

# A Study of the Aestheticism Paradox in The Picture of Dorian Gray

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**Abstract:** Oscar Wilde, a leading 19th-century British proponent of aestheticism and “art for art’s sake,” embodies profound contradictions within his sole novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This work intertwines aesthetic ideals with social morality, creating an ambivalence central to Wilde’s aestheticism paradox. Analyzing the novel, this paper explores Wilde’s paradoxical style through three lenses: paradoxes in protagonist portrayal, tensions between morality and aesthetic art, and conflicts between aesthetic ideals and social reality. It reveals how Wilde’s self-contradictory writing critiques aestheticism’s limitations and Victorian society, enriching the work’s psychological and social depth beyond mere theoretical discourse.

**Keywords:** Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, aestheticism, paradox

## 1. Introduction

Aestheticism, emerging in modernization, championed artistic autonomy and dismissed conventions. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveals reality’s impact on art, exposing Wilde’s internal conflict and his artistic exploration and challenging to social norms.

This paper explores contradictions, Wilde’s philosophy, and aestheticism’s evolution and analyzes his aesthetic style. Unlike Shaw, Yeats, and Hardy, his paradoxical thought reflects British aestheticism. Extensive scholarship research often stays within aestheticism, ignoring its paradoxes. This paper, which reveals Wilde’s ethics filling that gap.

The paper is structured as follows: An overview of the aestheticism paradox; Brief introduction to the book; Concrete manifestations of aestheticism paradox in the book, and Conclusion.

## 2. An overview of the aestheticism paradox

Wilde, a key aestheticist, promoted art’s separation from reality, but infused it with ethical significance.

### 2.1 An introduction to the aestheticism and aestheticism paradox

Aestheticism, a late 19th-century European trend, prized beauty and promoted “art for art’s sake”. Wilde, the “King of Paradox”, argued that a literary classic’s value lies in its ethical worth, with artistic aesthetics merely extending or realizing it. Keats, a Romantic poet, pioneered “aesthetics,” seeing beauty as eternal joy. In the 1850s, Gautier promoted “art for art’s sake,” opposing utilitarianism and pursuing pure form, linking Romanticism and Aestheticism. The movement offered escapism and peaked with the Pre-Raphaelites in late-19th-century Europe amid social turmoil.

European aestheticism prioritized art’s sensory pleasure over moral lessons, advocating that life imitating art. The aestheticism paradox is key to the movement. Wilde’s paradoxes expose Western cultural inconsistencies and the modern trajectory.

Paradox exists in science and ancient philosophy (e.g., Socrates and Confucius’s paradoxes). Aesthetics, a philosophy branch, studies beauty’s essence. Paradoxes present two opposing valid views, unlike fallacies. Aestheticism and paradox are deeply linked. They provoke thought via contradictions.

Adamskic (2021)[1] said that, “So far, their works have been analyzed only from a very limited perspective of the tension between aesthetics and ethics. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that what prevails in their art is the state of ambivalence and ambiguity in relation to the issues connected with religion and morality, innocence and experience, life and death”.

### 2.2 Previous research on the aestheticism paradox

Traditional literature paradoxes expose self-contradictions from language confusion. The Industrial Revolution disrupted Victorian society by corrupting morals through utilitarianism. Dissatisfied aesthetes found refuge in theory. Influenced by Kant but diverging, Wilde saw art as pure beauty, with bad art arising from reverting to life and nature, embracing art’s “falsity” with a paradoxical style to negotiate social reality.

Early Chinese research on the book was limited, focusing mainly on translation influenced by Soviet literary ideology. Critical research emerged later: biographical articles emerged in the 1980s (e.g. Jin Fu, 1981), significant studies were con-

ducted in the 1990s (e.g. Zhang Jieming, 2000; Wu Xueping, 2003).

Domestic research on Wilde's aestheticism paradox and Dorian Gray has surged, with varied critiques emerging in areas like aestheticism (e.g. Zhang Hui, 2008), literary ethics (e.g. Fan Xinyue, 2016), and psychology.

### 3. Concrete manifestation of aestheticism paradox in the book

This chapter explores from protagonists, art, morality, and aesthetics.

#### 3.1 Portrayal of Main Characters

Henry's aesthetics, Dorian's desires, and Basil's morals are all mirror of Wilde.

##### 3.1.1 Dorian Gray — Beauty's Distortion

Dorian Gray embodies Wilde's ideal: eternally young, amoral, hedonistic. His tragedy begins when Basil's picture catches to Lord Henry's attention. Henry warns Dorian of beauty's transience, prompting his wish to age the picture instead. The attic serves as Dorian's moral record and shrine to his crimes. Dorian values the "secret base," but hides the disfigured image as his sins grow. Wilde (2014)[2] described it as "he flung it over the picture". Dorian's attempt to destroy the picture reveals his irreconcilable duality: craving hedonistic rewards yet fearing consequences, and his dislike for it shows his moral judgment. This act signifies his deepening moral conflict, as a shackle, constraining his ethical decay.

##### 3.1.2 Henry Wotton — Tragedy's Driving Force

Henry's fanatic aestheticism makes him Dorian's tempter and truth-seeker, calling Dorian's picture Basil's "best work" and viewing Dorian as artistic material with "wounds like red roses". Just as Yang (2008)[3] said, Henry critiques love's fidelity to reveal latent ethics, reflecting personal betrayal and contrasting the ruling class's commodified "faithful love". It embodies art-morality paradoxes.

##### 3.1.3 Basil Hallward — Justice Incarnate

Basil embodies Victorian morality but can't suppress his artistic admiration for beauty. Wilde admits, "I'm too present in Dorian Gray, he's more than a model." He rejects Henry's amorality, "Selfish living costs dearly".

To Basil, Dorian represents physical purity. He shields Dorian from Henry: "Dorian, horrible!" You're the purest. Now, you seem heartless. "All Henry's influence". He discovers Dorian's degeneracy, and attempts moral intervention. Dorian kills him, swayed by Henry's teachings.

#### 3.2 The Paradox of Art and Morality

Art and morality are distinct but interconnected.

##### 3.2.1 The Distinction between Art and Morality

Charles Batteux proposed "art of beauty" in 1746, formalizing its independence from crafts and techniques.

Art is subjective. Morality guides social interactions for justice and harmony. Art conveys emotions and views via symbolic social life. Morality stresses conduct and responsibility, art freely pursues aesthetics.

##### 3.2.2 The Dialectic between Art and Morality

Art shapes moral consciousness by promoting ethics and cultivating sensibilities. Art adhering to morals enhances value and progress.

Fan (2016)[4] figures that "The novel satirizes Victorian hedonism and highlights art-morality inseparability". Guo and Xin (2020)[5] argue that "he separates art and morality: science seeks truth, art beauty, morality the lower". Wilde rejects constraints on art, not morality. Dorian's soul-exchange paradox reveals evil aestheticized, with his self-destruction confirming moral inevitability. Sybil's tragedy shows Wilde's hidden moral view. Basil's death symbolizes art's nominal victory.

#### 3.3 Aesthetic Ideals and Social Practices

Art originates from life but surpasses it. All aesthetic ideals should be rooted in social practice.

##### 3.3.1 Rebellion and Submission

Wilde merged aesthetic formalism and social critique through characters' ethical revolt. Despite claiming autonomy, Victorian aestheticism remained tied to socioeconomic structures. According to Zhou (2002)[6], it offered illusory respite for marginalized groups under class oppression. According to Zhou (2005)[7], aestheticism acts as societal escapism, forming artistic ideals to critique and supplement reality, with an "affirmative" nature.

##### 3.3.2 Realism and Hedonism

Urbanovich (2022)[8] defines hedonism (Greek *ἡδονή*) as "theories on goodness, behavior, and motivation". The novel exposes Victorian bourgeois moral decay. Henry promotes hedonism, urging aesthetes to reject ethics for pleasure. Dorian's creed leads to moral decay and loved ones' destruction. It also defends aestheticism's educational value.

## 4. Conclusion

This thesis highlights Wilde's paradoxical aestheticism, suggesting future research despite limitations.

Oscar Wilde embodies paradox via contradictions. Art's dual nature, constrained yet propelled by external factors, reveals the art-morality paradox reflecting Wilde's inner conflict. His aesthetic paradox affects modern materialism, providing lasting artistic value.

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