

DECADENSTYSM, SYMBOLISM AND AESTHETICISM

ARS GRATIA ARTIS

In European Art, women are depicted as sensuous and sensual figures, often portrayed as seductive or alluring witch-women, exuding confidence in their beauty.

Symbolic elements such as flowers, mirrors, and gardens are employed to suggest images drawn from mythology, mysticism, isolation, and dreams.

A clear example can be Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "**Lady Lilith**".

Lilith, a mythical being often featured in origin stories, is often depicted as a formidable demon. In the realm of Jewish folklore, Lilith takes on the role of Adam's initial wife, before Eve.

The enchanting and captivating sorceress looks into the mirror, exuding confidence in her charm and sensuality. The opulence and silkiness of her curls, clearly present in the images, serve as a representation of her beauty and her ability to captivate men at their peril.

A symbolic poppy blooms in the foreground, complemented by roses behind her, while a standing mirror to the right reveals a lush garden.

These symbols serve to reject realism and rationality, aiming instead to express abstract ideas.

Symbolist artists sought to convey individual emotional experiences through a highly symbolic language.

They rebelled against the strict conventions governing both technique and theme in traditional poetry, developing their themes through the sensitive manipulation of harmonies, tones, and colors inherent in carefully chosen words.

The first Symbolist Manifesto, published in "*Le Figaro*" in 1886 by **Jean Moreas**, marked the movement's formal inception.

Charles Baudelaire and his "*les fleurs du mal*" emerged as the most influential poet among the Symbolists, viewing nature as a temple composed of a multitude of symbols, inspiring other great artists such as Arthur Rimbaud.

The discussion shifts to **Pascoli** and his poem "Night-Blooming Jasmine" written in 1901 as a wedding gift for his friend Gabriele Briganti.

The night scene in the poem reveals the fecundation of the night flower and the bride within the house.

The poet-speaker observes as an outsider, noticing but remaining apart and alone.

This poem stands as a quintessential representation of Pascoli's mastery of symbolism. Commencing with the unconventional "And," it suggests a continuation from a recurring contemplation—the poet's poignant reflections on departed loved ones. Yet, in a departure from his usual mournful tone, the verses are woven into the tapestry of a joyous event—the wedding of a cherished friend. As the night progresses, the fragrance of jasmine pervades the air, and the house's light ascends, then extinguishes. Is this a reference to the newlyweds? Dawn's advent and the closure of flowers suggest a transition. The poet hints at a "soft and secret urn," alluding to the vessel within which new life and happiness will burgeon—a delicate conclusion, promising the dawn of fresh beginnings amid the fading night.

Synesthesia, defined as the simultaneous appeal to more than one sense, is not merely a rhetorical device to enrich language but a genuine evoke of emotions, leading to the interpretation of hidden truths.

The senses appealed to in the poem include sight, hearing, smell, and touch.

Synesthetic examples like "*odore delle fragole rosse*" (the scent of red strawberries) and "*s'esala l'odore che passa col vento*" (the scent that wafts with the wind) are highlighted.

Flowers in Pascoli's context do not represent the beauty of nature but instead announce death, loneliness, isolation, and difficulties in communication. They symbolize the speaker's isolation, frustration, and exclusion.

The discussion transitions to **Symbolism** as an art movement in the second half of the 19th century, primarily visible in painting and poetry.

Symbolists rejected both Realist and Naturalist approaches, believing in interpreting reality through mysticism and spirituality. They held the conviction that absolute truths could only be understood through indirect methods. For Symbolist poets, this meant developing content and techniques that evoke and suggest ideas and meanings rather than directly describing them. Images and objects were to be interpreted as symbols rather than in their literal sense.

The musicality of the poem, the deliberate choice of words, and the use of synesthesia work in harmony to confound the reader's senses.

The narrative of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" by **Oscar Wilde** revolves around the three central characters: Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward (the painter), and Lord Henry Wotton. The story begins with Basil painting Dorian's portrait, and Lord Henry advising Dorian to seek new 'sensations' in life. Dorian expresses a desire to remain perpetually young while his portrait ages, a wish that appears to mark a significant turning point and almost signifies a pact with the devil.

Influenced by Lord Henry's hedonistic philosophy, Dorian indulges in a life of excess and pleasure, detached from the consequences of his actions. His relationship with actress Sibyl Vane becomes emblematic of his moral decline. Dorian abandons Sibyl when her acting abilities decline due to genuine love, leading to her tragic suicide. This event foreshadows the darker turn that Dorian's life is about to take.

As Dorian continues to pursue immoral experiences, guided by an immoral 'yellow book' from Lord Henry, the portrait undergoes a grotesque transformation, reflecting the accumulating weight of his sins. Thirteen years later, Dorian remains outwardly youthful, while the portrait increasingly mirrors his inner corruption.

The story takes a tragic turn with Dorian's heinous acts, including the murder of Basil Hallward, who, as the artist, had revered Dorian's beauty. Dorian conceals the crime, and events escalate with accidental violence towards Sibyl Vane's vengeful brother. Attempting redemption, Dorian strives to reform his character, hoping that the portrait will improve if he behaves better.

However, even his attempts at abstinence from vice are revealed to be hypocritical, as the portrait depicts him as a hypocrite seeking a new sensation through his self-discipline.

This revelation horrifies and angers Dorian, leading to his desperate act of plunging a knife into the canvas.

When the servants discover the scene, the portrait is miraculously restored to its original state, showing Dorian as a youthful man. Simultaneously, on the floor lies the withered corpse of an elderly man with a "loathsome" face, symbolizing the true toll of Dorian's decadent and immoral life.

“Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.”

The aphorisms that make up the "Preface" of Wilde's novel were his response to those critics who had denounced the immorality and unhealthiness of this story after its scandalous first appearance in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine.

However, for all its transgressive delights, The Picture of Dorian Gray could easily be read as a profoundly moral book, even a cautionary tale against the dangers of vice.

Dorian's descent into moral squalor is neither admirable nor enviable. Indeed, the beautiful boy is the least interesting character in the book that bears his name.

To be sure, it is the epigrammatic wit of Lord Henry Wotton that encourages Dorian on his quest for sensuality and sensation, but Dorian's values pervert the deeply serious Wildean ethic that they superficially resemble. Whereas Wilde's essays advocated individualism and self-realization as a route to a richer life and a more just society, Dorian follows a path of hedonism, self-indulgence, and the objectification of others. It is nonetheless a story that poignantly reflects Wilde's own double life and anticipates his own fall. Dorian's negation, "Ugliness was the one reality," neatly summarizes Wilde's Aestheticism, both his love of the beautiful and his fascination with the profane.

The Picture of Dorian Gray has been analysed as an example of the Gothic horror novel, as a variation on the theme of the 'double', and as a narrative embodying some of the key aspects of late nineteenth-century aestheticism and decadence.

Wilde's skill lies in how he manages to weave these various elements together, creating a modern take on the old Faust story (the German figure Faust sold his soul to the devil, via Mephistopheles) which also, in its depictions of late Victorian sin and vice, may remind readers of another work of fiction published just four years earlier: Robert Louis Stevenson's Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (which we've analysed here).

Indeed, the discovery of the body of Dorian Gray as a wrinkled and horrifically ugly corpse at the end of the novel recalls the discovery of Jekyll/Hyde in Stevenson's novella.

To find the novel's value as a book of the aesthetic movement, we need look no further than Wilde's preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, in which he states, for instance, that "there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book" (what matters is whether the book is written well or not) and 'all art is quite useless (art shouldn't change the world: art exists as, and for, itself, and no more).