

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

“All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril,” so says Oscar Wilde in the “Preface” of his first and last novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray (Wilde, 1994: 6). Surely, Wilde does not say it for nothing; moreover, what was first intended to be a sequence of aphorisms for the British publication of the novel has really become a new way of thinking and also a concept. Within that controversial preface, Wilde himself admits that all art and all pieces of writing have both surface and layered meaning; furthermore, according to Wilde, it is dangerous to try to interpret what is beyond the surface. The same idea can be applied to symbol; it is one of the most important literary elements used by writers in order to achieve the aim of “saying as much as possible as briefly as possible” and one of the most risky, too.

When a writer is said to practice symbolism, it means that he or she is representing something as a symbol. Symbols are not easy to read. The practice of interpreting the symbols carried out by the readers is not effortless given that “a literary symbol is something that means *more* than what it is. It is an object, a

[character], a situation, an action, or some other item that has a literal meaning in the story but suggests or represents other meanings as well” (Perrine, 1974: 211).

Many writers, especially writers of fiction, apply symbolism as figurative devices essential to the meaning of their works. The writers of the two works analyzed are no exception; Wilde and Will Self are believed to have made good use of symbolism in representing the deepest meaning of their works. This is made possible by the existence of the central character of both The Picture of Dorian Gray and Dorian: An Imitation, namely Dorian Gray, a figure which essentially unites the two novels.

In view of that, the two novels discussed apparently have an intertextual relationship. According to Wikipedia (n.d.), intertextuality is “a relationship between two or more texts that quote from one another, allude to one another, or otherwise connect.” The Picture of Dorian Gray and Dorian: An Imitation are examples of novels which have an intertextual relationship in which two texts are interconnected.

Self has made many adjustments to his own version of Dorian. He rewrites the original book with a contemporary setting and turns the characters into unsympathetic ones. The “picture” can no longer be found in the modernized novel for it is replaced by a video installation called “Cathode Narcissus”. However, the three major characters, namely Dorian Gray, the artist Basil/Baz Hallward, and the mentor Henry Wotton, along with Dorian Gray’s traits, the setting of place, the overall plot, the depiction of the lifestyle of the upper classes and the poverty of the lower classes, and most importantly, the aura of deterioration, are among the elements that Self maintains to stick to the original.

By comparing the two novels, the significance of Dorian as a symbol can truly be seen; in addition, both Dorian symbolize the social degeneration and moral decadence within his very own country, Britain, in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The significance is primarily acknowledged through the elaboration of one type of symbolism, which is “symbolic use of an object, a situation, an action, or a character” (Perrine, 1974: 211-212). The one that I will employ in this thesis is the last, which is the symbolic use of a character, in this case Dorian. The significance of Dorian as a symbol of social degeneration and moral decadence is represented by his traits. There are three traits of his that need underscoring, namely being homosexual, being narcissistic, and remaining young.

When talking about a person, one cannot separate him or her from his or her traits because generally a trait refers to “a distinguishing feature or characteristic, as of a character” (Davies, ed., 1973: 732). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, personality traits are “prominent aspects of personality that are exhibited in a wide range of important social and personal contexts.” In other words, persons have certain characteristics which partly determine their emotion and behaviour. The homosexual and narcissistic traits of Dorian are classified into personality traits. Accordingly, the remaining young trait can be categorized into physical traits, which pertain more to the body and the outer look as distinguished from the emotion and behaviour. These traits will go hand-in-hand in order to symbolize the social degeneration and moral decadence within Britain and thus suggest a new meaning beyond what are literally described.

As it is asserted in The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, the words *degeneration* and *decadence* in fact suggest the same idea, which is a sinking to a state of low moral standards and behavior. Both words are characteristically used to describe a kind of society, a civilization, or even a country; and commonly, they refer to the supposed decline of a country as a result of moral weakness. The phrase “social degeneration”, then, in this context refers to the decline of the British society on the whole. Thus, although Dorian in each of the two novels is a part of London upper class society, the degeneration of both the lives’ of the upper and lower classes are wholly encompassed by Dorian.

Meanwhile, another phrase, “moral decadence”, is substantial in relation to the standards of what is right or wrong, good or bad in conduct, particularly in the late 19th and 20th centuries Britain. The character Dorian in The Picture of Dorian Gray lives in the late 19th century, the Victorian period, which was characterized by the strict and professedly pure Victorian norms. A. N. Wilson in his book After the Victorians: The Decline of Britain in the World argues that the norms “were marked by excessive concern for propriety and courteous behavior.” Nonetheless, the norms serve well as the measurement of moral decadence at that time. In the meantime, to set a standard of what is morally acceptable in the late 20th century is much harder as the era was very much influenced by the notion of postmodernism, which celebrates liberations above anything. Even so, it can be argued that the moral standards, specifically of Britain, were not much different. What was different in the late 20th century Britain was the mindset of its people in accepting and being more open to abnormal, dreadful, deviant, and nonstandard manners, as well as being less

fastidious in morals. Frederick Douglass, a famous American abolitionist, orator, author, and reformer, once said, “The life of a nation is secure only while the nation is honest, truthful, and upright.” This sensible saying somewhat confirms that honesty, truthfulness, and uprightness are the kind of moral standards which interminable, regardless of what ideals people are into in a given time.

Dorian in The Picture of Dorian Gray lives in the 1880s. Some significant events happened during those times, all of which allude to the underlying idea of Britain’s social degeneration and moral decadence. Meanwhile, Wilde, who set Dorian: An Imitation in the late 20th century, sees peculiarly similar characteristics of both times. This fact brings me to choosing Historical Approach as the most suitable tool in analyzing the novels. The Historical Approach will bring me to a deeper understanding of both novels and the symbols conveyed, as the approach puts its emphasis on historical facts. The aim of Historical Approach is “to interpret the work of literature through understanding the times and culture in which the work is written” (Baltimore County Public Schools, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, 1996). This information clearly shows that a knowledge of history is necessary in order to fully grasp the notion of the symbols in the novels. Having broader knowledge of the times and culture of Dorian in both novels, also of when and where he lives, will hopefully help interpret the symbols related to the social degeneration and moral decadence of Britain.

The Picture of Dorian Gray and Dorian: An Imitation display different settings of time and different kinds of problem; yet, both present the same impression of social degeneration and moral decadence. Moreover, the aura seems exactly what both authors want to propose through their use of symbolism.

Statement of the Problem

Based on the discussion above, the problems of this study are formulated as follows:

1. What is the significance of Dorian as the protagonist in the two novels in symbolizing the social degeneration and moral decadence within Britain during the late 19th and 20th centuries?
2. Why do the authors choose to portray Dorian in such a way?
3. How do the similarities and differences between the two chosen literary works together with their intertextual relationship help deepen the meaning of the symbols Dorian carries?

Purpose of the Study

Viewing the facts mentioned in the statement of the problem, the purposes of the study are

1. to describe the significance of Dorian as the protagonist in the two novels in symbolizing the social degeneration and moral decadence within Britain during the late 19th and 20th centuries;
2. to determine the authors' reasons for portraying Dorian in such a way;
3. to show how the similarities and differences between the two chosen literary works together with their intertextual relationship help deepen the meaning of the symbols Dorian carries.

Method of Research

In doing the study, I use the library research method. Having read the two novels, Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray and Will Self's Dorian: An Imitation, as the primary texts, I, then, study several references and literary criticisms related to the topic being analyzed in order to support my understanding of the two novels. As well as reading the biographies of the authors, I browse some Internet websites to look for more information about the historical periods in which the two works were written. Furthermore, I apply an extrinsic approach, to be exact the Historical Approach, considering that historical facts related to the topic are important in analyzing the symbols which suggest the social degeneration and moral decadence within Britain.

Organization of the Thesis

The thesis, starting with the Preface and the Abstract, consists of three chapters, which are organized as follows. Chapter One, the Introduction, contains the Background of the Study, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Method of Research, and Organization of the Thesis. Chapter Two contains the analysis of how the name and three traits of Dorian embody certain symbols, which suggest the same impression of deterioration within Britain. The last chapter, Chapter Three, provides the conclusion of the analysis. The thesis ends with the Bibliography and the Appendices, which include the synopses of the two works chosen and the biographies of the authors.