deficiencies in life. In this essay, Wilde constantly emphasized the defect of the nature: “It is fortunate for us, however, the nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have no art at all. Art is our spite protest, our gallant attempt

to teach nature her proper place” (“The Decay of Lying”, 921). This assumption justifies the superiority of art over nature. Wilde also believed that when in nature, people lose their individualism which he considered essential especially for artists and development of art: “Out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal. One’s individuality absolutely leaves one” (“The Decay of Lying”, 921). Wilde contended that, in nature, all human beings became the same and lost their own characteristics; thus, artists who performed art under the influence of nature lacked the essential quality of individualism.

Wilde’s “Decay of Lying”, “refers again, to the decline in the value of fiction or storytelling” (Brown, 71). The emphasis in “The Decay of Lying” is on the significance of lying in literature. Wilde’s definition of lying involved telling beautiful things that were strengthened with creativity and did not include use of harsh realism. For Wilde, the old habit of telling lies in art lost its significance and this led to the creation of novels that resembled annual reports. He believed that the reason for the monotony in literature was the decay of lying. Vivian: ““One of the chief causes that can be assigned for the curiously commonplace character of most of the literature of our age is undoubtedly the decay of Lying as an art, a science, and a social pleasure”” (“The Decay of Lying”, 923). As clearly indicated in Vivian's words, Wilde held forth that the liar in literature only aimed to amaze the readers and to give them pleasure. This idea suggests that the old habit of lying intends to delight people. Wilde showed his opposition to the realist insistence on the idea that art mirrored the reality. His suggestion indicates that the aim of mirroring cannot be the excuse of “vulgarity” in art.

Accordingly, he criticized the realist movement in literature and showed his dislike for the works of art created in line with this movement. Vivian’s speech expresses Wilde’s idea about realism clearly: ““The ancient historians gave us a delightful fiction in form and fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction. The blue book is rapidly becoming his ideal both for method and manner”” (“The Decay of Lying”, 923). Thus, realism could not create impressive, charming and delightful art. According to Wilde, realism put an end to the creative and imaginative power within art and led to a failure in art. His view that a work of art should not include the vulgarity of real life is stated in the long speech of Vivian:

The characters in these plays talk on the stage exactly as they would talk off it; they have neither aspirations nor aspirates; they are directly taken from life and reproduce vulgarity down to smallest detail; they present the gait, manner, costume and accent of real people; they would pass unnoticed in a third- class railway carriage. And yet how wearisome the plays are! They do not succeed in producing even that impression of reality at which they aim, and

which is their only reason for existing. As a method, realism is a complete failure (“The Decay of Lying”, 930).

Wilde was against Victorian insistence on realism and criticised the use of it as a method in art since it killed the creative and inspiring force of art which could fill people with different kinds of emotions. Instead realism mirrors what it observes and names it art. As Wilde offered art as a way of experiencing, realism with its unimaginative and tedious reality could not provide the necessities of art. Wildean art is creative, imaginary, beautiful and inspiring. The work of art comes out of the dull and uninteresting facts of life that lack the essential feature of beauty. His criticisms went as far as to depict that if the insistence on following realist tradition was not abandoned, the inevitable result would be the loss of beauty. This notion can be found in the speech of Vivian: “[...] If something cannot be done to check, or at least to modify, our monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile, and beauty will pass away from the land” (“The Decay of Lying”, 924).

Vivian's speech explicitly indicates what Wilde did not want in art; the meaning of art for Wilde was based on one major criterion that artists should create beautiful things. In “The Decay of Lying”, he clearly emphasized that beauty was what he desired in literature: “In literature we require distinction, charm, beauty and imaginative power” (“The Decay of Lying”, 925).

The difference between Wildean and Victorian interpretations is that the former stresses beauty, individuality and freedom of art whereas the latter praises realism and lacks the inspiring force of art for the sake of realism.

When the subject matter of art is considered, Wilde argued that anything that did not concern people was suitable for art because as long as a subject had some kind of meaning for people, it affected them. Wilde argued that, “we should, any rate, have no preferences, no prejudices, no partisan feeling of any kind” (“Decay of Lying”, 928). If people did not have a connection, they would only feel the pure emotion arising from the work of art without getting hurt. He moved on to discuss the relationship between art and life and, in conclusion, favoured art over nature as a work of art was unique. His approach towards nature can be observed in a conversation with Andre Gide:

Again one day he tells Gide that: “Do you know what makes a work of art and what makes the work of nature? Do you know what makes them different? For after all, the flower of the narcissus is as beautiful as a work of art- and what distinguishes them cannot be beauty. Do you know what distinguishes them? - The work of art is always *unique*. Nature, which makes nothing durable, always repeats itself so that nothing which it makes may be lost. There are many narcissus flowers; that’s why each one can live only a day. And each time that nature

invents a new form, she repeats it” (Ellmann, 28).

Wilde emphasised creative and individual features of a work of art and Victorian approach, on the contrary, tried to stereotype everything including art. Victorian requirements of art aimed to shape art according to its own philosophy. He refused this notion and stressed the importance of individuality.

In a similar contrast to realism, Wilde emphasised that art should not indicate direct duplication of nature. In “The Decay of Lying”, he describes how the process of creating a piece of art starts and how it turns into corruption as a result of life’s interference:

Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when life gets upper hand, and drives art out into the wilderness. This is true decadence, and it is from this that we’re now suffering (“Decay of Lying”, 929).

Wilde, with this statement, strengthened his claim that the effect of nature corrupted a work of art and although ‘decadence’ was associated with immorality according to Victorian norms, Wilde used this locution as a concept that described the nature’s corrupting effect on art.

Another principle Wilde held was that perfection of art came from within, not from the outside. Vivian says, “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. She has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses” (“Decay Of Lying”, 933). This idea frees art from the generally accepted notion that a perfect work of art should be informative or didactic. Wilde argued that a work of art should not be judged by its similarity to real life and real events since it had a world of its own and it was more real than people themselves. This argument stresses that art could not be morally judged as moral principles are outside the realm of art.

Moreover, Wilde suggested that life imitates art more than art imitates life. In “The Decay of Lying” he put forward that: “Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose” (934). This statement indicates that art and inspirations arising from art affect people's behaviour. This is the transformative force in art that Wilde stressed in his moral vision. This argument leads to the idea that nature also imitates art. Wilde also set forth that realization of nature

could only take place if people have realized it through a work of art previously: “the only effects that she can show us are the effects that we have already seen through poetry, or in paintings” (“The Decay of Lying”, 943). Wildean art does not copy but it has the power of influencing life.

The obvious conclusion that can be drawn from the examples Wilde gave is that nature offers people the impressions they get from art. Wilde used Goethe’s *Werther* to illustrate that life imitates art: “‘Young man committed suicide because Rolla did so, have died by their own hand because by his own hand Werther died’” (“The Decay of Lying”, 936). He further insisted on the issue by saying that the fog in London came from the Impressionist paintings. What he deliberately tried to show was the superiority of art over nature.

Another assumption found in “The Decay of Lying” is that “art never expresses anything but itself” (938) which constituted an important principle of Wilde’s aesthetics. This hypothesis aimed at freeing art from the moral burden while supporting the belief that art does not symbolize the era in which it is produced. Another line from the essay supports this idea: “‘She develops purely on her own lines. She is not symbolic of any age’” (Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*”, 938). With his principles he deliberately tried to save art from the moral and social burden. He did not accept the fact that art was tied to the period and he refused the approach that dictated art some social responsibilities in the era it was produced. Danson comments on Wilde’s insistence on art’s self-expressive mode as: “The crucial insistence on art’s self-referentiality is intended to create a separate, privileged zone where the artists are free from moralizing censorship” (54). Art’s self-expressive character was Wilde’s answer to the pressure created by the notion that art reflected the social and moral values and therefore carried responsibility of the period it was produced in. Epifanio makes the same interpretation about Wilde’s assumption:

Art escapes history in expressing nothing but itself; “the only history that it preserves for us is the history of its own progress” It never reproduces its own age because it conforms to its own laws and conventions. It operates beyond the exigencies of historical vicissitudes since it conforms strictly to the law of plastic form, of embodied repose which absorbs all the accidents of reality (79-80).

With the quotes mentioned above, Wilde supported the idea that art had nothing to do with the rules of the period it arose in. Expressing itself and nothing about the period was Wilde’s defence of art against Victorian expectations. Art’s and the artist’s freedom from conventional rules is a crucial step to reach better standards in their development. “The artist achieves universality when he, desiring to comprehend his age, abstracts himself from it” (Epifanio, 84).

As can be understood from the discussion on “The Decay of Lying”, Wilde highly valued lying in art. Yet, the lie he constantly mentioned was not used with the lexical meaning. Lying in a Wildean sense is the telling of the beautiful and the untrue things in a creative way. He argued that art never expresses the truth. The truth in this sense is dull and consists of unimaginative facts that must not be expressed by art. Thus, art never expresses the truth. ““The fact is that we look back on the ages entirely through the medium of art, and art, very fortunately, has never once told us the truth”” (“The Decay of Lying”, 940). He supported the restoration of lying in art and he believed that real aim of art was lying which involved creating beautiful things. His deep adoration of beauty in art shaped his aesthetic principles. Wilde’s principles in “The Decay of Lying” can be summarized as follows:

- 1- Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as though has and develops purely on its own lines.
- 2- All bad art comes from returning to life and nature, elevating them into ideals. Life and nature may sometimes be used as a part of Art’s rough material, but before they are of any real service to Art, they must be translated into artistic conventions.
- 3- Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.
- 4- Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art (“The Decay of Lying”, 942-943).

“The Decay of Lying” is Wilde’s declaration of art’s independency from Victorian values. In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he supported his theories which were also depicted in the novel.

The preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also offers an insight to Wilde’s aesthetic principles. In his first argument about the artist and beauty, he suggested that “The artist is the creator of beautiful things” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 3). This brief statement is important as his initial claim indicated the fact that the first and the foremost mission of an artist is to create beautiful things. Furthermore, he argued that “Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming” (*Ibid.*, 3). With this statement he emphasized that the real corruption was finding ugliness in beauty.

Another well-known idea of Wilde is his emphasis on the fact that books could not be divided as moral or immoral but could only be separated as well-written or badly written. With this idea, he criticised the Victorian interpretation of art which required art to shape public morality. Furthermore, he argued that an artist should be free from ethical sympathies: “An ethical sympathy

is an unpardonable mannerism of style”(*Ibid.*, 3). This argument still remains as a bold remark for Victorian times in which literature was required to be perfectly moral. Employment of this notion was in full accordance with the point he made in “The Decay of Lying”. In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde saved the artist from moral constraints once again.

In the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde also put forward that an artist did not have to prove anything as only truths could be proved. His refusal of realism in literature can be frankly observed in his reaction to applying facts in art. Wilde claimed that “All art is at one surface and symbol” (*Ibid.*, 3) and he carried the argument further with other notions suggesting that there is a chance to explore the depths of art which is a risky process. He stated that “Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.” however, the risk was expressed in the following sentence: “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (*Ibid.*, 3). Thus, what one understands from art is determined with what/who he is. Wilde here depicted that if there were a mirror in art, it must have mirrored the spectator, so the corrupt saw the corruption in art. This argument stands as a very appropriate answer to those who constantly claimed that Wilde’s art was immoral.

The last sentence of The Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “All art is quite useless,” highlights his belief that art did not and could not have the mission Victorian culture required. The uselessness he conceptualised has to be judged according to the meaning of usefulness of Victorian interpretation of art. Wilde released art from its moral, political and social boundaries: “Art is ‘useless’ because in a perversely utilitarian society, it must be so in order to endure; otherwise it becomes grist for the bourgeois moral order, as the hack reviewers and members of the ‘police court of literature’ would have it be” (Brown, 110). The idea depicted in the quote is quite valid. Art’s uselessness indicates that it cannot be a tool for fostering hypocritical and rigid dogmas of Victorian period. If it was useful in a Victorian sense, then it did not have any value and people could not have the chance to reach the higher values through art. In a further suggestion Brown depicts that: “With his satiric bitterness Wilde is saying to his age: you have made art useless by your insistent utilitarianism. Like the auctioneer, you understand the price of everything and value of nothing” (110). Wilde here criticised the utilitarian philosophy of Victorian period.

Wildean art and aesthetic principles can also be examined through some of his other critical essays. In “The Critic as Artist” for instance, he formulated his aesthetic theories while he described the importance of criticism in art. In this essay, also authored in dialogue form, Earnest stands for the commonly held ideas whereas Gilbert, who is the voice of Wilde, tries to show the superiority of art over life. Wilde also claimed that a work of art had its own life from the moment it was completed.

“For when the work is finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say” (“The Critic as Artist”, 985).

In the quote above Wilde depicted the importance of audience; what the work of art describes is limited to the interpretation of audience.

The importance of beauty was emphasized once again as he argued that beauty was the best symbol of all which revealed everything and expressed nothing. “Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery- coloured world” (“The Critic as Artist”, 986). Victorian values stood for everything that was deemed “serious” and “earnest”. Thus, Wilde’s beauty expressed nothing and did not imply anything about Victorian values.

In “The Critic as Artist”, Wilde also commented on action and inaction by depicting that talking is harder than acting and he despised action. This was an unfamiliar suggestion when compared to the Victorian attitude which praised working, the utmost action. In the essay, Gilbert says, “When man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet. The whole secret lies in that” (“The Critic As Artist”, 980). He disdained the action based philosophy of Victorians. Wilde's argument of superiority of inaction goes with his statement: “What is action? It dies at the moment of its energy. It is a base concession to fact. The world is made by the singer for the dreamer” (“The Critic As Artist”, 981). He carried on with this argument as the essay displayed his idea that action belonged to the sphere of ethics. Art did not involve action; hence, it must have been free of moral constraints. This turns out to be another important step Wilde took to free art from moral judgement.

The comparison between life and art was also explored in “The Critic as Artist” and Wilde argued that life gave people pleasure, but these pleasures were always followed by pain and disappointment. He mentioned deficiencies of life and criticized its form:

For life is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in wrong way and to wrong people. There is a grotesque horror about its comedies, and its tragedies seem to culminate in farce. One is always wounded when one approaches it. Things last either too long, or not long enough (“The Critic as Artist”, 991).

Wilde’s emphasis on the deficiency of life strengthened his suggestion of art's superiority over life. Between art and life he favoured art and laid stress on his choice in his arguments. Following this criticism about life, Wilde suggested that people could live everything through art in a perfect way

as quoted from Gilbert's speech: "There is no mood or passion that Art cannot give us, and those of us who have discovered her secret can settle beforehand what our experiences are going to be" ("The Critic as Artist", 992).

Furthermore, he believed that from an artistic point of view, life was a failure so people should have been appealing to art for everything, as it offered everything without hurting them: "Because art does not hurt us. The tears that we shed at a play are type of exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of art to awaken. We weep, but we are not wounded. We grieve, but our grief is not bitter" ("The Critic as Artist", 995). Wilde used art to gain experience in life without facing moral judgement. This notion, also mentioned in the section that described Wilde's morality, it is the cornerstone of both his ethics and aesthetics. He put forward the idea that unlike life, art engendered different types of feelings in a perfect way without hurting people. Art's ability to arouse emotions without causing any harm placed it in a higher position. This idea is very crucial in assessing the art of Oscar Wilde. His assumption was that one could enjoy every type of emotion through art and that he did not need to experience them in real life as real life experiences were never satisfactory like art's experiences.

The influence of Pater can be seen in Wilde's argument as his appreciation of the experience resembles Paterian aesthetics. Experience is another concept that should be assessed carefully. What Wilde referred to as experience was the experience one could have through art. "Pater and Wilde both prefer the experience of art to the experience of life. Pater lauds the emotions engendered by art for their "sterility," that is, because they can be enjoyed for their own sake, and are not attached to a goal or aim beyond themselves" (Cohen, 111). As Cohen explains, for Wilde, art offered a chance to escape from action and suffering that followed.

This kind of an experience supposedly has no danger of any kind. In art, one can feel all sorts of emotions including sinful or evil experiences without actually getting hurt. What Wilde offered was not adopting a sinful or immoral life but the possibility of experiencing all types of human feelings through art while remaining unharmed. This moralistic approach was also described in Wilde's moral vision but it also defines the nature of his art so it has to be included in the discussion of his art.

In "The Soul of Man under Socialism", Wilde once again revealed some aspects of his artistic principles such as his ideas about the constraints on art and the artist, social pressure and importance of individualism, as well as the notions of good and bad art. The pressure that the artist

has to face can be interpreted in terms of Victorian restrictions and constraints.

Wilde pointed out how a work of art would lose its value if the artist was dictated how to perform his art. "A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want" ("The Soul of Man under Socialism", 1052). With this statement he once again criticised Victorian pressure on art and the artist.

For Wilde, individualism of the artist was essential, for its absence restricted him in his creation. He claimed that, in England, creative art was suffering from the interruption to the artist's individualism. Wilde described how and why the public disliked art and why art should have been considered as a hero that could save minds from inhumane conditions:

The public dislike novelty because they are afraid of it. It represents to them a mode of individualism, an assertion on the part of the artist that he selects his own subject, and treats it as he chooses. The public are quite right in their attitude. Art is individualism and individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of machine ("The Soul of Man under Socialism", 1053).

Art was precious for Wilde as it enabled people to feel every sorts of emotions and keep the beauty of the soul. It also helped reaching a higher moral and as it is mentioned in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism", it saved us from the monotonous dedifferentiation. Wilde offered art as a solution to restore the deficiencies of life he depicted in the previous passage along with the importance he attached to art. He also emphasized that the public would criticise a work of art when it introduced a new concept of beauty. From this perspective, if a work of art was to be charged with being inapprehensible or being immoral, then the artist would have created something beautiful or new. He took a stand against those who accused the artist of being immoral because of the subjects he had chosen. He valued artist over the public:

For what is morbidity but a mood of emotion or a mode of thought that one cannot express? The public are all morbid, because the public can never find expression for anything. The artist is never morbid. He expresses everything. He stands outside his subject, and through its medium produces incomparable and artistic effects. To call an artist morbid because he deals with morbidity as his subject-matter is as silly as if one called Shakespeare mad because he wrote *King Lear* ("The Soul of Man Under Socialism", 1055).

He stressed that selfishness created uniformity while unselfish people enjoyed variety. This argument can be assessed as Wilde charging Victorian intolerant mentality with selfishness.

Wilde also commented on the importance of the artist's duty which can be summarized as revealing art and concealing the artist. In other words, the artist should be impersonal and should not reveal anything about himself in his work. Defining the position of the artist while performing his art, he highlighted the exigency of the distance between art and the artist. In fact, this distance can be regarded as an answer to Victorian attempt to associate the artist with his art. Putting a label of corruption on a work of art was impossible for Wilde but according to the Victorian analysis, corrupt work of art was the product of a corrupt artist. Therefore, the Wildean distance between art and the artist was a counter attack to Victorian explanation. Wilde praised the freedom of art and the artist. In "The Soul of Man under Socialism" he suggested that a real artist should not give precedence to the public. For Wilde, "A true artist takes no notice whatever of the public. The public are to him non-existent. He has no poppies or honeyed cakes through which to give the monster sleep or sustenance. He leaves that to the popular novelist" (The Soul of Man under Socialism", 1060).

Wilde's heroes are crucial as he used standardized types of characters to show his resistance to Victorian social perception. The importance of hard work and usefulness in the Victorian social structure have been emphasized in the previous chapters. In contradiction with that structure, Wilde's heroes are decadent aesthetes who seem lazy and bored, fed up without doing anything. Purchase focuses on the common features of such heroes in his book and concludes that:

Their behaviour is profoundly anachronistic, in the sense of it being idle, non productive, useless and therefore, most crucially perhaps, distinctly un- middle- class and hence un- 'Victorian'. Aristocrats who uphold laziness and ennui as virtues are, needless to say, defying the Protestant work ethic so beloved of industrialist and bourgeois Victorians, and Wilde's fops smoke, drink and go to the theatre; as aesthetes, their only concern in life is with cultivating beauty and not being vulgar. They are dedicated to pleasure, leisure, the senses, to living life as art throughout the novel (40).

The quote above supports the argument that Wilde's main protagonists were an important part of his rebellion. He took a stand against Victorian values that rejected joy and praised hard work. With his lazy aesthetes who would not take part in any work except for the search for pleasure, he illustrated his dissatisfaction with Victorian values. These characters can also be assessed in terms of the dandy figure. Wildean dandy stands as the antithesis of Victorian middle class representation: "The dandy is furthermore devoted to the perfection of self, embraces individuality and strives for absolute freedom"(Green, 4).

The dandy was among the most important weapons of Wilde that reflected his criticism. With his impassivity and distance, the dandy became the spectator. He has the chance to overthrow the idefixe and conventional views of society with his unexpected notions. As Dumke depicts, “Indeed, 'the unexpected' is a major constituent of Wilde's wit. This also explains why paradoxical wit was especially important to him: it was most helpful to astonish the audience as it surprisingly turned around conventional views” (4). While criticising; values, wit and irony are among the most useful tools of the dandy. Again, Dumke points out that:

In language, wit and irony are masks. With their help the dandy has the freedom to say what he usually could not, because his own view is concealed. 35 When Wilde cloaks his attacks on society in wit and irony and oscillates between earnestness and fun, he cannot be attacked (4).

Wildean dandy does not show mature characteristics and he also does not pose any appropriate attitude in line with the valid moral codes. Wilde hid his rebellion under his sarcastic tone which was manifested through the dandy who tells the truth behind his mask.

The dandy is always “immature,” always “selfish,” because the criteria of maturity and unselfishness are crucial parts of the official value schemes of our culture, against which the dandy rebels. He rebels against both the fathers and the mothers of his culture, both of the greatest forced whose internecine conflict (Green, 10).

Aesthetic insistence on form over content can be observed in the dandy which also reflects the criticism of Victorian values. The dandy symbolises everything that a Victorian is not. As can be seen so far, Wilde’s art reflected his refusal of The Victorianism with all of his principles examined, including his dandy: “This was especially meant against the kind of content that was favoured by the Victorian philistines, who expected art 'to be spiritually uplifting and morally instructive’” (Green, 4).

Wildean paradox was another crucial tool Wilde adopted in his works. These paradoxes generally inverted fixed truths or beliefs and challenged the common rules: “Wilde's paradoxes most often reverse statements of prevailing beliefs and thus make us “reconsider the deep assumptions that govern a culture” (Dumke, 5). His paradoxes were designed to encourage people to challenge fixed patterns of conventional values.

His aestheticism and support of decadence along with his works of art should be interpreted as his resistance against hypocritical and strict Victorian morality and its demands from art and the artist. In the three essays which were examined previously and in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian*

Gray, Wilde characterised his art and aesthetics. He emphasised the superiority of art over life. In an unyielding manner Wilde highlighted the importance of beauty and his arguments supported that art should deal with beauty. The need for freedom in art was also pointed out. His dandies, paradoxes, wish for unconditional freedom of art and beauty are organic parts of his rejection. In fact, Ellmann puts forward the idea that Wilde belongs to our world instead of the Victorian era:

Richard Ellmann goes so far as to claim that Wilde ‘belongs to our world more than to Victoria’s’, essentially because [w]e inherit his struggle to achieve supreme fictions in art, to associate art with social change, to bring together individual and social impulse, to save what is eccentric and singular from being sanitized and standardized, to replace a morality of severity by one of sympathy (Kingston, 8).

The argument so far depicted how inseparable Wilde’s art and aesthetics were. Wilde criticised Victorian values through his art. His style, method, subjects, heroes, and metaphors are all organic parts of his art and; thus, are used as tools in his rebellion against the concept of Victorianism. In the following chapters Wilde’s application of his art and moral vision in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* will be examined.

VII. WILDE'S MORAL VISION, ART AND AESTHETICS IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

VII.1. WILDE'S MORAL VISION IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was at the centre of many criticisms during the period it was written. Moralistic interpretations of the novel created many controversies among the Victorian literary world and the novel was predominantly accused of being an immoral and perverted one. Yet, another opposing approach claimed that the novel posited an obvious moral. However diverse opinions were put forward, in general, Wilde's moral implications and vision were not fairly assessed and his moral vision was lost in the shadow of the controversies that the novel created. Substantially, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* involves good instances of Wilde's moral interpretations.

This section of the study aims to provide an insight to Wilde's moral vision accompanied by the examples from the novel which includes serious expostulation to the period's moral codes. The clash of Victorian and Wildean moral visions will be explored in the novel.

The Picture of Dorian Gray illustrates the story of the young and beautiful Dorian. Basil Hallward, the artist in the novel, who is very much influenced by the young Dorian Gray and his glamorous beauty, decides to paint Dorian's picture. When the picture is completed, Dorian falls in love with his own beauty and feels he can sacrifice everything to attain eternal youth and beauty including selling his soul. Thus, he wishes to remain young and his picture to grow old instead of himself. The novel narrates the fulfilment of that wish and the events that follow this wish.

Throughout the novel, cynical, witty and amoral Lord Henry Wotton makes Dorian aware of how ephemeral youth is, and under his influence, Dorian starts to live according to his own desires no matter what they are. His wish comes true and Dorian remains the same young and beautiful man while years and his sins leave their marks on the picture Basil painted. He turns into a selfish, immoral and corrupt creature behind his beautiful face. Starting with Sibyl Vane, the beautiful innocent actress who falls in love with him, he draws people to disaster. People spread rumours about him but when they see his innocent and beautiful face; they refuse to believe those rumours. Later on, he gets involved in a murder case and he causes people to commit suicide. In the end, disgusted by his picture which symbolizes his conscience, Dorian wants to get rid of it and he stabs the picture to kill it but, instead, he dies as an old and ugly man while his picture returns to its initial

beauty.

The obsession with the physical beauty in the novel illuminates the excessive importance given to appearance by Victorians who claimed to have high moral values but labelled people according to how they appear. As it was argued previously, the novel was furiously criticized and charged with indecency. In the critical review that was published in *Daily Chronicle*, the novel was described as 'dirt' and 'unclean'. It was also criticised for being:

'a tale spawned from the leprous literature of The French decadents- a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction'. Dorian Gray 'was a cool, calculating, conscienceless character' and the point of the story seemed to be that when a man feels himself becoming 'too angelic' he should rush out and make a 'beast' of himself (Pearce, 168).

This criticism can be regarded as biased because it was put forward from a moralistic point of view. Such a commentary expresses one kind of attitude towards Wilde's works which accused him of immorality. Wilde's own claim was that one should not examine a work of art from a moralistic perspective. Interestingly enough, in a letter he wrote to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, Wilde defended his novel by saying that it had an obvious moral in it:

What I want to say is that, so far from wishing to emphasise any moral in my story, the real trouble I experienced in writing the story was that of keeping the extremely obvious moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect. [...] When I first conceived the idea of a young man selling his soul in exchange for eternal youth--an idea that is old in the history of literature, but to which I have given new form--I felt that, from an aesthetic point of view, it would be difficult to keep the moral in its proper secondary place; and even now I do not feel quite sure that I have been able to do so. I think the moral too apparent. When the book is published in a volume I hope to correct this defect (Wilde, *Miscellanies*, 109-110).

Wilde believed that there was an obviously stated moral in the novel. This interpretation depicts the difference between the Victorian perspective and Wilde's point of view towards morality. For the interpretation of the *moral*, he suggested:

As for what the moral is, your critic states that it is this--that when a man feels himself becoming 'too angelic' he should rush out and make a 'beast of himself.' I cannot say that I consider this a moral. The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself (Wilde, *Miscellanies*, 110)

Wilde, in his letter to the *St. James's Gazette* written to justify the novel against the charges, stated that “there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray* a moral which the prurient will not be able to find it in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy” (Pearce, 168).

However, as it was depicted in the previous chapters, the moral Wilde implied and the Victorian interpretation of it were rather different. It is true that there is a moral in the novel, which should be assessed according to Wilde's moral norms rather than Victorian ones: “The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple” (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 671) is a quote that puts the case in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* clearly as the novel cannot be simply labelled as immoral. None of Wilde's works dealt with simple and pure absolutes. In order to show how invalid Victorian moral absolutes were, Wilde played with the notion of truth and depicted the delusions that resulted from the misinterpretation of the truth. Truths in his works are not “simple” and “vulgar” and one needs to analyse them clearly so as to distinguish what is “serious” and what is “trivial”.

At the beginning of the novel, young Dorian Gray is associated with the Greek ideal of beauty: “[...] Young Adonis who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose- leaves why, my dear Basil he is a Narcissus [...]” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 6). This man of incredible beauty attracts Basil's attention and inspires his art and under the influence of Dorian's beauty, Basil paints a picture of Dorian which turns out to be his greatest achievement. Basil's friend Lord Henry is also affected by Dorian and he works on Dorian as if he were an experiment. He urges Dorian about how transitory youth and beauty are, and advises him to live his life fully by enjoying all kinds of feelings. The most evident stress in the novel is to be in search of new sensations. With his brilliant speech and confident manner, Lord Henry the master of witty paradoxes, influences Dorian and inspires him to live his dreams and feelings how he likes

Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing... A new hedonism – that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season...” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 19)

Lord Henry's philosophy echoes Walter Pater's who also defends “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” (Pater, 236). Lord Henry goes further and claims that to reach perfection, one should live his life fully with all kinds of feelings:

I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream- I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism,

and return to the Hellenic ideal- to something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal may be (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 16).

Both Pater and Wilde were in favour of experiences through art. Wilde himself advocated this notion and he also described how to achieve it: “For Wilde, the highest order in the scale of human pleasure was after all art. According to the new aestheticism, commodities and materials, like works of art, should further sensation, pleasure and heightened individuality” (Sloan, 135). As it was argued, in Wildean perception, art provides people opportunity to live, feel and enjoy every kind of feeling without getting any physical and/or spiritual harm. Realm of art is where people do not hurt themselves or others with their passions and feelings. The first and the foremost rule in Wildean ethics is the fact that ethical codes are only applicable to actions in life; thus, only actions can be judged in terms of moral values. Wilde stresses the importance of experience in life and presents art as the perfect way to enjoy these experiences without losing the beauty of the soul.

In the novel, Dorian makes a wish to stay young and beautiful as his picture grows old instead. This wish comes true and his actions, just like the passing years leave their marks on Dorian’s picture. He grows more and more curious about life thanks to Lord Henry’s inspiring philosophy based on youth and beauty, and experiencing every kind of sensation. Under the influence of Lord Henry’s suggestions, experience becomes the main aim of Dorian’s life:

Yes. There was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival. It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly; yet, it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be. Of the asceticism that deadens the senses, as of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it was to know nothing. But it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 91- 92).

Leading a lifetime full of pleasures, Dorian cannot escape from death. He aims to enjoy every moment of his life; he searches for new sensations throughout the novel. As mentioned previously, Wildean art supplies every kind of experience without action and therefore, it is free from judgement. Dorian, instead of living through art, chooses action and hurts many people including his own soul. For this reason he is subjected to moral judgement which brings his death. He is responsible for Sibyl’s and Alan’s suicides, Basil’s death and for ruining many people's lives with unnamed sins. Accordingly, in “The Critic as Artist”, Wilde defended the superiority of speech against action: “When a man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet” (980). The action indicates imitating and it does not include creativity. They have consequences and do not provide

the chance of having pure and safe experiences. Dorian's friends who imitate him have to face the consequences of their action:

Why is your friendship so fatal to young men? There was that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton, who had to leave England with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable. What about Adrian Singleton and his dreadful end? What about Lord Kent's only son and his career? I met his father yesterday in St. James's Street. He seemed broken with shame and sorrow. What about the young Duke of Perth? What sort of life has he got now? What gentleman would associate with him?" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 106)

Basil questions Dorian's lifestyle but does not believe that he could act like the way in the rumors, since he believes that sins leave their marks on a person. As he could not see any sign of sin on Dorian's innocent face, he finds it difficult to rely on the validity of the accusations. However, in exchange for the wish he makes, his sinful actions leave their marks on the picture that stands for his conscience. This side of the story proves Wilde right in his claim that actions bring their consequences. Dorian's actions corrupt his friends like they corrupt his own soul:

One has a right to judge of a man by the effect he has over his friends. Yours seem to lose all sense of honour, of goodness, of purity. You have filled them with madness for pleasure. They have gone down into the depths. You led them there. Yes: you led them there, and yet you can smile, as you are smiling now (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 105).

Dorian is exposed to judgment for failing to choose the right way to live his sensations. If he had followed the path of art, he could have enjoyed all kinds of sterile feelings without getting hurt. The most evident example of this situation is the case of the picture and Dorian. Wilde depicted that in art, any theme can be used, free from ethical judgment. In the novel both Dorian and his picture explore the limits of corruption but Dorian dies whereas the picture survives. Nasaar explains this situation as:

In art, one can transcend to the bottom of the demon universe and emerged unscathed. This dramatized in the final pages of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian's Picture accompanies Dorian to the very depths of demon universe but it returns unharmed to its original state. Dorian, on the other hand, dies (71).

In his journey to degeneration, Dorian is influenced by Lord Henry. In fact, Lord Henry consciously and intentionally decides to work on Dorian's soul. He considers Dorian as a subject of a research. Influencing Dorian and monitoring the changes in his soul is just like a game for him. A quote about Lord Henry in the book exposes the Lord's plans: "He would seek to dominate him - he had already, indeed half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*,

29). For Lord Henry, Dorian is a study, an experiment on the human soul. When considered within this point of view, Lord Henry is an artist like Basil. Throughout the novel Lord Henry is never seen in action. He constantly talks and paves the way to destruction as he preaches and Dorian practises. Manipulating Dorian in an excellent way, Lord Henry turns Dorian into his work of art and his subject in the further analysis of passions: “It was clear to him that the experimental method was the only method by which one could arrive at any scientific analyses of the passions; and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made his hand, and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 43). In the end Dorian actualizes everything Lord Henry preaches and he admits to it by saying: “I am putting it into practice, as I do everything that you say” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 35). For Lord Henry, human life is the only thing worth experimenting on. He uses Dorian to explore the depths of feelings:

Human life--that appeared to him the one thing worth investigating. Compared to it there was nothing else of any value. It was true that as one watched life in its curious crucible of pain and pleasure, one could not wear over one's face a mask of glass, nor keep the sulphurous fumes from troubling the brain and making the imagination turbid with monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams. There were poisons so subtle that to know their properties one had to sicken of them. There were maladies so strange that one had to pass through them if one sought to understand their nature. And, yet, what a great reward one received! How wonderful the whole world became to one! To note the curious hard logic of passion, and the emotional coloured life of the intellect--to observe where they met, and where they separated, at what point they were in unison, and at what point they were at discord--there was a delight in that! What matter what the cost was? One could never pay too high a price for any sensation (42)

Lord Henry influences Dorian with his musical voice and his words, not with his life. Henry's effect is based on language which is described by Dorian as: “Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, vivid and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them!” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 17) Lord Henry is the poet who describes, Dorian is the puppet who acts.

Lord Henry says that he presents all the sins to Dorian which he cannot dare to commit. Here lies a dramatic irony. Lord Henry never acts like Dorian and Dorian commits all the sins that he always talks about. Dorian is the actor who commits sins and Lord Henry is the watcher. Therefore Lord Henry is the spectator of life; thus, he can escape the kind of judgement Dorian has to face.

Although he never acts, Henry is crucial for the novel as he triggers Dorian's some major actions. According to Epifanio, he introduces Dorian with the fear of getting old and causes him to enter the Faustian bargain. He, then, supports and flatters Dorian's narcissism after Sibyl's death and he also

makes Dorian believe that “all repentance is vain” (Epifanio, 64), not to mention the book he gives to Dorian. Later on, Dorian, calling it poisonous, complains about its bad influence. Wilde's claim that one cannot talk about moral or immoral books is also present here. Lord Henry in return depicts that “The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 151). This quote from the novel reflects the Wildean notion that art is a surface and it is dangerous to go beneath this surface because under it lies the spectator who is reflected through art. Thus, his novel, that was being stigmatized as immoral in fact mirrored the spectators own corruption.

The “poisonous book” given to Dorian has a tremendous importance in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It is often referred to as “the poisonous book” and was read by Lord Henry before Dorian. The definition of the book strikingly resembles *A Rebours*, a novel by a French decadent, Joris Karl Huysmans, authored in 1884. Jullian supports the same idea in his work: “Wilde himself recognised this debt: ‘The book in Dorian Gray is one of the many books which I have never written, but it is partly suggested by Huysmans’ *A Rebours*, which you will get at any French booksellers[...].’” (217).

In Huysmans’ novel, the protagonist is a Parisian who is disgusted by people after leading a decadent life in which he “tried to realize in [his] brief lifetime all the passions found in the history of human experience” (Epifanio, 60). For Dorian, this novel narrates his own life even before he lived it. Wilde’s notion that life imitates art is represented in his novel:

The hero, the wonderful young Parisian, in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 89).

Dorian collects various editions of the novel and he could not escape its influence. Just like Lord Henry, “For years Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 89). In one sense he imitates the hero of the novel. So, “this fantastic record soon becomes a reality as Dorian imitates what it describes” (Epifanio, 60). The book exemplifies the decadent lifestyle and works as a guideline for Dorian. It becomes an interpretation of Lord Henry’s teachings. “It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to a delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 88). Protagonist in the book becomes Dorian’s role model who actualizes Lord Henry’s fantastic suggestions. Dorian decides to act upon

this decadent novel and he enters the realm of ethics. Therefore it would be wrong to suggest that the book as a work of art has corrupting effects on Dorian. Art gives him the chance of “curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions” as Pater suggests (237). While he was given to test dark sides of emotions without getting hurt, Dorian does not choose having these experiences through the harmless sphere of art but instead chooses action. As a result, he has to face the ultimate result of his actions which is the corruption of his soul.

Upon their meeting, Lord Henry tells Dorian that: "Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul" (18). Instead of practicing this idea through art, Dorian prefers real life and action. However, in order to continue his life in high society, he has to keep his two lives separate. At this point in the story, Wilde chose to introduce the double life motif, which also reflected his criticism towards strict morality.

Social conditions like the incredible difference between public and personal lives, together with the concepts such as the creation of a second self were the results of an intolerant and so-called moral society. People were surrounded by a strict morality which manifested an opposition in form of corruption. As art was also subject to these pressures, as a result of the interference of harsh moral codes in all aspects of life, people could not find the joy and pleasure they desired in the works of art. The social pressure led to the creation of the double life in order to stay within the limits of the society. Hiding corruption behind the hypocritical morality and using ethics to create people without fancy definitely had some common reflections in the Victorian literature. Another Victorian novel, Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* projects the intolerant and one-sided point of view successfully. In the novel, Mr. M'Choakumchild, supporter of bare and unimaginative facts who could not tolerate the force of imagination says that “You must discard the world of Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it” (11).

Some elements of Gothic literature that gained popularity in the Victorian period also appeared as a reaction to Victorian pressure. Thus, there is a clear connection with the novel and important Gothic elements such as the Gothic monster, dark double and Gothic fear. The examination of some of these features illuminates the interpretation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Womack's essay provides many insights into Victorian Gothic:

As a literary phenomenon Victorian Gothic manifests itself in *fin de siècle* literature both as a subversive supernatural force and as a mechanism for social critique. Envisioning the world as a dark and spiritually turbulent tableau, the fictions of the late-Victorian gothic often depict the city of London as a corrupt urban landscape characterized by a brooding populace and its

horror- filled streets of terror (2).

The double life motif holds an important position in the examination of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The account for the creation of another secret life is crucial in the assessment of the level of the social pressure. One of the reasons behind the protagonist's creation of a second self can be defined as the clash between the desire for freedom and the need to stay within the limits of society.

Marks of Dorian's double life lead the subject back to the picture which reflects his corrupt life. Wilde gave no explicit evidence about the details, but Dorian's hidden private life gives the impression of something terrible and full of putrefaction. It is the area where Dorian practices all types of experiences that hurt other people as well as his soul. These actions bring putrefaction to his portrait.

Like the double life, dark double is another motif that Wilde used in his novel. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde used dark double motif which is a very important literary tool in expressing the monster within a person. However, Dorian's dark double is not in the original form; his picture resembles a dark double that keeps the record of his dark side. A dark double that hides the evil side of a person is still a recurrent theme in the Gothic tradition. These doubles often contradict with each other although they are the same person. Wilde also used these contrasting doubles: One is the ugly picture, conscience, and the other is the beautiful Dorian. Dorian's torturing secret allowed Wilde to show the monstrous side of Dorian.

The dark double emanates from its master's choice of a decadent lifestyle, and it has to be kept as a secret in order not to ruin the master's life. The same concept was also applied in another Victorian novel, *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in which the respectable Doctor Jekyll creates a second self, Mr. Hyde, to fulfil his desires without losing his reputation.

The need to hide the monster from the world introduces the theme of secrecy. Hiding the picture, keeping his dark side away from the world is easy for Dorian. Concealing the double is important as it symbolises master's corruption and the fear of not being able to hide it from the rest of the world raises the tension in the novel and creates a real tragedy.

Michel Foucault's theory on punishment helps develop a conception about this fear and Gothic monstrosity. Foucault claims that the nature of punishment changes in the 19th century; physical pain no longer remains as the main element of penalty and "minds rather than simply bodies

become the object of social control” (Halberstam, 72). These changes in the nature of punishment involve new practices in the field of punishment. “If body is no longer the object of the punishment then something must take its place and that something is the soul: [...] the soul is the prison of the body” (Halberstam, 72). The part of the soul that craves for forbidden pleasure wants to escape from its prison. The problem emerges when, in order to fulfil one's desires, he/she creates such a monster since this is not a suitable behaviour for good people. For the least, that is the case in Dorian's situation; his monster is his picture which he creates from the soul he sells out. Wilde, however, suggests that art can provide every feeling free of immorality. In “The Critic as Artist” it is stated that:

There is no passion that we cannot feel, no pleasure that we may not gratify, and we can choose the time of our initiation and the time of our freedom also. Life! Life! Don't let us go to life for our fulfilment or our experience. It is a thing narrowed by circumstances, incoherent in its utterance, and without that fine correspondence of form and spirit which is the only thing that can satisfy the artistic and critical temperament. It makes us pay too high a price for its wares, and we purchase the meanest of its secrets at a cost that is monstrous and infinite (995).

Dorian does not use art to experience various passions but he creates his double in search of pleasure.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, there is a connection between beauty and monstrosity. The two seem like opposite ends but they are found within each other. Halberstam describes this kind of Gothic novel as “monsterpiece” (57) as it narrates the story of monster inside the master and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* fits well into this category. After all, the monster which reflects Dorian's soul in the picture grows out of Dorian's very own soul. The Gothic monster that arises within people's minds can be regarded as the result of the social pressure. The prohibition of freedom with the help of moral constraints fosters this fear and the part of the soul which is in search of the forbidden pleasures in life turns into a monster.

Victorian moral and social repression create the dark double and dark life motif in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, showing the effect of pressure on people and revealing the burden that Victorian expectations put on people.

Another Wildean principle about the ease of being good according to the standards, which was stated in “The Critic as Artist”, is also present in the novel. Lord Henry dwells on the real meaning of immorality which is accepting the morals of the era that one lives in. He further argues that

“modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one’s age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 56). Lord Henry’s proposition redefines the term immorality as the approval of the common morality of the period. Wilde also criticised social pressure through morality with another speech of Lord Henry: “The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion--these are the two things that govern us” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 16).

Hypocrisy is another aspect of Victorian morality that Wilde objected and criticised. Although in general, Lord Henry talks in a critical manner throughout the novel, from time to time, Dorian and Basil make such criticisms as well. In his speech Basil implies that everybody with a white tie can be respected: “[...] with an evening coat and a white tie, as you told me once, anybody, even a stockbroker, can gain a reputation for being civilized” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 8). This is originally Lord Henry’s idea but it is Basil who expresses the notion, thus, along with the corrupt Dorian and amoral Lord Henry, the most moral man in the novel also criticises the hypocrisy. While defending his actions, Dorian attacks hypocrisy and tries to depict that the rest of the people are not devoted to their moral standards contrary to their claim.

The middle classes air their moral prejudices over their gross dinner-tables, and whisper about what they call the profligacies of their betters in order to try and pretend that they are in smart society and on intimate terms with the people they slander. In this country, it is enough for a man to have distinction and brains for every common tongue to wag against him. And what sort of lives do these people, who pose as being moral, lead themselves? My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 105).

Thus, it can be concluded that Wilde attacked hypocrisy from all quarters. This quote can also be examined in terms of the excessive importance given to appearance which in fact accounts for the downfall of many characters in the novel. Wilde criticised the society which claimed to pay attention to morality but applied it hypocritically and valued appearance more than reality:

It feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals, and, in its opinion, the highest respectability is of much less value than the possession of a good chef. And, after all, it is a very poor consolation to be told that the man who has given one a bad dinner, or poor wine, is irreproachable in his private life. Even the cardinal virtues cannot atone for half-cold entrees, as Lord Henry remarked once, in a discussion on the subject, and there is possibly a good deal to be said for his view. For the canons of good society are, or should be, the same as the canons of art. Form is absolutely essential to it (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 99).

While the society required morality in every aspect of life, they did not pay attention to the values and, instead, they adored the appearance rather than the moral values they defended.

In the latter chapters of the novel, Lord Henry criticises society's changing values towards harsh materialism that judges everything from a materialistic perspective: "“Nowadays people know the price of everything, and value of nothing”" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 35). One of the most outstanding signs of hypocrisy is people pretending to behave in a way that they actually are not. Moreover, they expect others to behave in the same way even if it is a lifestyle that they do not believe in. During the speech between Gladys and Lord Henry, the Victorians are described as hypocrites: "“They are more cunning than practical. When they make up their ledger, they balance stupidity by wealth, and vice by hypocrisy”" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 135). In parallel with this idea, he once again speaks out and attacks the civilization that the hypocrites are proud of: "“Civilization is not by any means an easy thing to attain to. There are only two ways by which man can reach it. One is being cultured, the other is being corrupt”" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 145). Wilde criticises Victorian civilization by use of culture and corruption. With its hypocrisy, superficial morality, social pressure, judgemental and limiting attitudes towards art and people, the culture Victorians were proud of was actually corruption for Wilde.

In his novel, Wilde depicted his own moral standards and also criticised the conventional ethics. Although *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was accused of being corrupt by many, it was not corrupt according to Wildean moral values, as art is not in the sphere of ethics and does not involve any action. Another one of his principles states that art allows people to live all kinds of sensations without getting hurt. Dorian however, tries to fulfil his desires in realm of life which involves action. Wilde accepts that actions have their consequences and therefore Dorian has to face these consequences. His actions corrupt his soul which can be observed with the changes on his picture.

After Sibyl's death, Dorian wants to become a better person because he cannot stand his soul's getting corrupt. Lord Henry comments on this issue: "“A very charming artistic basis for ethics, Dorian! I congratulate you on it”" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 69). As put forward previously, Wilde neither refused nor despised morality. His reaction was towards the oppressive and intolerant moral codes that limited freedom and creativity. Wilde used art to reach higher morality that would purify and enrich souls. He argued that perfection involved doing everything without hurting the soul and once the people reached the perfectness they would not desire anything that could possibly hurt their souls. Art allowed people to experience everything while saving the purity of their souls.

Dorian, on the other hand, corrupts his soul with his actions. He leads a double life to fulfil his desires. The double life and the dark double motif are the results of social repression. Another result

of social pressure is hypocrisy and it is also criticised in the novel.

The novel depicts decadent aspects. The forbidden themes and dark sides of pleasures are explored. The decadent touch in the novel displays Wilde's refusal of absolute morals and his aesthetic dissatisfaction from the world he lived in. Yet, when interpreted, it can be concluded that Wilde's decadence was not in the way that the hostile critics understood. As Adams depicts: "For a small audience however, "decadence" was something to be embraced and celebrated, precisely because it designated a subversion of the established order, a protest against bourgeois respectability...."(379-380).

According to Wildean morality, the worst thing is to surrender conventional morality, which he also tried to avoid in his own works. Wilde's novel shows his aesthetic perspective as well as morality and next chapter will work on Wildean aesthetic principles in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

VII.2. WILDE'S ART AND AESTHETICS IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

Wilde's aesthetic principles and his approach to art were depicted in his essays which have been examined in the previous chapters. His novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, exemplifies many of his theories that he put forward as a refusal to Victorian interpretation of art. This chapter aims to explore Wilde's theory of art in his novel and depict the dissimilarities between the Wildean and Victorian interpretations of art and aesthetics by providing examples from Wilde's criticisms of Victorian approach.

In accordance with Wilde's own assumption, Basil defends art's capability of expressing everything. "I won't tell you that I am dissatisfied with what I have done of him, or that his beauty is such that art cannot express it. There is nothing that art cannot express..." (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 11). The characters in the novel appreciate the importance of art. In fact, Dorian's picture is what makes Dorian realise his beauty. This is crucial both for the novel and Wilde's art. In accordance with Wilde's principle that a work of art inspires life, what Dorian sees becomes meaningful after he perceives in a work of art:

When he saw it he drew back and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognised himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of the words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 21).

Beauty has a tremendously important place in the novel. For instance, Basil, inspired by beauty, reflects it on his painting. He is in love with the harmony of the soul and body in Dorian.

Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school that is to have it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of that is Greek. The harmony of the soul and the body how much that is! We in our madness have invented a realism that is vulgar, a identity that is void (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 11).

The quote above shows that Basil adores Dorian's beauty and on the picture he depicts Dorian's beauty as a whole. Unfortunately, this perfect harmony collapses in a short period of time when Dorian's body and soul get separated irreparably upon his own wish and nothing could be done to unite them back together. After this separation, his soul is placed on the painting and gets uglier and uglier with each action that harms it. Dorian loses his beauty and goodness when he loses the harmony within himself.

Also depicted in “The Critic as Artist”, art is capable of expressing everything, hence there is no sensation that one cannot experience through it. This is another important principle of Wilde’s art which was frequently employed in the novel. Venice is brought to Dorian by the poem he reads. He can feel the joy and beauty of it with a couple of words about Venice:

How exquisite they were! As one read them, one seemed to be floating down the green waterways of the pink and pearl city, seated in a black gondola with silver prow and trailing curtains. The mere lines looked to him like those straight lines of turquoise-blue that follow one as one pushes out to the Lido. The sudden flashes of colour reminded him of the gleam of the opal-and-iris-throated birds that flutter round the tall honeycombed Campanile, or stalk, with such stately grace, through the dim, dust-stained arcades. Leaning back with half-closed eyes, he kept saying over and over to himself (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 114).

People are presented with a choice; thanks to art, they can enjoy all kinds of emotions without harming their souls. In the novel, Sibyl Vane is the most striking example on this issue. This beautiful girl is a wonderful actress and attracts Dorian’s attention with her beauty and talent. He loves her because she takes Dorian to the magical world of art. In his conversation with Lord Henry it can be understood that Dorian loves Sibyl but he does not have any idea about who she is; he loves Sibyl when she acts:

He shook his head. "To-night she is Imogen," he answered, "and to-morrow night she will be Juliet."

"When is she Sibyl Vane?"

"Never."

"I congratulate you." (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 40)

Sibyl plays the roles of different heroines from famous plays and she actualizes the perfect world of art. Watching her, Dorian feels as if he were one of the heroes in these plays. She dies, commits suicide or gets upset together with happy endings, but in these plays she is never hurt because of the tragedies she has gone through. She is successful because she has never experienced these passions in real life. The meeting of Sibyl and Dorian depicts the meeting of art and life. Sibyl, living in world of art, experiences every kind of passion through art. However, upon meeting Dorian she starts to look down on art and favors passions of life over art. Her acceptance of life’s superiority, her desire for realism, brings her disaster. Sibyl’s insistence on realism brings her destruction. Through Sibyl, Wilde attacked Victorian insistence on realism and exemplified the superiority of the experiences created by art.

You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is. My love! My love! Prince Charming! Prince of life! I

have grown sick of shadows. You are more to me than all art can ever be. What have I to do with the puppets of a play? When I came on to-night, I could not understand how it was that everything had gone from me. I thought that I was going to be wonderful. I found that I could do nothing. Suddenly it dawned on my soul what it all meant (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 61-62).

Sibyl has lived through art without getting any damage but the moment she faces real life and chooses life over art, she faces tragedy, which she could not handle and commits suicide. Such a tragic event once again justifies Wilde's theory; the tragedies in the plays do not harm her, but real life brings her disaster. Thus, compared to art, real life is faulty: "It often happens that the real tragedies of life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, their entire lack of style. They affect us just as vulgarity affects us" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 71). Sibyl's brother Jim, however, symbolically refuses to enter the world of art when he rejects his mother. "She felt a little disappointed that he had not joined the group. It would have increased the theatrical picturesqueness of the situation" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 46). Later on, he, too, has to face the tragedies of real life and dies.

Lord Henry brings a new perspective to this tragedy and interprets Sibyl's death from an aesthetic angle. He suggests that she has not lived in real world so she cannot die. He believes that Sibyl's death must be presumed as an end of a wonderful tragedy:

No, she will never come to life. She has played her last part. But you must think of that lonely death in the tawdry dressing-room simply as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy, as a wonderful scene from Webster, or Ford, or Cyril Tourneur. The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare's plays and left them lovelier for its presence, a reed through which Shakespeare's music sounded richer and more full of joy. The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away. Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 73).

This definition depicts Sibyl as a part of art that is destroyed with the interference of life. Dorian likes her only because of her artistic beauty. As Marshall depicts, "Dorian, it turns out, cannot admire Sibyl Vane as a woman but only as an actress, an artificial object designed for aesthetic consumption" (Marshall, 40). Lord Henry approaches her death from an aesthetic point of view and he alleviates Dorian with his aesthetic attitude towards her tragedy. Dorian gets rid of his guilt after this artistic explanation and views this case as an experience in life:

And yet I must admit that this thing that has happened does not affect me as it should. It

seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 71).

Sibyl's case also proves another Wildean principle to be true. Sibyl in real life imitates the tragedies of the heroines she portrays in her plays, which can be held as a proof of the principle, life imitates art.

Another life that imitates art is Dorian's. The picture is painted by Basil under the impression of Dorian's beauty. This work of art reveals Dorian his own beauty and he makes a wish with the fear of losing his beauty. He wishes to stay young and beautiful while his picture takes the burden of the years for him; a wish that in fact involves changing places with a work of art. As depicted by Lord Henry: "I am so glad that you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture, or produced anything outside of yourself! Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 73).

Dorian's life becomes art and his picture reflects the results of his actions. In a way this can be thought as life's imitation of art. According to Wilde, the artist should create beauty, but Dorian's art, that is his life, harms his soul and he cannot create something beautiful. What he brings into existence is something hideous. Another suggestion of Wilde was that art mirrored the spectator; thus it was risky to pass the surface and explore the depths of art. What is seen beneath is one's own soul. This notion is exemplified in Dorian's life: "His own soul was looking out at him from the canvas and calling him to judgement" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 84). Hence, Dorian is the spectator his picture mirrors. Brown comments on this issue in her work as:

During the epoch in which the painting is created and viewed (Dorian's lifetime), it functions as a mirror, unavoidably telling the age the "truth" which age itself wishes to deny, unconcealing that which is already present and hidden in the spectator" (Brown, 79-80).

Dorian's actions are inspired by the book which is often referred to as the "poisonous book". The book is an example of the decadent tradition that Wilde also supported. Dorian imitates the life of the book's hero, a work of art. His actions are inspired by Lord Henry and the book he gives Dorian. At this point, his actions can be interpreted according to another Wildean principle that when someone acts, he becomes a puppet. Dorian in that meaning is a puppet who acts according to what Lord Henry preaches. Lord Henry is the spectator of life who does not take an actual part in it and, instead, fulfils his desires over Dorian's life. By avoiding action, he tries to get rid of the tragedies of life.

Wilde showed his dislike of realism in his creative works which was examined previously. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry exemplifies this dislike as: "Names are everything. I never quarrel with actions. My one quarrel is with words. That is the reason I hate vulgar realism in literature. The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one. It is the only thing he is fit for" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 134).

In the novel, Wilde stressed the superiority of art over life by revealing art's ability of arousing all kind of sensations without hurting people. He exemplified art's inspiring force, its ability of expressing everything, and depicted his criticism of realism.

In his essays, Wilde favoured form over content. His emphasis on the form was also a criticism to Victorian aesthetics which burdened art with obligations and therefore expected a heavy moral or social content. Then, what is art's duty? According to Wilde, art did not have social or moral functions. He depicted art as immoral, only expressing itself.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the real protagonist is art. The superiority of art over life is emphasized. The main inspiration is Dorian's picture rather than Dorian himself. Wilde appealed to different art movements of the Victorian period and he supported his aesthetic theories in the novel by not putting any burden on art. At this point the ugly picture can be interpreted as a moral lesson but what Wilde actually did was to reflect life's decaying effect on art. Dorian's life corrupts art as the picture becomes hideous because of life's interference. Ugliness of the picture is the result of Dorian's actions which can be observed in the last section of the novel. When Dorian stabs the picture, he takes the responsibility of his actions and the work of art returns to its old beauty whereas Dorian loses his physical beauty. Thus, art does not have any moral implications. In a way, Wilde implied that art did not have a moral mission, it only inspired people and displayed beauty but life's influence could corrupt a work of art although it had nothing to do with corruption. In the novel, the picture of Dorian, a beautiful work of art becomes hideous because of its relationship to Dorian's life. Wilde also answered the charges that labelled his art as immoral through narratives explaining it was life which corrupted the pure and exquisite sphere of art. This example can be interpreted as his reaction to realism. When real life involves the whole, the beauty of art collapses.

The novel is connected to the decadent movement, as well as the aesthetics tradition as it explores the dark side of the feelings. Goldfarb describes the late Victorian decadence as the rejection of social concerns and emphasis on dark sensations:

Late Victorian decadence refers to poetry and prose which does not emphasize philosophical, historical, or intellectual concerns, but which does emphasize the value to be gained both from experience of all sorts and from indulgence in a life of sensations. Because of this emphasis, decadent literature is animated by the exploration of immoral and evil experiences; never does it preach morality, nor does it strongly insist upon ethical responsibilities. Decadent literature is characterized by artistic concern for the morbid, the perverse, the sordid, the artificial, the beauty to be found in the unnatural, and the representation of the cleanliness in unclean things; it is characterized by a self-conscious and weary contempt for social conventions such as truth and marriage, by an acceptance of Beauty as a basis for life (Goldfarb, 373).

The Picture of Dorian Gray involves such features and the dark side is also shown with Dorian's indulgence. However, in accordance with his own aesthetic principles, Wilde used an aesthetic expression of dark nature of humanity as Dorian comments on the dark side:

There was a horrible fascination in them all. He saw them at night, and they troubled his imagination in the day.... There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode of thought which he could realise his conception of beautiful (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 102).

Dorian's indulgence is not expressed in detail but he is seen in opium dens and he experiences dark passions to escape the real world.

Ugliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason. Ugliness was the one reality. The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense actuality of impression, than all the gracious shapes of art, the dreamy shadows of song. They were what he needed for forgetfulness. In three days he would be free (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 130).

Wilde combined aesthetic and decadent concepts in his novel. In Wildean approach, even sin can be expressed in an aesthetic way since art allows people to discover different experiences including darker aspects of life. A work of art cannot be an immoral act as art does not involve action. Yet, in Dorian's case, he practices what he has read in the novel given to him by Lord Henry and when he imitates the book, he passes beyond the sphere of art and acts in real life.

Wilde's application of decadence in his novel was also his reaction to Victorianism. He offered inaction, criticism, dissatisfaction, strangeness and aesthetics when Victorians required reinforcement of obedience, purpose and morality in art.

The importance of the dandy figure was mentioned in the previous chapters. It was also an

important weapon in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through which Wilde expressed his dissatisfaction from the era. In *Children of the Sun*, the dandy is described as:

[...] a rebel or more often a cynic, about many things in which most men and woman find the good, the true, 'and the beautiful. Marriage and the home are values as dubious to him as are responsibility and business success. As Baudelaire put it, dandies are interested in neither Money nor love. They are interested in style, in refinement, and in fantasy (Green 9-10).

Likewise, in the rebellion against Victorian values, the dandy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is Lord Henry. He is the spectator and master of paradox who has a comment to make for everything. The dandy appears as the obverse of Victorian middle class mind. His laziness and boredom is an opposition to Victorian hard work, his effeminacy is the antithesis of manliness. With his insistence on form over content, and artificial over natural, he solidifies the rejection of conventional values. He glorifies art and beauty, emphasises art's superiority, mocks the so-called morality and criticises conventional values and people in his humorous way with witticisms.

She is still *décolletée*," he answered, taking an olive in his long fingers; "and when she is in a very smart gown she looks like an *édition de luxe* of a bad French novel. She is really wonderful, and full of surprises. Her capacity for family affection is extraordinary. When her third husband died, her hair turned quite gold from grief (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 123).

Art was priceless for Wilde because it was able to provide everything people needed. It was a way of purifying one's soul. He always narrated the world of art. For instance, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, long descriptions of several works of art can be detected. In a conversation with Gide, Wilde asked him what he had done since the day before and Gide responded by listing the trivial things he had done. Wilde then answered:

But then why repeat it? You do see that it's not at all interesting. Understand that there are two worlds: the one that is without one's speaking about it; it's called the *real world* because there's no need to talk about it in order to see it. And the other is the world of art; that's the one which has to be talked about because it would not exist otherwise (Ellmann, 27).

He preferred talking about art so that it would exist and fill people with the perfect forms of feelings that they needed in their lives. In his works including *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he employed an aesthetic style to express his notions. He tried to free art from its boundaries and feverishly criticised those who compelled art to dictate social and moral rules. Wilde did not steer away from his own path when he expressed the truth. In "The Critic as Artist" he suggested, "Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (1002). Wilde's art was his mask and he told his own truth behind that mask. When criticising, Wilde adopted the same style as he told "beautiful, untrue things" in an

aesthetic manner away from the “vulgar realism” that he disliked. Next chapters will focus on the aesthetic and moral exploration of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that also exemplifies Wilde’s reaction to Victorian values.

VIII. WILDE'S MORAL VISION, ART AND AESTHETICS IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

V.III. 1. WILDE'S MORAL VISION IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People is a hilarious play of Oscar Wilde which is still regarded as one of the most popular comedies in English drama. It is set in Victorian England and satirises the period with witty dialogues. The play includes serious moral and social criticisms and mocks the shallow Victorian values, Victorian hypocrisy and hypocritical morality, as well as the social institutions of the Era by focusing on the term *Victorian earnestness*. This chapter of the study aims to illuminate the clash between Wildean morality and Victorian ethics while depicting Wilde's refusal of Victorian values through the exploration of examples from the play.

The play starts with Jack's visit to his friend Algernon's house. He goes there with the name Earnest with the intention of proposing to Gwendolen, Algernon's cousin. Algernon refuses to give his permission unless Jack tells him why his name on the cigarette box is Jack. Later, it turns out that Jack uses his fictitious brother Earnest in order to come to the city more often and Algernon uses his imaginary friend Bunbury to visit the country to escape from his social responsibilities. Jack has to admit that he is the guardian of a young girl called Cecily and, to set a good example, he has to be careful with his life, so he makes up a fictitious brother to escape his social position. Algernon later becomes interested in Cecily and goes to see her under the name of Earnest, Jack's fictitious brother. Eventually Gwendolen arrives to see Jack who is known to her as Earnest and there she meets Cecily who also claims that she is engaged to Earnest. Two men lose control of the situation. With the arrival of Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen's mother, the lovers have to pass a hard test. At the end, problems are solved and it comes out that Jack is the elder brother of Algernon whose name is Earnest.

As suggested earlier, Wilde made serious social and moral criticisms in the play, all of which were depicted in a sarcastic way with skilful use of dialogues. The play reflects Wilde's attitude towards strict conventional codes. Ellmann supports this idea by referring to Bentley: "Eric Bentley considers the play to be an attack upon a series of moral foibles, the more piercing because it pretends not to pierce at all" (Ellmann, 7). They are expressed in such a humorous way that Victorian audience bursted out laughing at the play that actually criticised them. The play's subtitle, *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, includes a pun. The dictionary meaning of earnest indicates:

“...resulting from or showing sincere and intense conviction...” (Oxford Dictionaries). However Wilde’s use of earnestness symbolised false and hypocritical Victorian seriousness. He depicted Victorian seriousness as a shallow and hypocritical mask. If the audience is “earnest” in this sense, the play only exposes trivial issues. Thus, the play was a trivial comedy for Victorian philistine but it was a serious comedy for those who were trivial as opposed to Victorian earnestness. Dumke points out that: “As seriousness of matter is the disguise of the fool, folly in its exquisite modes of triviality and indifference and lack of care is the robe of the wise man” (16). The play is based on the witty use of these opposite notions. As Ellman argues, earnestness in the play has negative connotations:

Insensitivity to slight and delicate things is insensitivity *tout court*. That is what Wilde meant when he declared that the man who despises superficiality is himself superficial. His best play is connected with this idea. As its title confesses, it is about *earnestness*, that is Victorian solemnity, that kind of false seriousness which means priggishness, hypocrisy, and lack of irony. Wilde proclaims that that earnestness is less praiseworthy than the ironic attitude to life (Ellmann, 111).

Wilde made severe criticisms on social values and institutions. He inverted all the conventional motifs and ridiculed the hypocritical application of them. In the play, the first emphasis can be seen on marriage. This subject appears for the first time during the speech of Lane and Algernon and is presented as an unpleasant state. Later Jack tells Algernon that he comes to the city to have some fun; however, it turns out that he comes there to propose to Gwendolen and they start discussing the content of marriage:

JACK. I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.
ALGERNON. I thought you had come up for pleasure?...I call that business.(*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 678)

Wilde mocked the Victorian marriages, based on economical conditions of the couples. In the later stages of the play, Lady Bracknell’s business-like attitude towards marriage proves Algernon's notion to be true. She reports that if Gwendolen was engaged to someone, she would learn it from her parents. The eligible bachelors list that she shares with Duchess of Bolton also implies that she sees marriage primarily as a profitable business. Lady Bracknell’s remark on Gwendolen’s unexpected engagement depicts her interpretation of marriage:

LADY BRACKNELL. Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself... And now I

have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Worthing. While I am making these inquiries, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me below in the carriage. (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 677)

She approves Algernon and Cecily's marriage after she finds out about Cecily's economical situation.

The play criticizes Victorian conception of marriage. Gwendolen and Cecily's romantic feelings are the result of their desire to marry someone with the name Earnest. They only pay attention to the appearance and they want a husband whose name is Earnest. They do not care about whether their fiancé is really earnest or not. They also easily accept the fact that they may not be able to marry the man they love. For instance when her mother does not give her permission to her marriage with Jack, Gwendolen says that she will always remember Jack no matter how many times she gets married:

GWENDOLEN. [...] But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry someone else, and marry often, nothing that she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 682).

In a similar vein, when Jack does not give his permission Cecily's and Algernon's marriage, she says she cannot wait until she reaches to lawful age:

CECILY. Yes, I felt it instinctively, but I couldn't wait all that time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross. I am not punctual myself, I know, but I do like punctuality in others, and waiting, even to be married, is quite out of the question (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 711).

Wilde ridiculed the supposedly high values of Victorian marriage. He displayed the moral constraints of the period and also showed the hypocritical attitude towards morality that resulted from these restraints. Miss Prism, Cecily's governess, has rigid moral assumptions. As her name suggests, her comments reflect Victorian values like a prism. Her remarks consist of clichés on many issues such as literature fiction and morality. However, she and Dr. Chasuble share mutual romantic feelings which can be detected from her attitude that completely changes when she meets him. As Nasaar suggests:

All her moral platitudes and the preaching of her three-volume novel are dropped as she surrenders to her sexual drive. She tries to maintain a façade of respectability, but this façade is hilariously shattered when she obliquely tries to suggest that she is the best woman for him (Nasaar, 140).

She definitely has feelings for Dr. Chasuble and her rigid moral values disappear when she is with him. During their conversation, Wilde reveals their hidden sexual desires through the metaphors they use. Dr. Chasuble, the doctor of divinity, also has difficulty in hiding his feelings. They display the examples of the Victorian opposition between appearance and reality.

CHASUBLE. That is strange. Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips. [Miss Prism glares.] I spoke metaphorically.—My metaphor was drawn from bees. Ahem! Mr. Worthing, I suppose, has not returned from town yet? (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 685)

Wilde further reflected the emptiness and hypocrisy behind the strict and solid values. Victorian repression fosters hypocrisy in people and the most important result of hypocrisy is the double life that is created by Algernon and Jack. All events rest on the fictitious identities of Algernon and Jack that they invent to escape from social restrictions. Algernon and his friend who is known to him as Earnest find out that both of them create second selves for themselves. The term Algernon uses for the people with a second self is "Bunburyist" and himself is a Bunburyist, too. Algernon creates an imaginary friend called Bunbury for himself and he falls back upon this friend whenever he wants to escape from his boring social duties. Likewise, his friend becomes Jack in the country and Earnest in the city. Jack guards a young lady called Cecily and he believes that he has to behave according to certain moral codes. For this reason he creates an imaginary brother to escape from the constraints of this obligatory morality:

JACK. My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretend to have a younger brother of the name Earnest, who lives in Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 671).

This is ironic because Jack does not behave in an earnest way but his attitude reveals quite the opposite of earnestness. With this speech, Jack shows that these high morals that are requested by the society do not contribute to one's happiness or health. So "behaving well" according to social norms and "feeling well" displays a contradiction which is also emphasized by Lady Bracknell in a conversation with Algernon:

LADY BRACKNELL. Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.

ALGERNON. I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL. That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go

together. (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 673)

Algernon's imaginary friend, Bunbury, has very poor health so he goes to look after him whenever Bunbury gets ill. Algernon is grateful to him because his bad health lets Algernon escape from his social obligations.

ALGERNON. You have invented a very useful younger brother called Earnest, in order that you may be able to come up town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 672).

Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also has a double life so as to live as he likes while he stays within the limits of society. Like Dorian, Algernon is able to get rid of the social burden and Earnest creates a dignified and mature image for Cecily thanks to their second identities. Miss Prism claims that she has not seen a young man so responsible as Jack. She also thinks that Jack deals with his bad-tempered brother and respects him for that, too.

MISS PRISM. Your guardian enjoys the best of health, and his gravity of demeanour is especially to be commended in one so comparatively young as he is. I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 684).

If Jack and Algernon are compared, keeping in mind that Jack wants to abandon his brother and Algernon is glad to have one; Jack's behaviour seems sneakier as he uses an acquaintance to deceive people to the point of telling that his brother is dead. He pretends to be a man who is very virtuous which is far more hypocritical than Algernon's behaviour. Jack makes everyone believe that he has an immoral brother and having such a brother makes him seem even more virtuous. The people who are deceived by Jack admire him because of his ostensible and hypocritical virtues.

CHASUABLE. Ah yes, he usually likes to spend his Sunday in London. He is not one of those whose sole aim is enjoyment, as, by all accounts, that unfortunate young man his brother seems to be [...] (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 686).

Jack, who announces that he has never wanted a brother, later shifts his attitude and propounds that he has always known he had a brother.

What Algernon and Jack do in the country and the city, respectively, are not told directly in a similar way to Dorian's unclear secret life. The audience is informed only about the fact that they use these fictitious characters when they need an escape from their lives.

Leading a dull life in the country, Cecily spends most of her time with Miss Prism. She knows about her uncle Jack's brother who has gone astray and she is romantically quite interested in him. His name, "Earnest", and his reputation of wickedness are enough for her to love him. She desires him to be really wicked, different from all the virtuous and dull people around her. Here being wicked has positive connotations when compared to being good according to Victorian values. As it was discussed in the previous chapters, for Wilde being good according "vulgar standards" of Victorian period is not a positive feature. Cecily does not want Earnest to be a man who is good according to the conventional norms of goodness. In the following dialogue with Algernon, who visits Jack's house as his brother Earnest, she describes hypocrisy as pretending to be wicked but being good which is highly paradoxical.

CECILY. If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable way. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked but being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 687).

Cecily and Gwendolen take part in one of the most hypocritical situations in the play. Gwendolen comes to see Jack and she comes across Cecily. Things go well between the two until they find out that they are both engaged to Earnest. Then, out of jealousy, they talk in a far more different way compared to their first encounter, which is exemplified below:

GWENDOLEN. Cecily Cardew? (Moving to her and shaking hands.) What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we're going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 696).

Later on, Gwendolen and Cecily start arguing and the following dialogue exposes the sudden change in Gwendolen's manner during this argument:

GWENDOLEN. From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 700).

Their argument because of jealousy emerges as one of the most humorous scenes in the play. Although they accuse themselves of stealing each other's fiancé, the argument seems to be the result of cake and sugar:

GWENDOLEN. You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most

distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 700).

This is important because they do not talk earnestly, they hide their real face behind the trivial issues. They behave in accordance with Wilde's notion that people tell the truth with their mask. The sugar and tea work as a mask that let girls express their own ideas about each other. In the following stages of the play, Lady Bracknell makes her debut and it is obvious from her attitude that she does not accept Algernon and Cecily, and Jack and Gwendolen as couples. At first she looks down on Cecily, but after finding out that Cecily has a fair amount of wealth and comes from a good family background, Lady Bracknell immediately changes her attitude towards her:

LADY BRACKNELL. [Sitting down again.] A moment, Mr. Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces. [To Cecily.] Come over here, dear (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 708).

Lady Bracknell lays emphasis on the fact that Algernon does not have a promising economic condition; however, this time interestingly enough she claims that she does not approve marriages based on money. This approach is totally dissimilar to the one that she has shown in the first act:

LADY BRACKNELL. Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that. (*To Cecily*.) Dear child, of course you know that Algernon has nothing but his debts to depend upon. But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way. Well, I suppose I must give my consent (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 709).

She suggests that style is more important than reality. She believes that how Algernon looks is more important than what he really is. Lady Bracknell's attitude towards morality criticises Victorian moral manners that indicated high ethical norms but valued appearance instead. Wilde again exemplified and criticised the opposition between appearance and reality.

LADY BRACKNELL. Upon what grounds may I ask? Algernon is extremely, I almost say an ostentatious, eligible young man. He has nothing but he looks everything. What more can one desire? (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 709)

The overemphasis on style can also be seen as a criticism of society which gives importance to appearance more than reality. Gwendolen and Cecily forgive Jack and Algernon for their lies as the

two girls are more interested in the beauty of what they say:

CECILY. [To Gwendolen.] That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?

GWENDOLEN. Yes, dear, if you can believe him.

CECILY. I don't. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.

GWENDOLEN. True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing. Mr. Worthing, what explanation can you offer to me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible? (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 70)

Wilde revolved around the Victorian dissimilarity of reality and appearance and depicted the contradiction between them. Gwendolen and Cecily want an "Earnest" but they ignore the virtue of "earnestness". Manner becomes more important than reality. The same notion was also observed in previous chapters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "Even the cardinal virtues cannot atone for half-cold *entrées*" (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 99).

Victorian overemphasis on customs is ridiculed in the proposal scene between Jack and Gwendolen. Her exaggerated insistence on style is an example of the unnecessary adherence to meaningless customs:

GWENDOLEN. I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.

JACK. Well... may I propose to you now?

GWENDOLEN. I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly before-hand that I am fully determined to accept you.

JACK. Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN. Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?

JACK. You know what I have got to say to you.

GWENDOLEN. Yes, but you don't say it.

JACK. Gwendolen, will you marry me? [Goes on his knees](*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 676)

Victorian moral values were repressive and they ignored individuality with the aim of stereotyping people. Gwendolen who is brought up under the influence of Lady Bracknell is a copy of her mother. She is also dependent on the shallow values like her mother who symbolises whole concept of Victorianism. People could not escape Victorian values in their own character. They could not be authentic. They were only able to escape Victorian pressure as gothic figures with double lives like Dorian, Jack and Algernon.

In the play, the situation of the social classes is also criticised. When Cecily and Miss Prism are

talking about economy, Cecily is asked to describe the relationship between capital and labour. She says that the only relationship she knows is the one that is between capital and idleness depicting the relationship between upper classes and the ease of being wealthy. Furthermore, the speech between Lady Bracknell and Jack depicts the importance of occupation for a man. Thus, the upper classes are depicted as idle. During the conversation of Lady Bracknell and Jack, smoking is evolved as an occupation:

JACK. Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

LADY BRACKNELL. I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you? (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 677)

The name *Earnest* bears different meanings for people in the play. As Gillespie argues, for Algernon, Earnest is his friend and when it comes to Jack, Earnest symbolises his hunger for desires which he tries to fulfil over his brother called Earnest. As for Gwendolen, Earnest represents an example of moral perfection and for Cecily, he is a romantic figure that comes out of her chatting with Miss Prism. It is ironic that both girls assume Earnest as the safest name in the world; however, they are deceived by this safe name which depicts a serious irony. Earnest is connected to Victorian values such as false seriousness, self-righteousness and hypocrisy. As Dumke depicts:

Victorian earnestness becomes manifest in political, moral and religious orthodoxy. Its repressive character provoked hypocrisy, which allowed the fulfilment of individual desires while at the same time one's role in society was maintained.¹⁵⁷ Hypocrisy became "the most characteristic vice of the age" (20).

In the play what seems earnest is in fact depicts a lie. After all, it was the social pressure and hypocritical attitudes of people that created false seriousness or earnestness. Wilde satirised the Victorian moral codes and revealed the absurdity and superficiality of these principles. Wilde's morality refused being good according to Victorian standards of goodness and he located "triviality" against Victorian "earnestness". By inverting the accustomed and conventional rules, he challenged Victorian ethics.

With all these aforementioned examples in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde ridiculed the whole concept of Victorianism. Victorian morality taking its share from his satire and his feverish criticism centred upon earnestness as the hallmark of Victorian characteristics: "By a paradox that would have pleased Wilde, the play has become a Victorian period- piece, although its chief is to reduce Victorian pieties to the level of amiable idiocies." (Ellmann, 7-8) He trivialized the serious

and aggravated the trivial. Hence, “It is only a 'trivial comedy' if we are 'serious people', that is Philistines. If we are trivial in the sense of Wilde, then it is a 'serious comedy' that has to be treated accordingly” (Dumke, 28).

In the play, Victorian “earnestness” is shown as a symbol of the hypocritical and superficial values of Victorian age and depicts the Victorian opposition between appearance and reality. Wilde criticized the hypocrisy of the period and its effects on people through the double life concept which was created as a result of social pressure on people. The superficial virtues and courtesy were also ridiculed with the attitudes of the characters.

Victorian materialism was also displayed with the marriage which was shown as a business contract. As discussed earlier in this section, Jack poses a more hypocritical attitude in the play. Algernon, on the other hand, is criticized by Jack because of his triviality. It can be argued that Algernon has a better chance to attain higher morality. Wilde proves this notion to be true and Jack turns out to be the Earnest at the end of the play. From Wilde’s standpoint, earnestness was the symbol of Victorian values that he criticized. So with his name Earnest and his false Victorian earnestness, Jack presents a real irony with the opposition between the dictionary meaning of earnest and the features he adopts. Fineman argues that: “the paradox very neatly summarizes the plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, since Earnest will himself be earnest only when he isn't, just as he will not be earnest only when he is” (82).

Wilde depicted that in Victorian society, the trivial rather than the serious has the chance to attain higher virtues and moral values. Wilde attacked “vulgar standards of goodness” (“The Critic as Artist”), shallow and tyrannical morality and hypocritical application of morality and displayed the Victorian opposition between appearance and reality. In the next chapter, the discussion move towards the exploration of Wilde’s aesthetics and art in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

V.III.2. WILDE'S ART AND AESTHETICS IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

The previous section has shown that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a crucial work of art which focuses on Victorian "earnestness" to depict Wilde's criticisms toward Victorian morality. Wilde ridiculed the hypocritical application of the moral values with his skillful and witty use of language. In this part of the study, the focus will be on Wilde's artistic principles in the play. As art was indispensable for Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* reveals some details that exemplify his attitude on art. As depicted previously, Wilde's art and moral values cannot be separated. In the play Wilde criticizes society's point of view toward art and as their perspective was shaped by moral expectancies, he criticizes the society as well. As Foster suggests:

By ex-posing and burlesquing the vacuities of a moribund literature Wilde satirizes, too, the society that sustains and produces it; he has given us an oblique perspective on a society's shallowness through direct ridicule of the shallow art in which it sees its reflection (23).

In Act 1, while Algernon and Jack are talking about the nature of truth, Algernon denies truth's being pure and simple and he says that:

ALGERNON: The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility! (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 671)

This is an important quote which has also been referred to in previous sections. It states the difficulty of single sided explanations and also stresses the importance of creative faculty in art. Wilde's truths are not simple and he also depicts this in his play. As Foster argues in his essay, "From this point on, Wilde's play is to be a satiric demonstration of how art can lie romantically about human beings and distort the simple laws of real life with melodramatic complications and improbably easy escapes from them"(20) In the play Wilde himself created a world where he inverts all the common values and concepts.

Another hint about Wilde's art lies in Algernon's comment about modern literature's revealing the social pressure on art:

ALGERNON. Oh! it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read (*Importance of Being Earnest*, 670).

With the quote above, Wilde criticised the social assertiveness on literature and showed the

absurdity of setting rules in art. As it has been stressed in this study, in the Era the books were required to foster social values and they were classified as moral or immoral. The novels that were labelled as corrupt would be dragged through the mud. Wilde was against that type of attitude art and for this reason he supported freedom in art from social or moral constraints.

Literary criticism is an important theme that Wilde often explored in his essays. In the play, Wilde showed that this important job was in the hands of wrong people called journalists.

ALGERNON. Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. Don't try it. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers (*Importance of Being Earnest*, 671).

In his essay, "The Critic As Artist", along with his principles about art and aesthetics, Wilde described the characteristics of the critic. The critic, for Wilde, should be creative besides being critical of the conventional morality. With the quote above Wilde expressed his criticism towards journalists who judged works of art without sufficient knowledge about art. As it can be remembered from the previous sections, his own novel was labelled as "dirt" and he was among the authors who were attacked by the journalists. For their "vulgarity" in approaching and assessing literature, they were not qualified enough to criticize a work of art:

GILBERT. Earnest, you are quite delightful, but your views are terribly unsound. I am afraid that you have been listening to the conversation of someone older than yourself. That is always a dangerous thing to do, and if you allow it to degenerate into a habit you will find it absolutely fatal to any intellectual development. As for modern journalism, it is not my business to defend it. It justifies its own existence by the great Darwinian principle of the survival of the vulgarest. I have merely to do with literature ("The Critic as Artist", 971).

He distinguished journalism from literature and emphasised the importance of literature while criticising journalists.

The decadent movement, which was severely criticised by most of the Victorians, was highly influenced by French literature. Lady Bracknell's notions about French music can be seen as an example of the anti-French attitude in art:

LADY BRACKNELL. Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you. [Rising, and following Algernon.] I'm sure the programme will be delightful, after a few expurgations. French songs I cannot possibly allow. People always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse. But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed, I believe is so. Gwendolen, you will accompany

me (*Importance of Being Earnest*, 675).

During the period, French decadence and its reflections in English were regarded as corrupt works of art. This approach reflected through Lady Bracknell, resembles the general attitude to decadent French literature.

Miss Prism contributes to the play with her clichés and so-called Puritanism. With her middle class ethical values, she supports Victorian moral demands from literature. The insistence on art having a purpose is portrayed through Miss Prism's opinions about fiction.

MISS PRISM. The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means (*Importance of Being Earnest*, 685).

She depicts a simplistic understanding of art. However, Miss Prism's point of view towards fiction and literature were picked apart by Wilde when it is revealed that she has written a three-volume novel. In "The Critic as Artist", authors of three-volume novels are shown as people with a lack of knowledge about literature and life.

GILBERT. Certainly. Anybody can write a three-volumed novel. It merely requires a complete ignorance of both life and literature (*The Critic as Artist*, 978).

The comment on fiction's involving happy ending for the good and punishment for the bad comes from Miss Prism, who, according to Wilde, has no knowledge about art or life. Through Miss Prism's notions, Victorian evaluation of literature is criticised.

Another notion that can be inferred from the play derives from a conversation between Miss Prism and Cecily. Miss Prism could not understand the source of Cecily's opinions but she is sure that they do not come from the books she has given. Cecily on the other hand says that the books that can be taken as an example are not written to affect people. The good books, then do not aim to shape people's mind. Cecily's answer to Miss Prism can be appreciated as an illustration of the motto *art for art's sake*.

Cecily is presented as an imaginative and creative fantasist. She keeps a diary in which she dictates the important events of her life. However, her diary keeps the record of nonexistent romantic relationship between herself and Earnest, who is known to her as Jack's brother. Cecily's record of nonexistent relationship can be a symbol of artists' creative writing:

CECILY. On the 14th of February last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this is the little bangle with the true lover's knot I promised you always to wear (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 694).

The romantic relationship that she develops in her diary is later imitated by her life and she becomes engaged to Earnest like she writes in her diary. This situation can be inferred to as an example of life's imitation of art.

As observed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the dandy is an essential figure in Wilde's art. The dandy figure is also frequently applied in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wildean dandy in the play is a witty and flamboyant kind of philosopher who mocks society's hypocritical moral values with his skilful use of language. The dandy plays the role of the trivial and shallow. In the play, many characters show characteristics of dandy. Algernon exposes many features of the dandy with his witticisms and triviality. For example, his sarcastic comment that a gentleman never has any money, mocks the upper classes. Apart from Algernon, other characters also behave like dandy. With their insistence on form and style, Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen are being dandical. Jack's insistence on pleasure can also be interpreted as dandical. Cecily, with her witty remarks and refusal of conventional morality, is a very appropriate match for Algernon. In fact she can be regarded as a better dandy than Algernon as during a conversation she surpasses Algernon.

ALGERNON. Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn't think that I am wicked.

CECILY. If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy. (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 686-687)

As it can be seen in the previous sections, Wilde's approach towards art was completely dissimilar to the general Victorian interpretation of art. Wilde was opposed to the idea that art should have a social and moral mission and from this point he declared art's immorality and uselessness. However the uselessness and immorality depicted his refusal to Victorian tendency of using art as a tool in fostering conventional values. With this stand, he also declared his rebellion against Victorian point of view. However he did not ignore morality as a concept and he responded the moral vision of his time by means of its critique. *Importance of Being Earnest*, in a similar manner with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, depicts his rejection. Wilde implicated his dislike of journalistic criticisms and vulgar

realism in art. Wilde criticised the common Victorian approach to fiction which included social pressure, while ridiculing Victorian expectancies from art.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to investigate Wilde's approach towards morality and art in relation to Victorian interpretation of ethics and art. The analysis depicts Wilde's art and aesthetic theories and moral vision as well as his rebellion against Victorian moral values and art. It also provides a basis for the exploration of his morality and art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Throughout the process, Victorian background is examined in order to understand the state of the society and the reasons behind the oppressive moral codes. Later, a general analysis of Victorian moral codes reveal the strict and dogmatic moral rules of Victorian ethics with oppressive requirements and hypocritical application of these expectations. In the following chapter, Wilde's moral vision is examined. With its insistence on individualism and freedom, it appears as the antithesis of Victorian moral codes. Wilde divided the realm of ethics and art and claimed that ethics should deal with actions. His notion that art is not a type of action saves art from moral judgement and provides freedom for the artist. Wildean morality is closely tied to his art and therefore, in the study, they are assessed together to appreciate Wilde's point of view.

Similar to his moral values, his art reflected his refusal of Victorian approach towards art. Thus, to contextualise Wilde in Victorian literary world, Victorian literature is explored before moving on to analysing Wilde's art and aesthetics. A general analysis of Victorian literature displays the fact that moralist interpretation of art spread to the period's literary movements and authors. Victorian literature aimed to shape public opinion. However, some authors including Wilde, reacted against Victorian tendency of using art to establish conventional moral codes. Aesthetic and decadent movements are also depicted as the rejection of Victorian pressure on art. The leading figures in Victorian literature that influenced Wilde are included in the discussion before moving on to Wilde's artistic principles.

Following this introductory social and literary study, Wilde's art and aesthetics are analysed. The main sources for this assessment are Wilde's essays, "Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist", which were written in the form of dialogue, and "Soul of Man under Socialism", which praises individualism but embodies Wilde's theories on art. The preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which provides a short summary of his aesthetics vision, is also included in the discussion. It is depicted that Wilde did not view art as a social or moral tool, but instead he approached art as a free zone in which people could experience different sensations without being subjected to moral

judgement. Therefore it could elevate conventional ethics to higher morality. Interpretation of Wilde's arts and aesthetics, mainly his refusal of realism and moral constraints, devotion to inspiring force of art together with its creativity and beauty are used as a basis for his refusal of Victorian assessment of art.

These chapters provide the theoretical knowledge on Wilde's art and morality and depict their interdependency. His art and moral values stand as the antithesis of Victorian attitude towards art and morality and, in light of these findings, his moral vision together with art and aesthetics are explored in Wilde's two creative works *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Wilde's moral vision in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* depicts the Victorian misjudgement that stigmatizes the novel as immoral. Wilde rejected Victorian moral pressure, not the notion of morality. The Victorian pressure is depicted through the analysis of Dorian's double life and hypocritical moral assessment of society while Wilde's feverish criticisms on Victorian values are depicted through the examples from the novel.

His approach to art is also explored in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde's reaction to Victorian interpretation of art is detected together with his refusal of realism in art. He exemplified art's ability to express everything and stressed the inspiring force of art. The superiority of art over life was indicated and Wilde also depicted that the work of art mirrors the spectator.

Wilde's morality in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is observed as well. The satire of Victorian values through the focus on *earnestness* depicts the superficial and hollow Victorian ethics. Hypocritical application of morality and the double life motif are examined as the results of Victorian repression.

Wilde's perspective in art is examined through *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Together with his reaction to journalists for their vulgar assessment of art, Wilde's criticism to realist movement in art is detected in the exploration of the play. The Victorian attitude towards French literature, which inspired decadence in England, is also revealed and Victorian expectations from art are ridiculed by Wilde.

As it is observed in this study, Wildean ethics and aesthetics are interconnected and become meaningful when they are examined together in relation to Victorian context. Therefore the

exploration of Victorian background, Victorian morality and Victorian literature are essential to contextualise Wilde in Victorian setting and they provide necessary grounds for the discussion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Analysis of Wildean morality depicts his deep concern for the moral standards in Victorian England while emphasizing his refusal of conventional moral rules. In this work it is shown that Wilde's aesthetics principles and approach to art criticize the use of art in shaping public mind according to Victorian values. Wilde's principles aimed to stress the need of individuality, creativity and beauty in art while freeing it from moral and social constraints of the period.

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