# Hedonism in “The Picture of Dorian Gray” by Oscar Wilde

## Introduction

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a book that has harbored some social themes that have raised concerns among the readers (Wilde 5). The predominant themes in the book are moral corruption and hedonism. The book emphasizes on how the corruption of the soul leads to corruption of one's entire life. The book points out that this decadence has not only affected a certain social strata but haunts a great part of the English population. The book portrays a youth that is devoid of parental guidance and thus is fascinated by guidance from other spheres of the society. The youth are thus deprived of good morals and subscribe to hedonism and other social upheavals. Dorian Gray, the protagonist in the book, is initially naïve but an encounter with Lord Henry awakens his conscious and self-belief that feeds his hedonism to such a great height that his life is entirely changed. This paper aims to outline how Oscar Wilde has advanced the theme of hedonism in the book "The Picture of Dorian Gray."

## The Origin of Hedonism Movement

Hedonism is a movement that emerged in the 1800’s that beliefs that personal happiness and pleasures are the primary aim of one’s life. Members of this school of thought excessively strive to maximize their pleasure with minimum pain. However, social research shows that despite the method used to gain these pleasures, the level of happiness is not changed. Ethical hedonists believe that every individual has a right to do anything within their power to attain ultimate pleasure with minimum pain. Hedonism is believed to have started by a student of Socrates who was known as Aristippus of Cyrene. Hedonism is a subset of utilitarianism philosophy whose primary belief is working in such a way that one maximizes utility (Veenhoven 442). Therefore, hedonists relate pleasure to utility and advance that pleasure is the ruler of humankind.

## The Book’s Advancement of Hedonism

The book “The Picture of Dorian Gray” is focused on the beauty of a young man named Dorian Gray. Dorian is depicted as being in a self-destructive search for happiness after the encounter with Lord Henry. His search for pleasure corrupts his mind and later leads to the destruction of his life and soul (Gillespie 152). The book thus clearly portrays the theme of hedonism and how it corrupts Dorian’s mind leading to his eventual death. At the beginning of the novel, Dorian Gray is represented as a naïve, innocent, and beautiful young man. This changes when he meets Lord Henry, and he is given his beautiful portrait by Basil. He looks at his portrait and wishes that his beauty remains while his portrait ages and bears his shame and disgrace. Dorian mental corruption starts when Basil declares his obsession and adoration of his charm. This corruption is advanced by Lord Henry's hedonistic teachings that challenge Dorian to embrace and cherish his youth and beauty. These teachings fill Dorian with negative feelings of selfishness and urge to seek pleasure while he is still young. Through his ideas, Lord Henry gradually takes over Dorian's mind, ideals, and later his soul. Every effort that Dorian makes to redeem himself is countered with Henry's persuasive words of hedonism. For instance, there is an instance where Dorian realized his misdeeds to Sybil and resolved to apologize but the reminder of her death from Henry makes it hard.

Using his shrewd dictum, Lord Henry advances ideas of free thinking, rejection of societal norms, and selfishness to Dorian. Lord Henry's philosophy delights Dorian that when one day he meets Sybil Vane an actress is highly impressed by her acting talent and thus confuses passion for art with love. Delighted by this new feeling, they get engaged and the next day invites his friend to her acting performance. Her acting that day is pathetic, and Dorian breaks up with her for embarrassing him to his friends. Sybil is highly affected by this breakup and commits suicide. Before Dorian could hear the demise of Sybil, the portrait changes by adding a touch of cruelty in its mouth to depict his misdeed. Although detachment from Lord Henry enables him to live a prosperous life for 18 years, his portrait mirrors his misdeeds and corruption of the soul. This change bothers him that he decides to hide it from other people by concealing it in a secret room. His indulgence into hedonistic pleasures compel him to study perfumes and different embroideries to satisfy his desires. His evil deeds become his way of life that Basil asks him to repent. The repentance call angers him so much that he kills his friend. This act adds a stain of blood to the portrait, a view that gnaws deep into his heart that he decides to destroy the picture by stabbing it with a knife. Stabbing the portrait kills means killing himself, and the portrait regains its beauty while all the dents transfer to his lifeless face.

## Evidence of Hedonism in the Book

In chapter two of the book, there are several indicators of hedonism. The first instance of hedonism appears when Lord Henry stirs Dorian's mind by his philosophy which opens his eyes to a new world where the primary goal is to seek pleasure by doing all that feels good in contrast to exploring morality. Henry’s conviction is that if one was to follow pleasure regardless of what society considers moral, life would be more pleasurable and ideal. The second instance of hedonism is when Lord Henry cautions Dorian against taking his youth and beauty for granted but instead use it to the fullest as youthful days are numbered. In chapter three, Lord Henry advances his hedonistic beliefs by telling Basil that he hopes Dorian marries Sibyl and marries someone else six months later. By hedonism philosophy, Henry finds it more pleasurable to lead a young man down the destruction path and advances it although it is not a moral act. In chapter eight, an instance of hedonism is evident when Dorian realizes that he is not able to do all that is morally correct and chooses to do what fascinates him and gives him pleasure. The fact that he could not grow old encouraged him to do all that was pleasurable to the flesh and watch his soul grow old and ugly as the world could not see his soul. In chapter eleven, the writer outlines how Dorian takes after Lord Henry's mannerism and life philosophy on the importance of new hedonism in the community. This pleasure spurs him to find the more elegant things in life and other pleasurable experiences that he could find.

## Advancement of the New Hedonism

The book ends by showing Dorian advancing the new hedonism ideas. The new hedonism is based on the Cyrenaic and Epicurean school of thought where pleasure is the primary thing worth living for (Simion 58). This is brought out by the book through Lord Henry who advocates for a life where one indulges in momentary pleasures of the world disregarding the consequences of such undertaking. The carpe diem call by Lord Henry and consequent fall of Dorian is a true reflection of new hedonism in the book.

## Conclusion

Oscar Wilde is a charismatic writer in the 19th century who has been able to advance the superiority of pleasure and beauty over the usual social molarity. His book, The Picture of Dorian Gray, outlines the major principles of hedonism as a major theme in the book. As outlined in the book, teachings of hedonism are so influential to the youth and cause a great erosion to molarity. The main character in the novel, Dorian Gray, trades his innocence and purity for pleasures and eternal youth disregarding the effect it has on his soul and fulfillment. Although teachings of hedonism are greatly rooted in the society, its application can have both negative and positive effects on the society. The writer's message regarding hedonism is clear that; becoming a hedonist for the sake is a misguided endeavor that only leads to destruction. Dorian Gray embraces hedonism for the pleasure of staying physically young. However, his actions continuously erode his convictions, and eventually, his soul decays that he could not take it anymore. Although he was physically young, his soul was old and ugly that it was destroying him.

## Works Cited

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