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**Degeneration- A Key Concern of the 1890s: A Study of *The Picture of Dorian Gray & Heart of Darkness***

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**Article Received:** 23/08/2024

**Article Accepted:** 25/09/2024

**Published Online:** 26/09/2024

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.9.101

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**Abstract**

Decadence and Degeneration were two key concerns in the 1890s owing to rapid industrialization, greed for wealth accumulation, and challenges to religion and the basic social fabric. This study aims to analyze the reasons and ways degeneration became a concerning issue in terms of physical, psychological, and moral devolution. The paper analyses *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde and *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad to find evidence of Social Darwinism, social-artistic, and political-physical degeneration. It then engages with the anxieties of society and examines the influence of the higher class on the working and that of a colonizer on a colonized, as presented in the aforementioned novels. As Dorian degenerates following his decadent pursuits of appearance, beauty, and pleasure, Kurtz becomes mad for ivory, and both bring themselves death. The paper also studies the ways in which the endings of these novels conserve the convention of a Victorian novel and reveal insights into Victorian morality and cultural decline.

**Keywords:** Degeneration, Decadence, Social Darwinism, Colonialism, Victorian Novel

**Introduction:**

Degeneration is said to be derived from the Latin word *degenerate*, which means falling off from the ordinary or natural state. It is used to “denote a change from higher to a lower kind, [...] it is a process of dissolution, the opposite of that process of involution which is essential to evolution” (Maudsley, 1884: 240), i.e., the process of going from civilized to barbaric, from an evolved being to the primitive stages of evolution. The concept was influenced by the scientific theories, cultural anxieties, and social changes that accelerated in the late nineteenth century owing to rapid urbanization, industrialization with technology, and a transformative change in the social fabric with decadence and other challenges posed by modern life and thought. With the publication and popularity of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), the theory of evolution and natural selection challenged and questioned science, sociology, psychology, religion, and morals, contributing to the understanding of “survival of the fittest” as one of its interpretations by Herbert Spencer and eventually Social Darwinism. While degeneration dealt with physical

and psychological deterioration, decadence was its cultural manifestation, with moral decay at the center of both.

To understand degeneration and its forms in the 1890s, this essay aims to study *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by Oscar Wilde and *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad while analyzing them using the theory of Social Darwinism and the idea of moral degeneration which is at the core of these novels. The essay first outlines the concept and context of degeneration, followed by an in-depth exploration of this concept in the first novel to analyze the social-artistic degeneration and the political and physical degeneration in the latter. An attempt is made to study ways in which these novels explore the idea of going back to the primitive stages of evolution by falling morally and physically, followed by an analysis of the ambiguity of their ending in terms of conserving the Victorian conventions.

The ways in which degeneration affected society were significantly influenced by Social Darwinism, particularly in changing the higher-lower class or race dynamics. Social Darwinism applied the concept of natural selection by Darwin to argue about the inequality in society, which, according to it, was necessary for progress and, hence, justified capitalism, racism, and imperialism in order to adapt to change and survive while focusing on the role of individual traits shaped by inheritance and environment that define their success. However, degeneration posed a question on these impacts, which led to a decline rather than progress while at the same time shaping attitudes towards morality, justice, mortality, and social order. Nordau defined the fin-de-siècle spirit as “the impotent despair of a sick man, who feels himself dying by inches in the midst of an eternally living nature, blooming insolently forever; the envy of the rich, hoary, voluptuary who sees a pair of young lovers making for a sequestered forest nook” (Laqueur, 1996: 12), and I agree because the 1890s was a period of existential angst, emptiness, and uncertainty; meanwhile, the images he used in his description speak about the concerns of social injustice, moral decay and rejection of traditional values which were prominent then. This could serve as an introduction to the disillusionment and anxieties expressed in both the novels under consideration on the lines of degeneration.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* explores the moral degeneration of an innocent young man because of his decadent pursuits of appearance or beauty, pleasure, and the desire for a higher social reputation with popularity under the influence of his social setting in terms of people and the city. Dorian gets infatuated with his portrait under the influence of Lord Henry, who first makes him realize his beauty and then its impermanence when he says, "When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it [...] You will suffer horribly... Ah! realize your youth while you have it." (Wilde, 1997: 29). I strongly agree with critics saying “A predisposition to vice could be either inherited or acquired during an individual's lifetime; in either case, the contamination could be passed on through either heredity or simple association, through sexual intercourse or social intercourse” (Hurley, 2004: 71). It adds to my

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argument of Dorian's degeneration due to his social intercourse with Lord Henry and the ambiance of the areas of the city he wandered with hedonist people, which lured him more to pursue pleasurable activities, "searching for new sensations" (Wilde, 1997: 30). The city locations have an impactful influence on Dorian. It is depicted as a hub of decadence and moral ambiguity, which yields his descent into hedonism. In her exploration of the theory of degeneration, Hutchison quotes a scholar's comments on degeneration as a "deviant germ- that could be activated via toxic environmental conditions that altered a patient's biological and neurological system" (Hutchison, 2016: 396). I agree because as Dorian witnessed the decadent lifestyle, indulgence in self, opium, pleasure, and illicit affairs in the city, it encouraged him to seek sensual gratification above all. The Darkness of places where he socializes reflects a spiritual deterioration and manifests his moral depravity, turmoil, and corruption. The city's duality, with its secret vices, superficiality, and shallowness, contributes to the dual and shallow life that Dorian starts to lead. Its effect on his neurological condition in terms of his psychology and behavior is discussed later.

The relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian could be read from a Social Darwinist perspective, which supported social class inequality for progress. Wilde has portrayed Henry as a true aristocrat and hedonist who desires to have as much influence and domination as he can have on others. He believed that Dorian "could be made a Titan or a toy" (Wilde 1997: 44), making him a subject of his experiment with no regard for the destruction he did to him. It could indicate the higher class's bad influence on the working class. Bristow remarks that Dorian appears to be an aristocrat but possesses characteristics of a working-class who are "debased" and "indecent" (Cited in Clausson, 2003: 358). While Dorian does act indecently, I disagree with the stereotype in the comment stating that the working class is indecent; it further elevates the discrimination for the already repressed. I argue that Lord Henry uses his privileged position to indulge in corruption without restraints, spoils the unaware and powerless, and makes them indulge in debauched activities, hampering their progress for self-pleasure. The detachment of the higher class from their moral responsibilities contributes significantly to the degeneration of society and its functioning, making it a significant concern.

It is interesting to note the reversal of the human mortality and immortality of art in the novel. Raitt writes, "The immortality of art— its arrest of time and change— is transferred to the flesh that in normal circumstances would droop and wither as the body made its inexorable way toward death" (Raitt, 2017: 164). The novel provides a moving portrayal of a social-artistic degeneration using the element of the Faustian tale with gothic undertones, which explores the consequences of Dorian's moral decay on his portrait instead of his own body but on his life as a whole. This juxtaposition of art and the human body underscores the critique on society's obsession with appearance and not reality- which Dorian hid inside him as he becomes increasingly corrupt by engaging in sinful and debauched activities like consumption of drugs, manipulating lovers and friends and even committing murders

to preserve his youthful beauty. His act of hiding the portrait is a way of maintaining this duality between appearance and reality hidden from the world. The idea of mortality and brevity of beauty, which is instilled in him by Henry, makes Dorian frantic as he cries because of his jealousy of the portrait, which would still be beautiful when he would not, as he says, "Why should it keep what I must lose? [...] it will mock me some day- mock me horribly!" (Wilde, 1997: 34). Such jealousy from a piece of art is unusual and threatening as it indicates his fall as a rational being. Here, Dorian begins his life of pursuing aestheticism and pleasure, leading to complete degeneration.

Understanding his relationship with Sibyl is also essential to exploring his obsession for beauty and art over love. At first, he was fascinated by her artistic talent and idealized her based on her performance as an embodiment of love, innocence, and purity. However, the revelation of her flaws as an actress makes Dorian disillusioned, as it does not give him a sensation, thrill, or entertainment similar to before. He says that she killed his love and imagination; he also admits that he loved her for her "genius and intellect," but now she appears "shallow and stupid" and "nothing" to him (Wilde, 1997: 95-96). He rejects her love due to his inability to accept imperfection. However, he blames it upon her under the influence of Henry, who, anyway, sees women as decorative objects and devalues her as an artist when she dies by stating, "She looked such a child, and seemed to know so little about acting" (Wilde, 1977: 107). The rejection of Sibyl is a significant point in Dorian's moral descent as he becomes increasingly consumed by vanity and perfection. This obsession with decadent ideas was a concerning issue in the 1890s that led to society's moral and psychological degeneration.

Dorian's observation of the changes in the portrait hints at his psychological degeneration. It could also be read as intellectual degeneration as he loses the rational human brain and becomes inhuman or barbaric, which is an essential argument of degeneration. The first time he notices a significant change is after his breakup with Sibyl, as the portrait had a "cruel smile [...] had altered already", and this inspires him to "resist temptations" (Wilde, 1997: 100). He thinks to mend relations with Sibyl with the awareness of the consequences of his actions but fails. As he commits more sins, the changing portrait gives him pleasure, as he becomes "more interested in the corruption of his soul. He would examine it with minute care and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight" (Wilde, 1997: 138). Again, there are instances when observing the portrait makes him oscillate between feelings of loathing and pride, "He would sit in front of the picture, [...] with that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin, and smiling with secret pleasure at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own" (Wilde, 1997: 150). While explaining Darwinism and human evolution, Hurley writes about the changes brought by new sciences during this period and the fears it posed about the evolution of humans, their "distinctness from "the brute beasts"- unstable" and if "the evolutionary process might be reversible: the human race might ultimately retrogress into a sordid

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animalism rather than progress towards a telos of intellectual and moral perfection” (Hurley, 2004: 56). The descriptions of Dorian's behavior quoted above portray this psychological degeneration while also presenting him as a criminal and mad or a primitive figure. Had his physical body been changing with the corruption of his soul instead of the portrait, this fear of humans turning into beasts would have looked clearer. The final sin of murdering Basil Hallward is the peak of his obsession that led him to madness and death. The concerns with madness and death are significantly drawn in *Heart of Darkness* as well, although in a different time and setting; however, the underlying ideas of moral and physical degeneration remain the same.

Degeneration in *the Heart of Darkness* is on multiple levels because of its racial, political, and environmental dynamics. Marlow's journey into Congo becomes a metaphorical journey into moral decay and depravity. However, Conrad, at the same time, maintains or instead leaves an ambiguity about the source of this decay. The political ambitions of imperialists raised questions about the implications of the supposed civilization and its dehumanizing treatment of the Indigenous people of its colonies, which eventually led to their physical and moral degeneration. While imperialism, conquest, and exploitation of colonies started much earlier than the conceptualization of Social Darwinism, the idea of it can be related to each other. Hawkins, in his study on Darwinism, writes that adventurers and historians saw Africans as savages and “despised the blacks and regarded them as occupying a lower scale of humanity” and conquering them without a rebellion was “a pre-requisite for the development of civilization, even though this undoubtedly involved bloodshed and injustice against the primitive race” (Hawkins, 1997: 207). Applying this in reading Conrad's anti-imperialist fiction makes it easier to understand the façade of the civilizing mission and the establishment of race inequality. The political conditioning of Kurtz, as Conrad writes, “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (Conrad, 2019: 76), leads him to this path, which degenerates him physically, morally, and psychologically, presenting him almost like a monster by the end. As mentioned earlier in the essay, the influence of social and physical settings unleashes the true human nature of Dorian Gray; it stands true for Kurtz as well. Initially portrayed as an idealistic and talented European agent, Kurtz descends into savagery and brutality as he succumbs to greed and the temptation of power he holds over the Africans and his subordinate European agents.

Kurtz's political ambitions lead him to exploit the native population. Instead of civilizing people, he becomes a part of their savage lifestyle. He becomes a God figure for them and treats them as his subjects. His brutal and violent methods of coercing them show his descent into degeneration, as Marlow's observation of Africans as “each had an iron collar on the neck, and all were connected with a chain whose bights swung between them rhythmically clinking” (Conrad, 2019: 23) presents them as “criminals,” maybe slaves and also animals under Kurtz's supervision. I argue that apart from describing their bodies as degenerate and behind time, such ways of coercing people under Kurtz's supervision look primitive and

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disregard basic humanity, hinting at the degeneration of Kurtz's morality and rationality as a supposed civilized man. His ambition for ivory makes him tyrannical as he goes deeper into greed and calls everything his own: "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my ---" (Conrad, 2019: 74-75), reveals his belief in the superiority of his own which blinds him to the needs and rights of others. Thus, it mirrors the moral degeneration that accompanies imperialism as the colonizer ignores the suffering of those oppressed in their pursuit of power and prestige. Opicane, in her reading of *Heart of Darkness*, says that Kurtz's statement- "Exterminate all the brutes" (Conrad, 2019: 77), can be explored from a Darwinian perspective, which believed the potential for "civilized races of men" to replace "savage races" (Cited in (Opicane, 2012: 105). It suggests the same hierarchical view of human society based on technological and moral superiority; however, I say the transformation of Kurtz and his moral depravity proves it otherwise because, as a White, morally upright man, he starts acting beastly. Scholars remark that this racial superiority is not guaranteed in Conrad's fiction (cited in (Opicane, 2012: 105). To this, I would add that it is the civilized man who does not let the savage races know their potential and evolve because they are constantly subjugated to inhuman treatment and are looked down upon. The politics of not naming anybody in the novel except Kurtz and Marlow is interesting and hints at the loss of identity of other people, perhaps their insignificance, who either work behind as colonizers or get crushed under external rule. The people as part of the colonizer's team are described by their designation instead of names throughout. Conrad, thus, critiques this dehumanizing effect of colonialism on both colonizers and the colonized, a significant anxiety that affected the social fabric in the 1890s, leading to the degeneration of society at large.

The novel's physical setting is vital in understanding this process of devolution, or reverse evolution; as discussed earlier in the essay, the physical environment influences the individual's behavior. At the beginning itself, Marlow refers to his journey to Congo as a "prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (Conrad, 2019:54). This foreshadows the primitiveness and savagery in Congo, with no rules governing the land and people. Guven writes about Congo that "Principles, human rights, or even religion, which is the basis of the Western Civilization, have all lost their significance" here (Guyen, 2018: 260). This absence of law gives way to unusual, barbaric human behavior, as seen in Kurtz's behavior and the life he leads in Congo. Apart from Kurtz, the natives are also described as primitive men, as well as the other European agents whose bodies are deformed. The doctor at the station measures Marlow's head and informs him about the "changes that happen inside" and the "mental change of individuals" (Conrad, 2019: 17), indicating their physical and psychological degeneration. The act of measuring the size and shape of the head could also hint at Lombroso's theory of inheritance of criminality and his descriptions of the physical features of a criminal's body, which are different from those of an ordinary man, as mentioned in his book *Criminal Man* (1876). While the natives are termed criminals in many instances in

the novel, the changes that happen to colonizers in this land prove them inherently the same.

The disturbing body images and other descriptions of people as mere creatures give them a rather cannibalistic and animal imagery, which, according to Yousef, "adds a further element to the state of decay and annihilation" (Yousef, 1982: 27). I agree because, in some instances, Marlow sees natives not as people but as parts of their body. For instance, "naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eye [...] glistening of bronze color" (Conrad, 2019: 69) or sometimes as not even a tangible body part but a shadow, "nothing but a black shadow of disease and starvation" (Conrad, 2019: 25). This indicates at the bodily but also racial degeneration of Africans which as Achebe argues "eliminates the African as human factor," and denies the African any kind of intelligible speech" (cited in (Lloyd, 2003: 43). While I agree to this definite racist presentation, but to this I would also add that Kurtz is presented as unreal as the natives. As Conrad devoids the natives of a voice, he presents Kurtz more as a voice than a human body. His voice, even in his absence, exerts control and further hints at his degeneration, adding to his monstrous image. When he moves closer to death, Marlow sees him as an image of death covered by greed for ivory.

"I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hands with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze. I saw him open his mouth wide- it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. A deep voice reached me faintly. He must have been shouting" (Conrad, 2019: 91-92).

I argue that this description suggests an unsettling transformation of Kurtz, presenting his body as decayed, symbolizing his moral corruption, at the same time, a cannibalistic and monstrous trait with an insatiable hunger for power, domination, and control; something left behind is his voice or a sense of vibration or energy devoid of a body. Such images restate the principal ideology of degeneration, which is devolution, where these European civilized colonizers move towards the primitive evolutionary stages of men in the process of evolving the savage from it, owing to their moral and rational fall. The anxiety or competition of performing as the best agent, extracting as much ivory as possible, leads Kurtz to destruction, which mirrors the hunger of the society of the 1890s for wealth accumulation.

Both novels, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Heart of Darkness*, are contextually very different, but the endings are in the same fashion- they conserve the convention of a Victorian novel, while they begin with an idea of attacking the convention. *Dorian Gray* is devastated to witness the decayed image of himself in the portrait at the end and stabs it because he cannot withstand it as an "expression of horror at his bodily decline as much as his moral failings" (Raitt et al., 2017: 176). I say that hiding the portrait throughout and stabbing it in fury was again his way of

escaping his mistakes. He destroys the portrait to remove any evidence of his crimes, “the picture itself- that was evidence” (Wilde, 1997: 237) and that it served as his conscience that was affecting his joy, he wanted to destroy it, “Yes, it had been conscience. He would destroy it” (Wilde, 1997: 238), presenting the idea that he still cares for his joy and pleasure and is ready to kill his conscience that is warning him otherwise. While he decides to stab it, he does it to be free, unaware of the death he will bring to himself. Dorian's death eventually serves as the final judgment for his deeds, maintaining the convention of the destruction of evil and, at the same time, as a critique of the decadence in society. I argue that serving the convention here is a hint to the readers about the rightful and responsible choices they should make. Wilde himself enjoyed beauty and art without attaching moral messages to it, but his choice to end Dorian's story with a punishment of death makes the reader think about the extent of pursuing pleasure.

On the other hand, Kurtz's declaration of “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad, 2019: 107) could be read as his enlightenment about the reality of colonialism, but the ending of the novel with Marlow's lie to Kurtz's Intended about his life in Congo and his final words leaves an ambiguity about the original source of Darkness. Stark interprets the ending as a clear hint towards Europe as the source; he reads the locations in the novel as part of an Infernal system, with the European stations in Congo encircling it. He argues that “because the agents come from the Sepulchral City, it, not the jungle, must be the innermost circle of the Infernal System. Europe in general and this city, in particular, are the sources of the Darkness, not the jungle” (Stark, 1974: 539). I firmly agree with this, as the colonizers are depicted here as invaders, spectral figures, and morally corrupt, while the natives are simple beings leading a life in their own ways before the invasion. The anxieties of development, power, wealth, and domination in European society led them to self-degeneration. However, I argue that Conrad's choice of ending it with a lie conceals this reality and continues to serve the convention that was popular about colonialism as a civilizing mission, hiding its brutality because, as Marlow says, telling the truth would have been “too dark-too dark altogether” (Conrad, 2019: 120), leaving an ambiguity of Conrad's stance over it.

Thus, these two texts reflect the broader consequences of the anxiety of development and cultural decline in the society of the 1890s, which led to the degeneration of people biologically, morally, and spiritually owing to their ambition and desire and the corruption of their souls in the process of fulfilling them. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* provides some threatening consequences of pursuing hedonism as hard as death, and *Heart of Darkness* explores the effects of the greed of conquest of money and territory taking a toll on the health of the colonizer himself. The concept of devolution is key to degeneration and is closely connected to Social Darwinism, which further instigated the class/race hierarchies, dividing the society into various unsatisfied sections and affecting the social, cultural, and economic fabric of the whole. Such negative social developments and a rush for rapid growth



with personal and professional fulfillment make degeneration a key concern in the 1890s- the elaborated end of the Victorian era and a transforming period simultaneously with new sciences developing and challenging the core beliefs of human society and revealing the inherent nature of human as a hungry beast.

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