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王爾德式丹蒂主義之研究

A Study of Oscar Wilde's Dandyism

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## 摘要

本論文旨在提供王爾德式丹蒂主義(Wildean dandyism)之主題性研究及探索其獨特性。身為維多利亞時期著名的丹蒂(dandy)與頹廢思潮作家，王爾德(Oscar Wilde)更將其丹蒂主義美學表現於文學作品中。因此，本論文首要指出王爾德式丹蒂主義的獨特性，再進一步分析王爾德作品中的丹蒂角色(dandiacal character)如何反應其丹蒂主義。

本論文主要分為三章，第一章為王爾德式丹蒂主義之定義：美學主義(aestheticism)、頹廢思潮(decadence)與現代英雄主義(modern heroicism)。主要在澄清王爾德式丹蒂主義及提供相關背景資料，王爾德發展其丹蒂主義主要是受美學主義與頹廢思潮所影響。同時，王爾德有其社會關懷部分，並非只有純美學概念。第二章為跨越道德與性：《少年格雷的畫像》與《微不足道的女人》。第三章為女性主義型、足智多謀型與女性丹蒂：《溫夫人的扇子》與《理想丈夫》。第二章與第三章皆探討王爾德的文本與其中的丹蒂角色如何反映王爾德式丹蒂主義。第二章著重分析多利安(Dorian)和亨利勳爵(Lord Henry)如何跨越道德以及如何重建理想美學世界。此外，亨利勳爵與伊靈沃斯勳爵(Lord Illingworth)皆跨越「性」並追求更高層次的精神關係。第三章旨在點出王爾德式丹蒂的不同面相，包含具有女性主義特色的達靈頓勳爵(Lord Darlington)、足智多謀扮演救星的果林勳爵(Lord Goring)，特別是兩部劇本中女性丹蒂的角色更是代表王爾德式丹蒂主義顛覆傳統性別刻板印象。

關鍵字：王爾德式丹蒂主義、美學主義、頹廢思潮

## Abstract

This thesis aims to provide a thematic study of Oscar Wilde's dandyism and to explore the uniqueness of it. As a famous Victorian dandy and decadent writer, Wilde put both his dandyism and aesthetics into his literary works. Thus, this thesis first points out the uniqueness of Wildean dandyism, and then analyzes how the dandiacal characters of his writing mirror it.

Except for the introduction and conclusion, this thesis is composed of three major chapters. The three main chapters are: "Defining Wildean Dandyism: Aestheticism, Decadence and Modern Heroicism," "Transgression of Morality and Sexuality: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *A Woman of No Importance*," and "Feminist Dandy, Intellectual Dandy and Female Dandy: *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*." Various critics of dandyism are discussed in the first chapter. In the following two chapters, Wilde's revelation of his dandyism through his works is examined.

"Defining Wildean Dandyism" deals with the background studies of dandyism and clarifies Oscar Wilde's dandyism. Wilde develops his dandyism under the influence of aestheticism and decadence. Also, Wildean dandyism has social concerns. Chapter II and Chapter III intend to discover how Wilde's texts and the dandiacal roles reflect Wildean dandyism. "Transgression of Morality and Sexuality" emphasizes on analyzing how Dorian and Lord Henry transgress morality and rebuild an aesthetic world. In addition, both Lord Henry and Lord Illingworth transgress sexual norms and pursue a higher spiritual relationship between men. "Feminist Intellectual and Female Dandy" is to point out the different dimensions of the Wildean dandy. Particularly the female dandy presents Wildean dandyism's subversion of gender stereotype.

Key words: Wildean dandyism, aestheticism, decadence

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## Introduction

Oscar Wilde, the most important decadent writer in English literary history, is such a protean writer that can hardly be known thoroughly through a single perspective. His Anglo-Irish identity, homosexual orientation, dandiacal style and luxurious life were controversial during the nineteenth century. Wilde's performance in literature earned him fame and popularity, but died out quickly after the trial. No doubt he was a talented poet, novelist, critic and playwright. Choosing not to follow the social norm as his writing standard, Wilde built his own style. So Eltis once described Oscar Wilde as a figure whose "disobedience, rebellion, and resistance to the decrees of authority were the central tenets of Wilde's personal philosophy" (6). While reading Wilde's notorious novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the society comedies, the role of dandy and the decadent style of language drew my attention. Interestingly, Wilde himself was a well-known nineteenth-century dandy. Understanding Wilde from the perspective of dandyism both in real world and in the literary world became my main motivation for this thesis.

As a dandy himself, Wilde further developed his own dandiacal style which this thesis calls "Willean dandyism". Other than his elegant taste in dressing and the aesthetic attitude for living, Wilde devoted more to the mind. He followed the French decadence and further developed into his own aestheticism. On the other hand, his writing incorporated his dandyism. Especially in his comedies and novel, the dandy character is usually a wicked one who is good at manipulating witty language. I believe the role of dandy reappearing in Wilde's novel and plays is his self-implementation: an elegant, self-confident, but rebellious character who is always capable of criticizing the society through his penetrative observations. In literature,

Wilde created a world where no rule restrained him like the Victorian society did in reality. Therefore, I suppose the best way of understanding Wildean dandyism is to examine both the cultivation of Wilde's aesthetic mind and the dandiacal characters in his literary works. I aim at discovering the uniqueness of Wildean dandyism and exploring how the role of dandy in his works mirror Wildean dandyism. I hope this study will help readers understand Oscar Wilde in a more profound way.

Before clarifying the uniqueness of Wildean dandyism, I will first give an overview of Wilde's early dandyism. Oscar Wilde, born in 1854 in Dublin, was the second son of the successful Dublin intellectuals Sir William Wilde and Lady Jane Francesca Wilde. Thanks to his parents' love for literature and the economically prominent family background, Wilde could be exposed to literature in an early age and then continued his study first at Dublin, then in Oxford. Wilde's father was an eye surgeon and was famous for his love of Irish folklore and history. He built a fishing lodge on the west coast of Galway which his son explored as a child (Moya 163). In the days of staying in Galway, the Celtic folklore influenced Wilde's primitive knowledge of literature and his later works. As Coakley argues, the structure of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was formed by the Celtic folklore and myth (94-99). Also, Wilde's mother left profound influence on him, both in the development of literature and personality. Wilde's mother, also known by her pseudonym Speranza, was a famous poet and a lifelong Irish nationalist. She wrote poetry for the revolutionary Young Irelanders and supported the Young Ireland movement<sup>1</sup> (1842). Speranza, as an active member, "advocated a free Irish nation in her writings" (Coakley 8). She usually read the Young Irelanders' poetry and her own poetry to her sons. Oscar

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<sup>1</sup> According to Ana Moya, young Ireland was a political, cultural and social movement of the mid-nineteenth century. It led changes in Irish nationalism. This movement wished to create a nation where all Irish men and women would live in harmony. It attracted many middle-class Protestant and Catholic Irish (Moya 163).

Wilde's love for poetry was preliminarily cultivated by his mother. Moreover, growing up in a higher middle-class family, Oscar Wilde had great opportunity of studying in college and exposing himself to classical literature.

In fact, Oscar Wilde revealed dandiacal characteristics at an early age. His display of dandyism began from his boyhood. His early education was mostly established by private tutoring at home and his mother's instruction. In preparing to study in Trinity College, Dublin, Wilde entered Portora Royal School. Compared to other children at the same age, Wilde put more emphasis on costume. In the schooldays at Portora Royal School, Wilde once wrote a letter to his mother to accuse her of misplacing his brother's shirts in his hamper: "Darling Mama, [...] The flannel shirts you sent in the hamper are both Willie's, mine are one quiet scarlet and the other lilac but it is too hot to wear them yet" (Ellmann 3-4). Frank Harris described Wilde that "he never took any interest in mathematics either at school or college [...] the romances that impressed him most when at school were Disraeli's novels<sup>2</sup>" (38). When in school, Wilde was always a noticeable student. He was "a wide reader and read very fast indeed" (Harris 40). Also, he was "more careful in his dress than any other boy" (40). After Wilde left Portora School, he was given a royal scholarship to support his studying classics at Trinity College, Dublin, from 1871 to 1874. During the period in Trinity College, the tutorship of Mahaffy showed him "how to love Greek things" (Elleman 27-28). Wilde's excellence on academic performance maintained for all his school life. At Trinity, Wilde established himself as an outstanding student. In the finals, he won the Berkeley Gold Medal, the University's highest academic award in Greek (Coakley 154). At Trinity, he took a course in

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<sup>2</sup> According to Paul Smith, Disraeli assumed the mask which was to contribute to his reputation as a "mystery man". To some extent, it was the mask of the dandy. Disraeli was attracted to the "construction of the personality as an aesthetic pose, not least when it came to the cultivation of a striking appearance" (32). Disraeli, the dandy and self-styled heir to Byron, imposed traditional standards upon the hero of his novel *The Young Duke*.



aesthetics whose “subject dealt with such subjects as Rossetti and Swinburne” (Elleman 30). Wilde had already been an aesthete. At the age of eighteen, Wilde was thought to be a successful writer in this atmosphere (Elleman 30). Then, he was encouraged to compete for a demyship to Magdalen College, Oxford, and successfully won the opportunity to be enrolled in. As Elleman describes, “for the Irishmen, Oxford is to the mind what Paris is to the body” (37). Oxford was the place “gathering in a disproportionate number of the best talents in the islands, treated them with a mixture of tenderness and rigor” (Elleman 37). Fortunately, the training in Portora School and Trinity College alleviated him the pressure of learning ancient history, philosophy, and literature which were the Oxford requirements (Elleman 41). He had much more leisure time to study other fields that were of interest to him. He studied both classical and contemporary works. Also, he had time to dazzle people with his flamboyant costume every day. In the nine years staying at Oxford, Wilde rapidly broadened his horizon. His stay in Oxford was the period in which Wilde significantly built up his aesthetics and dandyism. Wilde’s encounter with John Ruskin and Walter Pater was a turning point in his life. They were the two principal scholars at Oxford influencing Wilde’s thought of “beauty.” Pater’s book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* was one of the books that influenced Wilde profoundly. Wilde even built a merry friendship with Ruskin whom he called “spiritual guidance” (Elleman 49). In a letter Wilde wrote to Ruskin, he said “the dearest memories of my Oxford days are my walks and talks with you” (qtd. in Elleman 50). In Oxford, Wilde had the opportunity to be with all the elites of Britain. Also, Oxford was the place where aesthetics and fashion were imported. The university was permeated with an air of aristocratic elegance. As Wilde once illustrated:

In Oxford, as in Athens, the realities of sordid life were kept at a distance.

No one seemed to know anything about money or care anything for it.

Everywhere the aristocratic feeling; one must have money, but not bother about it. And all the appurtenances of life were perfect: the food, the wine, the cigarettes; the common needs of life became artistic symbols, our clothes even won meaning and significance. (qtd. in Harris 64)

Here Wilde indicated that fashion had already become a part of the students' lives. At Oxford, students were not only professionals of art and literature, but also connoisseurs of beauty and fashion. Without a doubt, Wilde had prominent performance in the art of dressing. He was confident at trying out new wearing styles and appreciated his own artistic point of view: "It was at Oxford I first dressed in knee breeches and silk stockings. I almost reformed fashion and made modern dress aesthetically beautiful" (Harris 64). Wilde demonstrated the dandiacal body. I suppose Wilde's idea of dressing "aesthetically beautiful" comes from Ruskin and Pater's aesthetic ideas. For Wilde, dandiacal body is the embodiment of art work. Art and life are inseparable, even at the end of his life. He once made a joke to his friend and said "if I were all alone marooned on a desert island and had my things with me, I should dress for dinner every evening" (Ellemann 38). The boy from Ireland was even more fashionable than his English counterparts: "he put aside his Dublin clothing and became sportier than his friends" (38).

After graduating from Oxford, Wilde decided to go to London and continued to perform his talents for literature. Without disappointing his parents, Oscar Wilde later became a well known writer and showed his talents in front of the whole Londoners. But Wilde did not appear as a good boy in Victorian society. Instead, Wilde, like his mother, was full of rebellious ideas. His pose of dandyism was against the Victorian decency. Moreover, as Sylvan Barnet indicates, "Wilde had already established himself as a literary personality, and especially as a witty speaker both at the dinner table and on the platform" (xviii). Wilde's eloquence soon spread within the social

circles of London. He was invited to several lectures and to America in 1882. The topics of his lecturing were usually “on art, household decoration and on dress reform” (xviii). The costume of Brummel like velvet jacket, knee breeches and silk stockings became the best example of his topic on art and decoration. This was the early stage of Wilde’s dandyism. During this stage, Wilde’s dandyism was more likely to stay in Brummell’s style which emphasized more on the appearance. Yet, as I have mentioned earlier, Wilde showed a more complex dandyism which made him distinct from traditional dandies. He would definitely disagree with the critic that dandy was a cloth-wearing man. Wilde was a dandy with aesthetic and decadent thought. Like what Baudelaire mentions, the dandy’s wearing is “the symbol of the superiority of the mind” (*The Painter* 27). I argue that the main source nurturing Wilde’s mind and making it superior than his contemporary dandies lies in the influence of Aesthetic and Decadent movement.

Since the outburst of Queensberry trial, Wilde had been silenced into oblivion. It was not until the 1900s that critics began to talk about Oscar Wilde and re-examined his works. The major portion of studies can be sorted into four categories. First, some of Wilde’s acquaintances or scholars<sup>3</sup> wrote biographical books or articles showing things we did not know about the writer being silenced after the scandal. For example, Peter Raby’s *Oscar Wilde* emphasizes both on Wilde’s life and his art. He writes that “the relationship between Oscar Wilde’s life and his art, as represented by his literary work, makes complex and insistent demands on our attention” (1). Almost in every of Wilde’s biography, “dandy” is an accustomed term mentioned. It seems that everyone takes the term “dandy” for granted when hearing Wilde. However, the term is only mentioned in some paragraphs instead of being carefully reviewed as a thematic study.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Ellman: *Oscar Wilde*, Arthur Ransome: *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*, Peter Raby: *Oscar Wilde*, etc.

The resources available to understand Wildean dandyism are limited. During the boom in biographical studies, his homosexual orientation and the affair with Lord Alfred Douglas was a popular topic. The following categories of study were the homosexual studies and gender studies<sup>4</sup>. Jonathan Dollimore regards Wilde's homosexuality as an important source of inspiration in his development of aesthetics. As Dollimore points out in *Sexual Dissidence*, Wilde's "perverse desire is not only an agency of displacement ... [it] is transvalued, socially, sexually, and aesthetically" (309). In this realm of study, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is usually investigated, especially in the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian. The background needed to understand Wildean dandyism is still limited. The third portion of study lies in the social studies<sup>5</sup>. Wilde's society comedies are widely discussed. In social studies, critics tend to explore Wilde's revelation of the hypocrisy of Victorian society. For example, Russel Jackson's "The Importance of Being Ernest" shows that "Wilde's attack on earnestness undermines not only the well-established 'high moral tone' of Victorian plain living and high thinking" (172). Since Wilde preferred to use dandy in his plays, critics have often mentioned dandy in their essays. Yet, it is a pity that there are only a few complete studies that analyze Wildean dandyism. Not only is the dandy character in Wilde's plays a versatile dandy worth investigating, but also Wilde himself. The fourth portion of study is cultural study. Multiple plays and film adaptations of Wilde's life and works<sup>6</sup> "gained increasing critical currency among contemporary theorist" (Dickinson 416). As Peter Dickinson argues, the history of the

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Bristow: "A Complex Multiform Creature: Wilde's Sexual identities", Melissa Knox: *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide*. Alan Sinfield: *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Movement*, Jonathan Dollimore: *Sexual Dissidence*, Elaine Showalter "The Veiled Woman" etc.

<sup>5</sup> Sos Eltis: *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, Kerry Powell: *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, William Tydeman: *Wilde Comedies: A Selection of Critical Essays*, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Dramas: Terry Eagleton's *Saint Oscar*, David Hare's *The Judas Kiss*, Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*, Moises Kaufman's *Gross Indecency: The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, etc. Films: Brian Gilbert's *Wilde*, Todd Haynes's *Velvet Goldmine*, etc.

glam rock era of music in the 1970s producing stars such as David Bowie is “part of a camp aesthetic continuum that stretches all the way back to Oscar Wilde” (426). In fact, we can hardly find any critics devoted to the study of Wildean dandyism in connection to film or play adaptations. In the following part, I will concentrate particularly on giving an overview of some researches that relate directly to my thesis.

Ellen Moers in “Fin de Siecle: The Decadence of Dandyism” points out that “[t]he New Dandies of the era: Wilde, Beardsley, Beerbohm, the Rhymers’ club poets, built a literature around themes from the dandy tradition” (288). I appreciate Moers’ immense dedication to the historical research of the dandy in different eras in her book *The Dandy*. She argues that Wilde deals with dandyism in two ways. The first is that “as a novelist and playwright he found aristocratic society the only suitable material for his talent” (300). Secondly, “as critic and ‘aesthete’ he turned inward upon himself in search of a dandy-artist figure” (300). However, I oppose classifying Wildean dandyism in a binary way. We can still find the dandy-artist figure when Wilde plays the role of novelist and playwright. Indeed, Wilde performs dandyism through the role of dandy in his novel and plays. It is a pity that Moers seems to only focus on the dimension of Wilde’s aesthetics in fin de siècle without other supplementary connection with his literary works. In my thesis, I intend to develop Wilde’s dandyism with a clearer framework, including the analysis of his literary work to support my arguments.

Similarly, Stephen Calloway is an important critic studying Wilde from the perspective of the dandiacal identity. In “Wilde and the Dandyism of the Senses”, Calloway defines the quality of the aesthetics and decadence as “dandyism of the senses” (34). He claims the significance of the Aesthetic and Decadent movement to the formation of Wilde as an unconventional dandy. Calloway focuses on the background of Aesthetic and Decadent movement from Pater to the fin de siècle

group and rationalizes their influence on Wilde. Calloway's essay inspires me to explore Wildean dandyism and its connection with decadence in a profound way. Simultaneously, I intend to discover more about Wilde's uniqueness which might transcend his decadent predecessors. Yet, in reading Calloway's study, I have the thought that he presumes Wilde to be subjected to the previous decadents. Instead, I argue that Wilde has established his own style. In addition, Calloway mainly emphasizes Wilde's dandiacal identity without referring to his performance in literature. I suppose analyzing Wilde's dandyism through his work is an indispensable task. I believe we will reap more as we dig more into Wilde's literary works and observe how his dandy characters mirror Wildean dandyism.

Another study related to the theme of dandyism is "Subversive Dandyism in Oscar Wilde's Society Comedies" written by Fu-ying Cheng. The author focuses on Oscar Wilde's literary strategy—"his manipulation of the contemporary theatrical conventions—along with his deployment of dandyism and his cultural background of the Anglo-Irish which contributes to his ambiguous attitude toward self-identity" (iv). Cheng targets on Wilde's three society comedies except *Lady Windermere's Fan*. She intends to discover a "political" Wilde. Cheng's study mainly argues that Wilde's society comedies, although seemingly adopting conventional elements so as to appeal to the audiences' preference, are actually full of subversive ideas in disguise. Dandyism, according to Cheng, is Wilde's strategy to "express his philosophy and political concerns" (1). While my thesis aims at both the "aesthetic" Wilde and the "political" Wilde, I also emphasize on Wilde's aesthetic and decadent concern. I argue that the uniqueness of Wildean dandyism lies in his mind which is greatly influenced by French decadence. In Cheng's study, however, decadence is not mentioned. I consider Wilde to present his aesthetics in every of his works, even "society comedies." Besides the political concerns, Wilde reveals his tenets of dandyism and

aesthetics through the dandy characters, particularly in their verbal wit. Wilde successfully combines his political strategy and aesthetics together. I add *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* to my thesis and expect to observe Wilde's self-reflection on these dandy characters more clearly.

This thesis attempts to conduct a thematic study on Oscar Wilde's dandyism. To build a framework on this theme, this study encompasses related theories of dandyism, the influence of decadence on Oscar Wilde's dandyism and examines Wildean dandyism in his literary works.

To explore the development of Wildean dandyism, I acknowledge the importance of constructing a proper theory of Wildean dandyism. I first review the previous literature and present a general profile of a dandy's appearance and air. Then, I bring up some influential critics' ideas of dandy and dandyism: from Barbey D'Aurevilly's earliest description to Baudelaire's most influential discourse. My argument is mainly based on the theory of Baudelaire, the writer of modernity. Moreover, I point out the uniqueness of Wildean dandyism. I find Wilde, though inheriting the cult of dandyism in tradition, cultivates his own style. Like what Baudelaire says, a dandy's flamboyant dressing is for presenting the superior mind. Wilde is not the dandy who merely knows about appearance. Instead, he impresses people by his particular aestheticism and literary talents. This is what I need to elaborate in this thesis.

Secondly, I explore the formation of Wildean dandyism. I discover that Wilde is deeply influenced by the Decadent movement which forms his style of thinking and writing. Since Decadent movement is so extensive that it covers art and literature, I narrow down the scope of my research to literature. I mainly focus on investigating the impact of the French decadents who were directly related to the cultivation of Wilde's aesthetics. I outline the theory of the three most influential French decadents, Gautier, Baudelaire and Huysmann and demonstrate the influence of decadence on

Wilde's dandyism. Then, I make comparisons between Wilde and his counterparts in order to find the similarities Wilde inherits and the dissimilarities Wilde creates.

Wilde absorbs the tenet of decadence (art for art's sake), and even transcends the original to establish his own style. His literary works offer proper evidence.

Particularly the role of dandy, I argue, is the embodiment of Wildean dandyism.

Therefore, anatomizing the dandiacal characters of Wilde's works is indispensable.

The last step of my approach is to analyze the dandies created by Wilde in the literary works to support my previous arguments. I target on Wilde's only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the three society comedies: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of no Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*. I aim at discovering how the role of dandy reflects Wildean dandyism. I intend to supply textual evidence to support my previous arguments. Also, I will discuss Wilde's dandiacal style of writing.

Consisting of three chapters, this thesis includes a chapter clarifying Wildean dandyism and two chapters analyzing the dandiacal characters of Wilde's works. Chapter I deals with the background studies of dandyism and clarifies Oscar Wilde's dandyism. In this chapter, I mainly focus on "Regency England" and later the peaked age in "France" (Hammarberg 395). First, I will introduce the common appearance and air of a dandy. Also, I use the great English dandy George Bryan "Beau" Brummell to exemplify prototypical dandyism. Then I will take a closer look at some of the key interpretations toward "dandy" and "dandyism", including the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly, Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin and Albert Camus. Their opinions reveal different ideas of dandyism in different age. To define Oscar Wilde's dandyism, I mainly base my interpretation on Baudelaire's theory and the ideas of the critics of modernity. I discover that the particularity of Wilde's dandyism lies in the superiority of the mind which is closely related to the influence of decadence. Also, through the interpretation of modernity, a dandy can be



more fully realized through the perspectives of a modern hero or a social rebel.

Chapter II analyzes Oscar Wilde's dandyism in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the society comedy *A Woman of No Importance*. I mainly focus on studying the dandiacal characters in the two texts, including Lord Henry, Dorian Gray, Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby. In this chapter, I intend to discover how the two texts and the roles reflect Oscar Wilde's dandyism in the transgression of morality and sexuality.

Chapter III deals with Wilde's two society comedies *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*. The male dandy Lord Darlington is a feminist who shows Wilde's gender awareness. The other male dandy Lord Goring is the most intellectual one who represents Wilde's superior mind. Except for the male dandiacal characters, the two female dandies Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Cheveley play important roles in the two texts. In this chapter, I will devote to discussing not only the male dandies, but also the female ones representing Wilde's subversion of gender stereotype.

After introducing Wilde's early dandyism and the general approach of my thesis, I will now focus on the uniqueness of Wildean dandyism in a more specific way. I will begin with clarifying Wilde's dandyism in the first chapter.

## Chapter I

### Defining Wildean Dandyism: Aestheticism, Decadence and Modern Heroicism

Even today, dandy is not an unfamiliar word used to describe the well-dressed man. In general, a dandy is commonly known as a man who has particular emphasis on refined dress and deportment. It is often recognized that a dandy appeared in the nineteenth century, particularly in Brummel's era, but in fact, the term "dandy" first appeared in the seventeen-seventies, the years preceding the American Revolution. The word dandy was sung throughout the American colonies in the ballad "Yankee Doodle":

*Yankee Doodle came to town,  
Riding on a pony,  
Stuck a feather in his hat  
And called it Macaroni!* (qtd. in Moers 11)

The ballad, written anonymously, was mainly sung to "make fun of the appearance of the American troops" (Moers 11). The Macaronis were the "oddly-dressed, cosmopolitan Londoners who could be identified as the nearest ancestors of the Regency dandies" (Moers 11). Later in seventeen-eighties, the term dandy was used again in Scottish border songs as "Jack-a-dandy" (Moers 11).

Before the term dandy was written in literature, dandyism, as a phenomenon, could be traced back to the ancient history. As Gitta Hammarberg indicates:

Dandyism ... spans a broad spectrum of times and locations, from ancient Athens and Alcibiades, to Renaissance Italy and Castiglione, to Regency

England and Beau Brummell, to decadent dandies in late nineteenth-century France and Russia (395).

The dandy-like figure Alcibades, the Athenian general, was “aristocratic, wealthy, elegant, brave, skilled in oratory” (Feldman 4). These characteristics were prototypical standards for the dandies. Alcibades not only inspired many nineteenth-century dandies, but also became the “patriarch of all dandies” (Feldman 4). He was referred to by many of the nineteenth-century theorist of dandyism, including Barbey D’Aurevilly and Baudelaire.

Dandyism is such an extensive concept that it is hard to be limited to a single definition. The central concept of dandyism could be presented in the Regency period in England when Brummell ascended. Interestingly, dandyism had its roots in England, but prospered in France. It seemed that the French did not exclude dandyism from entering their society just because it was a foreign idea. Dandyism developed simultaneously in London and Paris. For the French, dandyism might be an imported idea. For the English, on the other hand, “Parisian style must set the standard” (Feldman 1). Although growing in England, dandyism was later idealized in France. In Regency England, Brummell demonstrated the phenomenon of having particular importance on the appearance. While in France, the charming English dandy developed into intellectual dandy. Especially in decadent period, many French dandies were writers or critics. Oscar Wilde, though an Irish writer gaining his fame in London, was deeply influenced by the cult of French dandyism. Simultaneously, Wilde further developed his own unique dandyism.

Before clarifying Wilde’s dandyism in detail, I believe having a historical overview of dandyism will help readers realize the formation of Wilde’s dandyism. In the following sections, I will first introduce the history of dandyism from Regency England to France. Then, I will enumerate the important definitions of dandyism in

history. Lastly, I will focus on clarifying Wilde's dandyism and point out its uniqueness.

### **From Regency England to France**

The Regency (1800-1830) was a period of political instability. Half of the Regency era was a post-war period which brought, as the Regency called, "ennui" (Moers 40). During the Regency period, the authority of aristocracy was rattled. When the aristocracy and monarchy were widely despised, a group of people feigned to be more aristocratic ascended to the society: "his arrogant superiority was an affirmation of the aristocratic principle, his way of life an exaltation of aristocratic society; but his terrible independence proclaimed a subversive disregard for the essentials of aristocracy" (Moers 17). It was the time when dandyism became a fashionable phenomenon which rose to its climax on Regency England. The most famous Regency dandy was George Bryan "Beau" Brummell<sup>7</sup> (1778-1840). The first half of Regency era (1800-1816) was Brummell's heyday. Brummell was not from a noble family. In fact, his father was a civil servant acting for many years as secretary to the Prime Minister Lord North and his mother was a well-bred lady (Moers 24). Although he could not be titled as a member of aristocrats, the huge wealth he inherited from his father could afford his aristocratic way of life. He spent mostly on costume, gambling and luxurious living. Brummell had been a celebrity in the fashionable world since at Oxford. Even the Prince Regent admired him and became intimate with him. Brummel had already been a classical icon of dandy. Most of our basic knowledge of dandyism came from this pretty man. From this Regent dandy, we could observe the prototypical model of a dandy's appearance and air.

In Regency England, dandy's costume was not flamboyant or exaggerating.

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<sup>7</sup> The name of dandy was not yet fashionable, and the arbiters of elegance were calling themselves *Bucks* or *Macaronis*. Brummell was called Buck Brummell. (Buck in English means "male") (D'Aurevilly 20).

Rather, dark colors were usually used. According to Susanne Schmid, “in the early and mid-nineteenth century, the dandy’s style is characterized by simplicity” (83). A dandy was used to dressing in dark colors and wearing a wig. It was not until Brummell that he made coiffure more fashionable than wearing a wig. Just like Disraeli, another model dandy, liked to sport “long black glossy ringlets” as a new fashion (Hammarberg 397). For Brummell, the time-consuming toilette was his daily routine:

Brummell would spend hours grooming and dressing, starting with furious teeth-brushing, careful shaving, scrubbing with plenty of soap, scratching his face with a stiff flesh-brush, and standing before a magnifying mirror with tweezers to pluck remaining hairs from cheek and chin. (Hammarberg 406)

As Ellen Moers describes, Brummell only used blue for the coat, buff for the waistcoat and buckskins, white for the linen and black for his boots (34). In fact, people nicknamed him “Beau” not because of beautiful face, but because of his devotion to refined costume. Conventionally, a dandy was a man who placed particular importance upon appearance. Beau Brummell was the best mouthpiece. Furthermore, the “airs” is indispensable for a dandy. The “airs” indicated “an expression frequently applied to the dandy” (Schmid 83). The ornament a dandy permitted himself was a cane. Dandies used to sport a cane and lorgnettes, which could be seen as indications of dandy delicacy: “feigned nearsightedness and weak legs were part of a dandy’s elegance” (Hammarberg 399). Judged by the appearance, a dandy would never be associated with fierceness. I suppose a dandy’s fierce weapon lay in the verbal witticisms. For Brummell, his witty words were the most useful implement. Although Wilde maintained this tradition, his pen drew people’s attention more than his cane. Wilde’s writing became his weapon to fight against Victorian

society.

Dandyism developed simultaneously in London and Paris. The political turbulence was the main cause of dandyism going to France. The fall of the Emperor and the return of Louis XVIII in 1814 accelerated the delivery of dandyism to France (Moers 109-110). During the Revolution, many French aristocrats fled to England and some had already learned the dandy ways. The Restoration urged the French emigrants to move back to Paris. Surprisingly, it seemed that the French welcomed the new import. The French, in fact, were fascinated with the English phenomenon. Brummell's first flight to France in 1816 received hospitable welcome. In France, dandyism had developed into a distinct style. For example, the French dandy did not dress in Brummell's style which was characterized by simplicity and masculinity. They were "ultras in knee-breeches, fingering antique snuff-boxes; liberals flourishing their grey hats; bonapartists wearing the imperial frock coat with large gold buttons" (Moers 121). Compared to the Regent dandy, the French dandy's costume was more feminine.

Dandyism had grown fashionable in France, even after the end of Regency era. The year 1830 was the end of Regency, but it was not the end of dandyism. In France, it was the year that the press popularized dandyism. The boom of novels, magazines and newspapers was beneficial to the spreading of dandyism in France. Balzac took the initiative in writing about dandyism. Since 1830, he had written articles about dandyism, such as the fashionable life, for the magazines. Balzac elevated the status of the dandies because they could dress with elegance. For him, the elements of elegance were expressed in "the arts of dandyism" (Moers 130). Also, Balzac initiated the idea of combining dandyism with art, which inspired many French descendants to view dandyism higher than the philosophy of dressing. The French did not merely imitate the English phenomenon, but developed it into a distinct style. Dandyism

reached its climax in England, but it was in France that dandyism became an ideal.

On the contrary, the situation of England in 1830 was totally different. The renouance of Regency was also the beginning to “vilify the dandy class” (Moers 168). Victorian England’s attitude turned out to be criticizing instead of tolerating. Carlyle and Thackeray were famous anti-dandiacal writers during the thirties. Victorian England experienced rapid and unregulated industrialization. “Gospel of Work,” in Carlyle’s term, represented the “rejection of the cultural and social authority of the ruling aristocratic classes” (Danahay 23). The indolent aristocratic classes and their “parasitical position in the economy should be supplanted by self-disciplined, hard-working ‘Captains of industry’” (Danahay 23). Similarly, the dandy’s aristocratic lifestyle and squandering expenditure on costumes were under attack. The central value of Victorian England was diligence. Carlyle in his published book *Sartor Resartus* had cynical criticism to dandyism, particularly to the dandy’s costume.

Before entering the nineties, some French critics, such as Barbey D’Aurevilly and Charles Baudelaire, started to resist the English anti-dandiacal writers. D’Aurevilly took Brummell as a model dandy and wrote a biography for him. For D’Aurevilly, dandy was not simply a dandy, but equivalent to an artist. He appreciated dandy’s costume as a work of art. The other important mid-century French writer was Baudelaire. Baudelaire elevated the dandy to a higher status. He considered dandyism the “superior intelligence” (Moers 116). Baudelaire’s influence was profound to Oscar Wilde and other decadent dandies.

The Victorian era suppressed the Regency dandyism for nearly half a century. Yet, in the nineties, a new power was rising. The Continental power rivaled with Victorian social values. Particularly in the late nineteenth-century, England, the prevailing dandyism was largely influenced by French ideas. The participation of aestheticism and decadence promoted a new style of dandyism which Holbrook

Jackson called “the New Dandyism” (qtd. in Moers 287). The late nineteenth-century dandy restored the Regency attitude, and moreover, worshipped art more than anything. The decadent dandies, such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, were famous not only for their outstanding tastes for dressing and living, but also for their talents in artistic creation.

Influenced by Continental power, the late nineteenth-century dandy Wilde shared not the same appearance with Brummell. When Oscar Wilde became fashionable in Victorian age, only unusual clothes could draw his attention. Wilde might wear “a Prince Rupert costume” with plum-colored breeches to his knee and silk stockings and patent leather shoes with bows (Ellmann 87). Also, sometimes he wore flowers, such as green carnations, large white lilies or sunflowers, or a green carnation which was “the symbol of Decadence” (Ellmann 365).

Indeed, Brummell’s greatness was “based on nothing at all” (D’Aurevilly 87). He was not an aristocrat or productive bourgeois. He did not leave behind any literary works which would never fade. Compared with Brummell, Oscar Wilde was from an upper class, but being an Irish was inferior during Victorian England. However, Wilde successfully built his reputation. Without a doubt, Wilde’s dandiacal style impressed the public. But I believe Wilde’s talents in literature were the foundation of his greatness. Unlike Brummell, the greatness of Wilde, the fin-de-siècle dandy, was based on his intellectual dandyism. If Brummell’s unproductive life “proclaimed a subversive disregard for the essentials of aristocracy” (Moers 17), then, I suppose, Wilde’s writing is his method to subvert the Victorian social value.

For furthering understanding, in the next section, I will enumerate some crucial critics’ definition of dandyism.

### **Defining Dandyism**

Since the debut of Brummell in London social circle, the definition of dandyism



has not stopped being controversial. For the Victorian conservatives, dandyism represented a deviation from the normal society. While for the optimists, dandyism demonstrated a modern attitude against the pedantic social mores. Indeed, there is no unified definition of dandyism. Dandyism develops with time, space and the most important—contemporary cultural context. As Thorsten Botz-Bornstein states, “the biggest fault one could commit is to believe that the dandy is a dandy because he follows the rules of dandyism” (285). Like an anarchist, the dandy “rejects all rules and all norms” (285). This could possibly be the reason why critics have difficulty to sum up a standard definition of dandyism. In this section, I mainly focus on the three crucial critics’ interpretation on dandy and dandyism: Thomas Carlyle, Barbey D’Aurevilly and Charles Baudelaire.

The early nineteenth century was Brummell’s heyday. He was the most famous English dandy and his fame soon spread around town. His beauty attracted the public’s attention, even the prince’s admiration. The dinner table of the higher class always saved a seat for him. But, not everyone appreciated his refined costume and exquisite manner. For the Victorian conservatives, he became the thorn in their flesh. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) was the first critic to attack the dandiacal phenomenon brought by Brummell. Growing up in a strict Calvinist family, Carlyle was expected to become a preacher by his parents. The faith of religion influenced him throughout his life and his writing. As an important Victorian writer, Bernard Howells indicates, “Carlyle’s thought is permeated by Christian moral inspiration, in particular by the Puritan work ethic, and is closer to the tragic moral climate of modernity” (110). His first major work, *Sartor Resartus*, was full of social criticism and didactic sense. Carlyle used a chapter to criticize dandyism. In *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle attacks dandyism as “a monstrous social delinquency, a vicious, imbecile tendency of the upper class to waste precious time and energy on frivolities” (198). For him, the

dandy's time-consuming grooming and dressing are a complete waste of time. In Chapter X, "The Dandiacal Body," Thomas Carlyle criticizes the appearance-emphasizing phenomenon as follows:

A Dandy is a Clothes-wearing Man, a Man whose trade, office and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes. Every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse and person is heroically consecrated to this one object, the wearing of Clothes wisely and well: so that as others dress to live, he lives to dress. The all-importance of Clothes ... has sprung up in the intellect of the Dandy without effort, like an instinct of genius; he is inspired with Cloth, a Poet of Cloth. (204)

According to Carlyle, a dandy is just a man who knows only about his dress instead of cultivating any inner thought and spirit. Other than clothes, nothing else exists in the dandy's intelligence. For the worse part, Carlyle negates the subjectivity of a dandy: "Solely, we may say, that you would recognize his existence; would admit him to be a living object; or even failing this, a visual object, or thing that will collect rays of light" (Carlyle 205). Instead of considering the dandy as a real person, Carlyle regards the dandy as an object. Accordingly, Brummell was just a clothes-wearing object without subjectivity. He disparages dandyism as a philosophy of time-wasting dressing. The fetishism of the dandy, no doubt, reinforces people's prejudice and misunderstanding against dandy and dandyism.

After the anti-dandiacal period of 1830s in England, the supporting opinions occurred in mid-century France. Compared to England, France became a more proper place for dandyism to develop. Among the French critics, Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly and Charles Baudelaire were the two most influential supporters of dandyism. In France, Brummell had been reinterpreted. Barbey D'Aurevilly wrote a book, *The*

*Anatomy of Dandyism*<sup>8</sup>, to praise Brummell's dandyism. This book recorded detailed observation of the famous English dandy Beau Brummell, and viewed dandyism from a distinct perspective. Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly has a different thought that is contrary to Carlyle. He explains that "the reality of Dandyism is human, social and spiritual" (7). Contrary to Carlyle's blistering biting remarks, D'Aurevilly defends the "clothes-wearing" dandy for the idea that "it is certainly not a suit of clothes walking alone; on the contrary a certain manner of wearing clothes created Dandyism" (7). In his opinion, dandyism is more than just costumes, deportment or exterior elegance:

Dandyism is a whole state of being, and one exists only in a material and visible aspect. It is a state of being entirely composed of fine shades, as always happens in very ancient and hyper-civilised societies, in which comedy is become a rarity and in which breeding hardly triumphs over ennui. (7-8)

Here D'Aurevilly infuses dandy with a certain state of being, a subjectivity, and does not just regard him as a clothes-wearing object. The dandy is an independent subject. It is wrong to subordinate a dandy to clothes. Since then, the term dandy has earned more emphasis and praise. D'Aurevilly's book *The Anatomy of Dandyism* plays an important role in the development of dandyism and successfully promotes dandyism to a higher position. For D'Aurevilly, a dandy is relevant to an artist. He regards Brummell as an artist who is worth observing in detail. He not only records Brummell's living, but also his conversations. The life of a dandy is an art work, and the words of a dandy are the intellectual performance. D'Aurevilly intends to "make dandyism available as an intellectual pose" (qtd. in Moers 263). Not only in France, D'Aurevilly thought to remind the English counterparts of taking dandyism more

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<sup>8</sup> The French original version is *Du Dandysme*. D. B. Wyndham Lewis translated it into English *The Anatomy of Dandyism* in 1845.

seriously. D'Aurevilly's influence continued to the late nineteenth century. Especially in the Decadence movement, dandyism was beloved by the fin-de-siècle decadents. As Moers proclaims, "in the dandy's mysterious blend of feminine elegance with masculine power Barbey sees the archetypal decadence; there the fin de siècle would also see a reflection of its ideas" (264-5). The famous decadent dandy-theorist Charles Baudelaire had a more profound influence on defining dandyism not only in mid-century France, but also in the fin de siècle.

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) devoted several essays to talk about dandyism. As a critic and essayist, he wrote "extensively and perceptively about the luminaries and themes of French culture" (Richardson 268). Baudelaire was not only a decadent writer, but also a famous dandy in the nineteenth century. Baudelaire's dandyism, to some extent, was inspired by D'Aurevilly's book. After reading D'Aurevilly's *Du Dandysme*, Baudelaire was attracted by the term "dandysme" and called it "*une chose moderne*" (Feldmann 100). From 1845 to 1863, Baudelaire wrote about dandyism in several journal entries and one concentrated chapter "Le Dandy" within *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*<sup>9</sup> in 1863 (Feldman 101). In "Le Dandy", Baudelaire demonstrates that

[d]andyism does not even consist, as many thoughtless people seem to believe, in an immoderate taste for the toilet and material elegance. For the perfect dandy these things are no more than symbols of his aristocratic superiority of mind. (*The Painter* 27)

Similar to D'Aurevilly, Baudelaire defends for the dandy. Baudelaire does not think that the dandy is a clothes-wearing man only. Nor does he ignore the dandy's wearing. Rather, he changes the dandy's refined costume, which people think unproductive,

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<sup>9</sup> *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* was published in the English version as *The Painter of Modern Life* in 1863.

into his advantage. He invests the dandy's costume with a more sacred and inviolable significance. The dandy's costume becomes an important symbol to show the superior personality. The dandy's superior personality, as Baudelaire indicates, mainly lies in the superior mind. Thanks to Baudelaire's reinterpretation, the dandy's intellectuality finally gained people's emphasis. Moreover, Baudelaire thinks highly of the dandy. He argues that the dandies are "all representatives of what is finest in human pride" (*The Painter* 28). As a precursor of decadence, Baudelaire relates dandyism to decadence and argues that "dandyism is the last spark of heroism amid decadence" (*The Painter* 28-9). According to Moers, Baudelaire's dandyism approaches the aesthetic position through an "insistence on self-beautification" and "admits the originality and permanence of sin" (282-3). Baudelaire's dandyism, to some extent, corresponds with the tenets of decadence. This point of view inspires many decadent dandies, such as Oscar Wilde.

In another chapter "The Artist, Man of the World, Man of the Crowd, and Child," Baudelaire further explores the performance of dandy. In this chapter, he compares his ideal modern artist with dandy and *flâneur*. Monsieur Guys embodies Baudelaire's ideal modern artist who loves the crowd and always has insatiable passion to seeing and feeling. On the contrary, the *flâneur* is "a spectator to be hidden amid the ebb and flow in the city and enjoys observing the crowd in an insensitive way" (Baudelaire *The Painter* 9). The dandy, as well, "aspires to insensitivity" and is "blasé" (Baudelaire *The Painter* 9). Yet, Baudelaire does not mean that the dandy is indifferent to the society. He further points out that the word dandy "implies a quintessence of character and a subtle understanding of the entire moral mechanism of this world" (*The Painter* 9). The blasé attitude is a certain kind of policy or personal revolt for the dandy to maintain detachment from the homogeneous society where industry and mass production replace individuality. Baudelairian dandy, indeed, has

social concern. Compared to Baudelaire, Wilde performs a different mode of dandyism. He demonstrates his social concern in a more specific way and with different attitude. Instead of adopting Baudelairean blasé attitude as a way of personal revolt, Wilde participates in the social circle and experiences the society himself. He directly reveals his dissatisfaction toward the Victorian society and criticizes it through his writing.

Furthermore, the phenomenon Baudelaire observed in the nineteenth century presents the first image of modernity. Based on Baudelaire's ideas, the critic Walter Benjamin indicates that the dandy is the creation of modernity. *The Painter of Modern Life* builds foundations for Baudelaire as a modern poet. Baudelaire initiatively presents "modernity" to the world: "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (*The Painter* 12). For Baudelaire, the hero of modernity is the poet. As Graeme Gilloch further indicates, the poet is "the figure who seeks to give voice to its paradoxes and illusions, who participates in, while yet still retaining the capacity to give form to, the fragmented, fleeting experiences of the modern" (134). For Baudelaire, "modern heroism resides in the attempt to give voice to the transience of contemporary life" (Gilloch 150). Baudelaire later became the lens through which Benjamin, the most important critic of modernity, examined the phenomenon of modernity and extended the idea of modern individual<sup>10</sup> (Gilloch 123). Benjamin sought to reveal Baudelaire's heroism: "The hero is the true subject of *la modernité*. In other words, it takes a heroic constitution to live modernity" (Benjamin 103). The

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<sup>10</sup> The pages given over to Baudelaire are perhaps the densest in the essay: Benjamin presents, in dizzying abbreviation, a number of the central motifs of his critique of modernity: the flâneur who strolls through the urban crowd as prosthetic vehicle of a new vision; the department store as phantasmagoric space of display and consumption; the commercialization and final alienation of the intelligentsia; the prostitute as concatenated image—of death and woman, "seller and sold in one"; the gradual denaturing of art as it is subsumed by commodification and fashion; and the replacement of experience by the new concept of information. (Jennings 9)

heroic individuals, according to Benjamin, are the “characters who most acutely embody the prevailing tendencies of their society and epoch, while denying and resisting them” or “at the same time engaged somehow in subverting it” (qtd. in Gilloch 150). It is not only the urban poet who deserves the title of hero, but also those on whom he models himself: “the flâneur, the dandy, the collector, the gambler, the worker, the rag-picker and the prostitute” (qtd. in Gilloch 150).

The nineteenth century was the era of modernity when Paris and London were turning into metropolitan cities. Gilloch points out that, for Benjamin, the archetypal signs of modernity in Paris includes “the arcade, the museum, the exhibition hall, the railway station and the other great monuments inspired by the dream” which were the “most prominent, profound forms of the phantasmagoria of the modern epoch” (Gilloch 123). Yet, Benjamin discovered the commodification hidden behind the dream of modernity. The arcades interiorized the life and space of the urban area, but developed into a space of the commodity, where the bourgeoisie came to buy and showed their fetish: “the arcade as the temple of commodity capitalism” (Benjamin 85). For Benjamin, the objects contained in the arcades and department stores were the non-auratic, mass-produced commodity (Gilloch 129). Even in the museum, art lost its aura and was judged on its “exchange-value or its exhibition-value” (Gilloch 129). Similarly, what the world exhibition celebrated is no longer the achievements of modern technologies and artefacts. Instead, notes Benjamin, “the world exhibitions glorified the exchange-value of commodities. ... They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background” (36). In Benjamin’s mind, Paris was not only the culture of the commodity, but also the commodification of culture.

Not only Paris, the nineteenth-century London was in its peaked time of modernity. According to Erika Rappaport, the formations of modernity in the late-nineteenth England have ranged from:

the impact of new forms of production and consumption, mass communications and travel, and the growing rationalization and bureaucratization of labour, business and the state to the role of technology, and, perhaps most crucially, to the place of the ever-growing metropolis in shaping everyday life, social interactions, and formations of identity. (25)

Also, the nineteenth century was the era when the society confronted with capitalism. Industrialization and commodification deprived people of individualism. Like commodities, human bodies were turned into the machinery of production without individualism. During the modern era of commodification, the dandy appeared as a resistant force. The distinct costume and life were the dandy's basic strategy. Their flamboyant costume and luxurious life demonstrated the indifference to the nation's need of hard-working people in increasing the national economy. As Benjamin notes, "the dandy is the creation of the English, who were leaders in world trade" (125). I suppose the nineteenth-century dandy was in fact the creation of modernity. Taking city as the space of commodification, the dandy appeared as a resisting power against "the grey uniformity of the urban multitude through the acquisition of the most fashionable and foppish" (Gilloch 154). Wilde's pursuing of fashion and aestheticism was against the social conformity. Like what Benjamin argues, the flâneur-as-dandy is "heroic in his arrogant retention of an aloof independence and a disdainful individuality" (qtd. in Gilloch 153). I find that Oscar Wilde had made an echoing definition to dandyism in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

Dandyism, which in its own way, is an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of beauty, had, of course, their fascination for him. His mode of dressing, and the particular styles that from time to time he affected ... and tried to reproduce the accidental charm of his graceful, though to him only half-serious, fopperies. (110)



For Wilde, individualism was the most important feature constituting dandyism. The individual style of Wildean dandyism, as I argued earlier, lies in his intellectual mind and social concern. Moreover, I suppose Wildean dandy, in light of Benjamin, to be the modern hero who exists in the phantasmagorical London with subverting and resisting power. Wilde's literature particularly reflects his dandyism of modernity.

Baudelaire's influence circulated round the whole France, and later transferred back to England. In England, dandyism was reaccepted as a French fashion. In addition, this fashion circulated to other European countries. In Germany, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) selected some of the most important themes of Baudelaire. Nietzsche was a nineteenth-century German philosopher, poet and classical philologist. Besides writing critical essays on philosophy, he was also interested in contemporary culture, including the fashionable culture of dandyism. The figure of the dandy was seen as "prefiguring Nietzsche's notion of the 'overman'" (Gogröf-Voorhees 9). Nietzsche translated dandy as "the higher human being" who was not a specialist but "a man of leisure and global education" (qtd. in Gogröf-Voorhees 9). It seems that Nietzsche agreed with Baudelaire's opinion that the dandy ought to be regarded as a superior human kind with thought.

The discussion of dandyism continued in the twentieth century. Michel Foucault, the French social critic and historian, also talked about dandyism. In "What is Enlightenment," Foucault states that the aestheticism of the dandy "makes of his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art" (41). From this perspective, the dandy is "the embodiment of the idea of *l'art pour l'art*, in that he has no social or political function" (Gogröf-Voorhees 54). Foucault finds out that Baudelaire's dandyism only concerns about art, and in rid of any social concern. In "What is Enlightenment," Foucault claims: "This aesthetic elaboration of the self—Baudelaire does not imagine that these have any place in society itself, or in the

body politic. They can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art” (42).

The other modern French critic who mentions dandyism is Albert Camus. Camus links dandyism with romanticism and claims that the dandy is the original creation of romanticism: “Romanticism, at the source of its inspiration, is chiefly concerned with defying moral and divine law. That is why its most original creation is . . . the Dandy” (50). In *The Rebel*, Camus indicates that “romanticism demonstrates, in fact, that rebellion is part and parcel of dandyism: one of its objectives is appearances” (53). In Camus’ words, dandyism represents the rebellious spirit against society. Elizabeth Wilson echoes Camus in her discussion of the dandy’s costume: “Dandyism demonstrated the superiority of the artist over the vulgar bourgeoisie; it was an expression of opposition and revolt” (164). The dandy knows not only the clothes, but assumes them as a revolting strategy to show the self as a work of art involved in life.

From negative to positive, then combined with aestheticism and decadence, dandyism evolves varied meanings from different milieu. Although Oscar Wilde did not publish any formal essay about dandyism, he himself was the embodiment of dandyism. In the following part, I will refer to the relative definitions to clarify Oscar Wilde’s dandyism.

### **Oscar Wilde’s Dandyism**

Oscar Wilde’s dandyism, I suppose, to some extent, corresponds to Baudelaire’s. According to Baudelaire’s theory, Wilde’s flamboyant costume is the symbol of his aristocratic superiority of mind. But it would be wrong if we build a fixed framework to define Wilde’s dandyism. In fact, Wilde, the rebel to Victorian society, eschewed any fixed position. In general, people tend to misunderstand that Wildean dandyism is equivalent to Baudelairian dandyism. Yet, I argue Wilde’s dandyism to be a more complex mode of dandyism. Indeed, it is a combined idea of both aestheticism and

decadence. Instead of inheriting Baudelairian dandyism, Wilde further developed his own aesthetics and philosophy toward art and life. In comparison with Brummell, Wilde drew people's attention more to his thoughts than costume. I suppose Wilde's superiority of the mind mainly came from the influence of aestheticism and decadence. But Wilde successfully transformed what he learned into his own style—Willean dandyism. Like what Foucault argues, the aestheticism of the dandy makes Wilde as the embodiment of *l'art pour l'art* (Gogröf-Voorhees 54). Wilde created his own style of artistic ideas, and simultaneously, practiced them into real life. Moreover, I argue Wilde, similar to Baudelaire, had social concern. But Wilde performed his social concern in a more profound way. He audaciously expressed his social concern in most of his works. Sometimes, the dandiacal characters can be deemed as Willean social critics. Wilde had a passion towards his life and cares for the society. Like Monsieur Guys capturing the transient beauty of modernity by painting, Wilde recorded the contemporaneity of Victorian society by writing. Many of Wilde's works unmasked the ugliness and hypocrisy of Victorian society. As a unique characteristic, Wilde's writing combined both the elements of aesthetic decadence and social criticism. Sometimes, Wilde is a pure aesthete. While other times, like Camus states, Wilde became a rebel. Rebellion is part of Wilde's dandyism. He would never compromise with the repressive social norms, but would fight back through his works.

In the following sections, I intend to investigate Wilde's intellectual mind and his social concern respectively. Wilde's intellectual mind, I suppose, was first learned from aestheticism; later matured in Decadence. To begin with, I will examine the formation of Wilde's superiority of mind from the perspective of aestheticism. Particularly John Ruskin and Walter Pater, the two influential aesthetes in Magdalen Oxford, brought the early crucial influence for the development of Wilde's aesthetics. Then, in the second section, I will focus on the relationship between decadence and

Wilde's dandyism. The French decadents nurtured Wilde, and inspired him to develop his own thought. Lastly, I will delineate the uniqueness of Wilde's dandyism as well as his social concern.

### *Dandyism and Aestheticism*

Aestheticism could be traced back to the Pre-Raphaelitist Rossetti, and was exploited by John Ruskin and Walter Pater. Rossetti's poetry and painting inspired the aesthetes whose artistic aim was "the pursuit of beauty, divorced social meaning" (Altic 291-92). Ruskin and Pater's aesthetic philosophy merited the idea of pursuing the pure beauty. Wilde owed his development of aesthetics to Ruskin and Pater. Also, Pater's idea was closely associated with decadence. Mario Praz identified Pater as "the forerunner of the Decadent movement in England" (qtd. in Kimball 11).

John Ruskin, the leading Victorian critic of art and society, was the first mentor of Wilde. Ruskin's philosophy of art and beauty is recorded in the book *Modern Painter*. In *Modern Painter*, he drew the analogy of looking at pictures. Conventionally, people were accustomed to look at a picture of its form, line or color. But Ruskin, as a pioneer, advocated that a man ought to look at the picture "with his own eyes," not "in the mirror of a convention" (qtd. in Hough 8). According to Graham Hough, Ruskin is "trying to release the sense of sight from the bondage to utility and convention and to set it free to operate in its own way; he is vindicating the rights of the senses" (12). Ruskin has faith in human's inner sense which can perceive the work of art in a transcendental way. I suppose Ruskin's thought encouraged Wilde to rely on his own sense confidently. In Oxford, Wilde was confident of his own dress. For him, the costume was a work of art which, through his own eyes, will become aesthetically fashionable. Without the inspiration of Ruskin, Wilde would probably not be a creative writer who followed his own style confidently instead of Victorian

convention.

Moreover, Ruskin provides art with new meaning. In *Modern Painter*, Ruskin uses picture and spectator to imply the relationship between art and the viewer. Ruskin points out the misunderstanding of art imitating nature. Instead, art is not imitative of nature. Like the greatest picture, it does not merely please the spectator by imitating nature. Rather, Ruskin clarifies “intrinsic beauties of color and form, and those works of art wholly, which, like the Arabesques of Raffaele in the Loggias<sup>11</sup>, are not imitative at all” (1320). The greatest of art, for Ruskin, lies in conveying “to the mind of the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas; and as it more fully occupies” (Ruskin 1321). Ruskin calls “an idea great in proportion as it is received by a higher faculty of the mind ...” (1321). Since art is not subjected to nature and life, beauty of the work of art is without certain formula. We have to believe our inner sense and appreciate art through our own eyes. Beauty reflects not the reality of life, but what deep down in our mind.

On the other hand, Ruskin connects the senses with morality. Although Wilde admired Ruskin’s devotion to aestheticism, the conservative part of Ruskin’s thought deterred Wilde from clinging to him. Ruskin’s mother was a devout Evangelical Christian who demanded him of daily Bible readings. From the Biblical indoctrination, Ruskin cultivated moral concern in his aesthetics. Ruskin defines beauty with two levels - Aesthesis and Theoretic: the former meaning beauty belonging to works of art where only “the perceptual aspect of the imaginative life is exercised,” and the latter concerning “the appropriateness and intensity of the emotions aroused” (qtd. in Hough 16). Only in the sense of Theoretic can beauty be truly apprehended. What Theoretic faculty results is the appreciation of pure beauty. Although the perception

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<sup>11</sup> The painting designed by the Italian painter Raphael (1483-1520), were decorative wall paintings that featured a complex pattern of leaves, animals, and human figures.

through inner senses is important, the higher kind of perception lies in morality. Accordingly, the Theoretic faculty is concerned with the moral perception and appreciation of ideas of beauty. Without morality, beauty would be degraded as Aesthesis—"a mere amusement", or "morbid sensibilities" (qtd. in Hough 16). Ruskin regards beauty inseparable from morality, which is against Wilde's ideal that art itself is its purpose. Compared to Ruskin's aesthetic system of combining art and morality, Wilde prefers Pater's thought that art is irrelevant with virtue. Gradually, Wilde turns to Pater.

The second scholar who inspired Wilde's interest of art was Walter Pater. He was "a key figure in the transition from mid-Victorianism to the 'decadence' of the 1890s" (Greenblatt 1506). Pater's traveling to Italy in 1865 was a turning point in his life. He was attracted by the Renaissance paintings in Florence. He found that the best way to know "the glorious works of Renaissance art" was indeed to "feel them, and this feeling was Pater's means of countering the dulling of sensation, the termination of feeling, the inevitability of death" (Leitch 833).

Taking the Renaissance works of art as materials, Pater composed *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. In the preface, Pater defines his central tenets of aesthetic: "To define beauty, not in the most abstract, but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it" (qtd. in Hough 158). Pater insists on "the direct contact of the critic's sensibility with its object in order to get as close as possible to the original experience" (qtd. in Hough 158). As Altick indicates, Pater regards beauty as "the supreme experience of life, and of art as a superior reality" (292). The book was Pater's most famous works, yet, it received polarizing reviews after it was published, particularly the *Conclusion*. Some concurred with him, but some attacked him for "advocating pleasure as the highest good and self-gratification as the best rule

for the conduct of life” (Leitch 834). Taking pleasure as the supreme construction of life was against Victorian social mores. George Eliot thought the book “quite poisonous in its false principles of criticism and false conceptions of life” (qtd. in Donoghue 209-10). Yet, Wilde took pleasure in being misled. He even declared that *The Renaissance* was “the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty” (qtd. in Kimball 15).

Pater’s invention of aestheticism lies in the challenge of temporality and morality. Opposing to Carlyle’s appeal to duty and social responsibilities, Pater reminds his readers the importance of *carpe diem*: “life passes quickly and that our only responsibility is to enjoy fully this short day of frost and sun, as a constant deferment of death” (119). Therefore, we have to seize the day and to enjoy the sensual pleasure best provoked by work of art. According to Pater, it is indispensable that all true works of art “shall excite or surprise us,” and “shall give pleasure and exert a charm over us” (41). Indeed, beauty exists in life and it needs people to explore it through experiencing itself. In the part of *Conclusion*, Pater quotes Victor Hugo’s saying to support his aesthetics: “Well! We are all condemned. We are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve” (120). Pater explains that life is like an interval and we had better utilize it well. For Pater, nothing matters more than the experience of the present moments. Although short, the successful life of beauty, is “to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy” (Pater 120).

Differing from Ruskin, Pater gets rid of the burden of morality when perceiving works of art. He insists on direct sensual experience. During Pater’s own time, “the narrow Victorian morality ... associated sensuous delight with sinful pleasure” (Monsman 54). Yet, Pater chooses not to follow the convention. He rejects all dogmatism to be the judge of art. Art, for Pater, is a sufficient end in itself and should be morally irresponsible. Also, he insists that beauty lies in the sensual pleasure.

According to Denisoff, Pater supposes that sensuality, being natural, cannot be immoral, and it follows that all desires are equally worthy pursuits. (37) Pater breaks the social convention and focuses only on experiencing the present moment and enjoying the sensual pleasure derived from work of art.

Pater's aesthetic system deeply fascinated Wilde and left profound influence on the development of Wilde's mind. Besides, Pater welcomed "European corruption" instead of being an "insistently English prig" (Donoghue 201). Donoghue describes that "it is the subversive Pater who appealed so strongly to Wilde" (201). The subversive Pater, indicates Christopher Nassaar, in *The Renaissance*, "rejects Christianity and advocates a return to paganism and hedonistic art appreciation" ("Pater's" 82). Also, he consistently used "biblical quotations<sup>12</sup> in a subversive antibiblical manner" (Nassaar, "Pater's" 82). Aesthetes embraced Pater's expostulation. Wilde was no exception. Taking *Salome* as an example, Wilde audaciously adapted the biblical story and rewrote the play with the main plot of Salome's perverted love toward Saint John. In *Salome*, Wilde presented Salome as "the true savior and Christianity as a religion of sexual repression" (Nassaar, "Pater's" 82). As Nassaar indicates, *Salome* is "a blasphemous Satanist play wearing a biblical mask and yields its meaning only to the initiated decadent or the analytic critic" ("Pater's" 82). Pater's *The Renaissance* built the foundation of aestheticism and opened a road to decadence which led Wilde to the path of dandy of decadence. Decadence constituted the main source nurturing Wilde's mind. The next section aims to explore Wilde's superior mind from the perspective of decadence.

### *Dandyism and Decadence*

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<sup>12</sup> He says of the Mona Lisa that "hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the worlds are come"<sup>66</sup>, thus inverting Saint Paul's statement: "Now all theses things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the worlds are come" (Nassaar, "Pater's" 83).



Decadence was an international intellectual current that left its mark on several realms, including philosophy, literature and visual arts throughout Western Europe and England. Decadence, in fact, is such a grand issue that can hardly be understood fully from a single perspective. In this thesis, I focus on the current of French literature which directly influences Wildean dandyism. To begin with, I will provide a historical overview of decadence. Then, I will enumerate the three key French decadents whose philosophies nurture Wildean dandyism—Gautier, Baudelaire and Huysmans.

The term decadence can be traced back to the nineteenth century. “Decadence,” in general, is commonly known to describe “a society as it decayed, falling from a state of health and prosperity to one of physical and ethical ruin” (Denisoff 33). The state of decay is shown either in the inferior literary quality compared to Hellenistic Greek or in the looser moral standards. Indeed, the idea of decadence permeated throughout the Victorian age. Although the growth of science and industrialization brought social progress, the society was shrouded with a pessimistic ambience. The scientists, according to the second law of thermodynamics, disclaimed that the universe would end in decrepitude following the diffusion of heat (Buckley 67-69). Moreover, the rate of economic expansion “steadily declined due to bad harvests in the late seventies” (Buckley 79). The economic depression which caused “widespread unemployment, demonstrations and strikes,” of the last three decades of Victorian age swayed people’s confidence and “engendered a suspicion that the great day of Britain’s supremacy was passing” (Buckley 79). France could not escape from the idea of decadence. A series of social dissolutions, including the debacle at Waterloo, and the coming of Second Empire heavily attacked France’s confidence. Tennyson made the trope of seasonal cycle to describe the society. He denotes that the middle age was the springtime; the Reformation was the summer; the age of Kant and Goethe

comes autumn (Buckley 83). Accordingly, the nineteenth century began the long winter of the West, “a period marked by the dominance of science, the appeal to utility, the dearth of metaphysical thinking, the worship of money, and the urbanizing of life in the monstrous megalopolis” (Buckley 83). However, not everyone became pessimistic during the age of decaying. Ruskin insisted that “great art of the past had arisen from dying cultures” (qtd. in Buckley 89). A new aesthetic wave was produced in the decadent age. As Dennis Denisoff describes, “One of the cornerstone paradoxes of decadence was that the greatest beauty was seen to arise at the cusp of a society’s destruction” (33).

From the perspective of literary movement, decadence is regarded by most critics as a “literary ‘period’ whose temporal limits, though varying to a degree, extend from the mid-nineteenth century (or slightly earlier) to the 1880s and 1890s, the *fin de siècle*” (Weir 5). In France, decadence and symbolism arose at the same time. Baudelaire was the poet adept at using sensory stimulation resulting experiences to capture the meaning when the basic language was too limited to address (Denisoff 34). Although the term decadence was associated with unfavorable connotations ranging from simple inferiority to moral degeneracy, several writers in the late nineteenth century accepted the accusation proudly, especially the French decadent writers. In France, it was not until 1883 that Paul Bourget articulated what had become the most famous description of the decadent style: “Decadence as a style where the book’s unity decays to make way for the independence of the page, where the page decays to make way for the independence of the sentence, and the sentence decays to make way for the independence of the word” (qtd. in Denisoff 37-38). This decadent style of writing left great influence on Huysmann’s *A Rebours* and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Also, 1883 was the year when Oscar Wilde traveled to Paris intending to conquer the continent after his previous conquest to the United States. To his

surprise, Wilde was conquered by French decadence. Especially in the realm of literature, Wilde was profoundly influenced by Gautier, Baudelaire, and Huysmans. It was Algernon Swinburne who first introduced the decadent style to the English mainstream (Denisoff 34). Years later, Arthur Symons, for explaining the new current to the English audience, explicated in “The Decadent Movement in Literature”:

After a fashion it is no doubt a decadence; it has all the qualities that mark the end of great periods, the qualities that we find in the Greek, the Latin decadence: an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity ... this representative literature of today, interesting, beautiful as it is, is really a new and beautiful and interesting disease. (858-9)

In the 1890s, Wilde became the leading role of decadence in England. During Wilde’s trial in 1895, the decadent episode suddenly ended. Although short, the decadence left profound impact on Wilde’s art and life. In the following paragraphs, I will outline the key French decadent writers who influenced the formation of Wildean dandyism as a unique style in the nineteenth-century Victorian society.

Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) is recognized as the predecessor of advocating “art for art’s sake.” As an art critic and writer, Gautier’s main tenet is “for the freedom of art and artistic expression” (Stocks 58). According to Lynette Stocks, Gautier’s notion of “art for art’s sake” indicates an ideal art where sentiment is purely instinctive, and which lacks “political and social awareness, involvement or commitment and even artistic conservatism” (44). Gautier’s aesthetic is inseparable from his best-known novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). The protagonist “D’Albert’s obsessive quest for the ideal feminine form is seen as a direct and absolute extension of Gautier’s own aesthetic perception” (Stocks 43). In the preface of his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Gautier claims that “there is nothing truly

beautiful but that which can never be of any use whatsoever; everything useful is ugly”<sup>13</sup> (*Mademoiselle XXV*). This dictum later became the manifestation of “art for art’s sake”. From this dictum, it is observable that Gautier attacked the bourgeois element. In other words, Gautier detested the narrow utilitarianism which displays “a moral and political conservatism, a profound lack of interest in art and an acute indifference to any form of idealism” (Stocks 48). He advocated that both artists and spectators ought to comprehend “new art” and appreciate “new beauty” without being restricted by moral or political stance (Stocks 46). On the other hand, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* had already appealed to decadent elements. This novel tells about lesbian love which transgresses the gender and social mores. *Mademoiselle de Maupin* can be deemed as a model writing of the decadents. The heroine Mademoiselle Maupin, disguised as a man named Theodore, was fallen into a love triangle between the hero d’Albert and his mistress Rosette. As soon as it was published, the novel received widespread rebuke because of the “immoral” theme which decayed the society and people’s mind. As a model writing form of decadence, the novel challenged the moral basis of life. From this novel, I suppose Gautier aims to create an art work out of the confinement of didactic purpose or moral concern. He audaciously adopts the transgressing elements to waken people to revalue art in which beauty is irresponsible for morality. Applying to dandyism, the dandy himself is a work of art, like a sculpture or painting. I argue dandy to be the best spokesperson of “art for art’s sake.” The dandy considers his body as an art work. He dresses in flamboyant costume. His speech is embellished with witty language and rebellious thought. Wilde is not only a dandy who performs his body and language as an art work, but also lives his life as an artist being rid of the restraints of morality and the disdain of others. Wilde agrees

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<sup>13</sup> Here I adopt Burton Rascoe’s English translation which I suppose most correspondent with Gautier’s original verse: “*Il n’y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien; tout ce qui est utile est laid*”(Gautier, “Preface” 22)

with Gautier that art should be for its own sake, not for others. As Wilde implies in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” he echoes with Gautier:

A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. Indeed, the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman, an honest or a dishonest tradesman. He has no further claim to be considered as an artist. (1184)

It is why Wilde insists on writing the works which the public might disdain. I argue Wilde’s the most art-for-art’s-sake work to be the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. From this novel, we can find that, except for the influence of Gautier, Wilde was affected by the writing style of Baudelaire and Huysmans.

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) is remembered as the first modern poet, essayist and art critic. Baudelaire shares with Wilde the identity of dandy and writer. He is the most influential critic to Wilde. Wilde’s early flamboyant costume mainly imitated Baudelaire’s. Also, many of Wilde’s ideas for writing inherited from Baudelaire. Baudelaire’s literary reputation came from his “blatant eroticism” and “open fascination with evil” (Lawall 1538), which outraged the conservative society. Observing the framed vision of human nature as fallen and corrupt, Baudelaire analyzed the hypocrisy and sins he found in society.

In French literature, the Decadent movement had been prepared by the influence of gothic novel from England and Edgar Allan Poe from America. Baudelaire was the first one to translate Poe’s works and to introduce him to the French literary circle. Baudelaire affirms with Poe that “poetry will be seen to have no other aim but itself” and that “a superior form of beauty lies beyond any moral truth” (Gogroff-Voorhees

74-76). The quest for supernal beauty is synonymous with the idea of artificiality, which “lies at the center of the aesthetics of decadence” (Gogröf-Voorhees 77). Baudelaire affirms that “everything that is beautiful and noble can only be artificial, supernatural and thus is always the product of an art” (Gogröf-Voorhees 79). According to Gogröf-Voorhees, Baudelaire argues that art “applies its veil as a surface over nature’s imperfection and vileness in an endless reformative effort” (Gogröf-Voorhees 79). For Baudelaire, as Gogröf-Voorhees points out, it is nature that embellishes beauty, which subverts the naturalistic ethical concept of eighteenth-century that nature as a basis of all possible forms of good and beauty. While Baudelaire protests that nature teaches man nothing from a moral perspective, it merely compels man to “sleep, drink, eat and protect himself” (78-79).

Baudelaire’s notorious volume of poems, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) is the representative work showing his decadent aesthetics. Also, *Les Fleurs du Mal* earns Wilde’s admiration and praise. As a pioneering symbolist, Baudelaire interrelates physical sensation with senses: “a perfume can suggest the softness of touch of a child’s skin, the sound of an oboe or the green of a pasture” (qtd. in Wright 33). In the preface, Baudelaire proclaims that to “extract beauty from evil” (*Les Fleurs* xxvi). Furthermore, Baudelaire expounds that the artistic beauty is often created “out of ugliness and crude reality” (Lawall 1538). The principle themes of *Les Fleurs du Mal* include sexual perversion, perceived sadism, profane love, corruption of the city and lost innocence. According to John Jackson, Baudelaire adheres to the doctrine of original sin, yet, he does not regard sin as a symbol of destruction. In Baudelaire’s opinion, he supports Satanism where he feels sin is well in himself, such as he once experienced sadism (9-10). Baudelaire abhors Christianity, “the official religion of the society,” and reveals that “evil is the basic fact of human life” (Jackson 10). Thus, far from being immoral, *Les Fleurs du Mal* is “the highest morality precisely because of

its subversion of conventional—and thus hypocritical morals” (Jackson 10). Also, these are the themes that appear in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*<sup>14</sup>, including homosexual love, suicide, drug den in the city and Dorian’s turning into a cruel murderer.

Baudelaire redefines literary decadence in a new sense, explains Gogroff-Voorhees: “value-free designation for a type of literature which turns itself toward the themes of decline and whose subject matter is equivalent to classical poetry” (Gogroff-Voorhees 66). Baudelaire enriches the motifs of decadence and spreads the aesthetic potential.

Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), French writer and art critic, derived in a direct line from Baudelaire and later became one of the foremost exponents of the French Decadent Movement (Hartnett 367). Huysmans in his early phase followed naturalism. Then, with *A Rebours*<sup>15</sup> (1884), Huysmans turned his back to naturalism and allied with decadence. *A Rebours* can be regarded as “the point of departure for the international decadent movement in literature” (Porter 95). The novel mainly describes the absorbed life of sensual experiment. As Laurence Porter expounds, the dominant motif of *A Rebours* is the “decomposition of society and the cult of artificiality that serves Des Esseintes” (95). The hero Des Esseintes retreated to a private asylum outside Paris where he could totally immerse himself in the imagination of sensual fantasies. Afraid of being disappointed by reality, Des Esseintes decided to seal himself off from the world hermetically. He only surrounded himself with works of art, even having his tortoise’s shell gilded.

Corresponding to Gautier and Baudelaire’s style, Huysmans’s *A Rebours* is

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<sup>14</sup> The design from the 1925 edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is inspired by *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The cover printed a sick and bleeding flower to suggest refinement and degeneration.

<sup>15</sup> *A Rebours* is translated into *Against the Grain or Against Nature* in the English version. The cover of the 1926 English version printed “the book that Dorian Gray loved and that inspired Oscar Wilde.”

observed with the same skill. In a chapter, it is devoted to “the painfully minute analysis of the components of rare odors, another to sounds, and another to tastes, and so on” (Hartnett 368):

[E]ach liquor corresponded, according to his thinking, to the sound of some instrument. Dry curacao, for example, to the clarinet whose tone is sourish and velvety; *kummel* to the oboe whose sonorous notes snuffle; mint and anisette to the flute, at once sugary and peppery, puling and sweet ....

(Huysmans 82-83)

After the publication of *A Rebours*, Huysmans became the model writer of new literary style: “a formless enumeration of topics and a catalogue of aesthetic enthusiasms” (Porter 95). Here, I agree with Edith Hartnett’s opinion that *Des Esseintes* is the author’s idealized self-image. As a civil servant in a government ministry with moderate income, it was hard for Huysmans to carry out his wish to indulge in all the decadent fantasies like *Des Esseintes* or to lead a debauched life. Like his precursors, Huysmans desired to pursue beauty from art and pleasure from sensual experiment. Although Huysmans remained unwed throughout his life nor did he reveal he was a homosexual, he confessed in a letter that he once spent some “horrifying evenings” in “the sodomite world,” to which he was “introduced by a talented young man whose perversities are common knowledge” (qtd. in Baldick 124). Huysmans revealed his inner desire of moral and sexual transgressions in his works, which influenced Wilde. Thus, moral and sexual transgressions were the themes commonly seen in Wilde’s novel and dramas.

Besides *The Renaissance*, *A Rebours* was the second book which poisoned Wilde. In Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the book Dorian received from Lord Henry implied the “yellow book” of Huysmans’s. After reading the yellow book *A Rebours*, I argue, Dorian had a sea change that he became a decadent dandy whose behavior



was beyond morality. Imitating Des Esseintes, Dorian, now turned out to be a decadent dandy, who indulged in the pursuit of beauty and pleasure rather than reality and morality.

*The Uniqueness of Wilde's Dandyism*

After introducing the three most influential decadents in Wilde's life, I intend to elaborate more on the uniqueness of Wildean dandyism in the following section. First, I argue Wilde to be capable of absorbing their theories and transforming them into his own aestheticism. Taking *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an example, I suppose Wilde manipulates the skill of "art for art's sake" and "extracts beauty from evil." However, it would be unfair to judge Wilde to be merely imitating Huysmans and Baudelaire. Indeed Wilde, I suggest, demonstrates superior literary talent than Huysmans. His invention of Dorian's decay of youth and morality reflected on the portrait is cleverer than Des Esseintes's decay on body. Moreover, Wilde embodies his principles in the role of dandy in his novel and dramas. Wilde's dandy characters exemplify Wildean dandyism in a more vivid way. In real life, Wilde also puts his dandyism into practice. Transgressing Victorian bourgeois values, Wilde had an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and enjoyed the forbidden love with his young pretty lover.

Compared with the traditional dandy in Brummell's era, Wildean dandy approaches the type of Baudelairian dandy in fin de siècle era. He emphasizes more on the symbol of spiritual aristocracy than aristocratic-wearing aristocracy. Stephen Calloway organizes Baudelaire's theory and the fin de siècle background in the article "Dandyism of the Senses":

The dandy-aesthetes of the fin-de-siecle period above all honed their senses and cultivated the rarest of sensibilities; they made the perfection of the pose of exquisiteness their greatest aim and they directed all their languid

energies towards nurturing a cult of aesthetic response that begins beyond ordinary notion of taste. (34)

According to Calloway, Wilde is thought to have directed his energy towards nurturing a cult of aesthetic response beyond ordinary notion of taste. By the end of the eighties, Wilde's dressing had almost no trace of the "former attention-seeking bohemianism"<sup>16</sup> (Calloway 48). Instead, Wilde's dressing became "coldly and formally correct" (Moers 299) in the nineties. In the nineties, Wilde's aestheticism matured and his plays succeeded. Since then, I argue, Wilde began to concentrate more on the mind than in appearance. His uniqueness was first revealed in his aesthetic mind. Also, I argue that it was a policy Wilde maneuvered to eschew people positing him in the "rigid Brummellian ideal of fine cloths" or Carlyle's walking clothes icon. Wilde continued to establish his own style and uniqueness.

Generally, I suppose Wildean dandy is close to Baudelaire's dandy. Also, he has social concern. However, Wilde performs a different mode of dandyism. Wilde does not merely pretend to be blasé or act like an insensitive *flaneur* without any aim for life. He can hide in London and revel in his intimate knowledge of city life, but he does not just observe the crowd with coldness. He utilizes what he observes as the materials of his literary works. In the society comedies, Wilde discloses the hypocrisy of Victorian social norm and breaks the binary opposition of good and evil. He writes several critical essays, including the issue of Socialism. In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." Wilde criticizes capitalism, simultaneously, points out his own aesthetic ideas.

In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," Wilde expresses his expectation for an

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<sup>16</sup> According to Elizabeth Wilson, an implicit theory of bohemianism may be found in Baudelaire's brief essay on the dandy, in which he suggests that the dandy was and aristocrat by reason of talent rather than birth. His aristocratic values were at odds with the philistinism of the day, and his mode of dress accordingly positioned him as an enemy of society. The dandy was no mere clothes horse, on the contrary, he was always an outlaw; and his creation of the self as a work of art involved the blurring between art and life that was characteristic of bohemianism. (164-65)

utopian world where art and individualism could have been emphasized more than wealth. Written in 1891, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” is under the background of the prosperity of capitalism. Yet, Wilde supports socialism. Wilde argues that, under capitalism, “the majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism—are forced, indeed, so to spoil them” (1174). In Wilde’s opinion, capitalism not only narrows people’s mind to pursue the material well-being, but also deprives people of their substances: “With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things” (1178). Also, capitalism blinds people to look what they have instead of what they are. Although Wilde begins this critical essay with socialism, the main issue he concerns is individualism and art. The chief advantage of establishing socialism lies in “freeing of mankind from living for others” (Ericksen 92) and in reestablishing individuality. According to Wilde, “the state is to make what is useful, the individual is to make what is beautiful” (1183). As Donald Ericksen indicates, “Wilde’s real interest in socialism does not lie in its potentialities for social betterment” (92). I aim not to negate Wilde’s expectation of social betterment. Yet, I would prefer to argue that there is a more subtle purpose for Wilde to write this essay. Wilde connects socialism with the importance of freeing individual art. Wilde states that “art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known” (1184). Any conformity to social rules will destroy the beauty of a work of art because “its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is” (1184). What Wilde wishes is not only the freeing of private property, but also the freeing of mind. Wilde obviously shares “the socialists’ dislike of capitalism, but his emphasis upon individualism is more in common with anarchism” (Ericksen 93). For Wilde, a progressed society is one that has been “through disobedience and through rebellion” (1176). Particularly the artists are responsible for carrying out disobedience.

Wilde expects to create an Utopian world where the artist can live and create without conforming to the taste of public or society. In the Utopian world, Ericksen proclaims, “this individualism must never be tampered with by dictating to the artist what he should create, nor should art ever attempt to be popular” (94). On the other hand, “the public should make itself artistic then it will cease asking art to flatter its own taste or conform to its own low standards” (Ericksen 94). Accordingly, Wilde, I argue, is not an insensate dandy. He is sensitive toward things around him. He observes the political and social issues. To my surprise, Wilde does not merely criticize society, but combines social critic with aesthetics. Under the veil of social reform, Wilde reveals his idealized aesthetics. I suppose it is Wilde’s unique characteristic from the British aesthetes and French decadents.

Wilde not only develops dandyism along with the superiority of mind, but also practices Wildean dandyism in his writing. Interestingly, Wilde, the dandy himself, also likes to invent dandiacal characters in his literary works. Especially in his comedies and novel, the dandy characters usually play important roles. I believe the role of dandy reappearing in Wilde’s works is not just a fabricated figure, but the self-implementation of Wilde. In the literary world, Wilde does not need to care about the restraints of Victorian society. He can give full play to his mind of aesthetic decadence and social critic. Thus, I suppose the best way of understanding Wilde’s dandyism is through examining the decadent style and dandiacal characters of his literary works. In Chapter II and Chapter III, I aim to investigate Wilde’s novel and plays to find the uniqueness of Wildean dandyism and explore how the role of dandy mirrors Wildean dandyism.

## Chapter II

### Transgression of Morality and Sexuality:

#### *The Picture of Dorian Gray and A Woman of No Importance*

During the five years from 1890 to 1895, Wilde was at the peak of his writing career. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* first appeared in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890. It was Wilde's first work which successfully attracted people's attention. However, it was not until the 1980s that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was accepted by the general public. Since then, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been formally positioned to be an English canon. Wilde gained a notorious fame. Yet, there is no denying that he was an unprecedented writer in the history of English literature. Before the 1980s, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was generally considered as a failure. However, within the last three decades, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was reconsidered as a valuable work in literary history. The name of Oscar Wilde began to be emphasized by critics. Many critics assumed this novel to be "an expression of Wilde's understanding of the human condition" (Liebman 296). Also, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was believed to be Wilde's awareness of the failure of Victorian morality and exploration of the consequences of its demise. This chapter aims to re-examine *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from the perspective of dandyism. As a dandy himself, Wilde presented the novel in a subverting way. This novel subverted the conventional Victorian literary genre. As for the context, Wilde showed his ideal world of transgressing morals and sexuality. Not only in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's second society play *A Woman of No Importance* also revealed Wilde's dandyism in sexual transgression. This chapter intends to discover Wilde's dandyism through the

dandiacal characters and seeing how they reveal Wildean dandyism.

### **Wildean Dandyism in Subverting Literary Convention**

To begin with, I argue *The Picture of Dorian Gray* subverts the genre of Bildungsroman. Bildungsroman is a German term signifying “novel of formation” or “novel of education” (Abrams 200). As M. H. Abrams defined, Bildungsroman is a kind of novel whose subject lies in “the development of the protagonist’s mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences—and often through a spiritual crisis—into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one’s identity and role in the world” (200-01). Like the Bildungsroman, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* tells a story about Dorian’s growth from a naïve boy to an adult. Conventionally, the Bildungsroman emphasizes the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood, such as in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, which told a story about the growth of the orphan boy Pip. Yet, the protagonist Dorian does not grow into a moral, successful adult in conformance with the social expectation. He is gradually influenced by Lord Henry, the wicked dandy, and experiences moral degeneracy. The original naïve boy later becomes a wicked dandy, and eventually, turns out to be an evil murderer. Instead of dramatizing the various influences on the moral growth, Wilde depicts the influence of decadence on Dorian’s falling into decay. The most distinct part is that the novel ends with Dorian’s death. Basil, the moral one, is murdered. Lord Henry, the evil dandy, remains to be an observer and escapes from any unfortunate consequence. Wilde, like a rebel, performs his subversion not only in social criticism, but also in literature.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be regarded as Wilde’s most decadent work. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Wildean dandyism is greatly influenced by decadence. The central idea of decadence is the emphasis on art and beauty, rather

than morality. As Wilde himself admitted, “I felt that, from an aesthetic point of view, it would be difficult to keep the moral in its proper secondary place” (*Letters* 263). Wilde composed this novel from an aesthetic perspective. He used his own aesthetics to write the deterioration of Dorian’s morality and the crime he committed, which reminds me of Baudelaire’s announcement of “extract beauty from the evil” (*Les Fleurs* xxvi). The theme of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is different from the popular didactic style in Victorian age, such as Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. It is said that the direct source of Wilde’s novel is the traditional Faust legend of a man selling his soul to the devil for infinite knowledge. The central theme of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that the protagonist Dorian, a beautiful young man, sells his soul in exchange for eternal youth. The portrait, implying the physical representation of his soul, reflects Dorian Gray’s sins (Raby, “The Picture” 67). Besides, Wilde’s novel includes murder, suicide and homosexual love; matters which were intolerable in Victorian society.

In the 1890s, as Koen Van Cauwenberge argues, conventional literary criticism generally believed that “fiction should hold a mirror up to nature and thus, expose the shortcomings of life (moralistic and didactic)” (Cauwenberge<sup>17</sup>). Also, he claims that “Victorian critic expected a literary work to reflect reality in an authentic way with the author attaching a moral message to this imitation of reality” and “artistic form was considered to be a means and not the end” (Cauwenberge). Yet, Wilde maintained his position that art should be considered an end itself. In his article “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde explicitly declares that art should express nothing but its own beauty. For Wilde, the artist is the creator of beautiful things without any concern for morals or an accurate representation of reality. In a letter to Henley, Wilde wrote: “No artist

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<sup>17</sup> The electronic file of Koen Van Cauwenberge’s thesis can be searched on the website: <<http://oscarwilde.projectx2002.org/>>. The text of this thesis is posted on the author’s blog without page number.

has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style; vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art” (*Letters* 260). This remark echoes with the novel’s “The Preface” which Wilde writes in the twenty-chapter edition: “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (*Picture* 3). Virtue and vice, for Wilde, were merely used as raw materials for his work of art.

In addition, Wilde subverts the nineteenth century convention of realism. As a strategy of subversion, Wilde deconstructs the conventional realism which prevailed in the nineteenth century. Conventionally, under realism, the relationship between art and life is the hierarchical order of life above art. Art is just the imitation of the mother nature. Yet, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde deconstructs the hierarchy of life above art and creates the work through aesthetic lenses. The decay of the portrait seems unreasonable in reality, but Wilde never meant to follow nature. He writes according to the standard of art for art’s sake and presents the transgression of morality through this novel. Similar to Pater, Wilde supposes that art should be higher than nature and life. In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde undermines the credibility of realism by reversing the relationship between life and art. In “The Decay of Lying”, he declares that life imitates art far more than art imitates life:

For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. (1086)

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not a novel of realism. It does not follow the literary convention. Rather, the novel represents Wilde’s strategy of bringing moral and sexual



transgression against the conservative society through aestheticism. This notorious novel was terribly criticized by his contemporary readers because they assumed that a good novel should depict the real life. While Wilde breaks through this convention and audaciously creates a world where art surpasses life and is reflected by evil, decadence and transgression. Wilde dismantles the grounds upon which any authority may be established. Simultaneously, Wilde points out that the text does not reflect the author, but mirrors the reader. He supposes that there is no certain interpretation of a text. In “The Critic as Artist”, Wilde indicates:

You see, then how it is that the aesthetic critic rejects those obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it becomes dumb and sterile, and seeks rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true and no interpretation final. (1129)

It is important that the critic should not always content himself with a single interpretation of a work of art. I am aware of the fact and aim to interpret Wilde’s work from a different perspective. In this chapter, I aim to reinterpret *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *A Woman of No Importance* from the perspective of Wilde’s dandyism. In the following section, I intend to first reinterpret Wilde’s dandyism shown in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in light of Camus’s idea of dandy as the rebel. I will mainly analyze the novel in two dimensions: moral transgression and sexual transgression.

Moreover, I suppose Wilde’s works, like his dandiacal identity, are more complicated than what we suppose. Except for subverting Bildungsroman and realism, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* combines a Gothic element. Kelly Hurley, in seeing Dorian’s emerging homosexuality along with his other crimes and sins as further evidence of his degeneration, places the novel in a tradition of subversive fiction:

“One could justifiably argue for Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* comprising a blueprint for the subversive genre of fiction which in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has counted amongst its numbers the works of Jean Genet, William Burroughs, and J.G. Ballard” (5). If we interpret *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from the perspective of the degeneration of a man, the novel is involved with some Gothic themes. David Punter denotes that the Gothic texts are “all concerned in one way or another with the problem of degeneration” (239). As Kelly Hurley defines, “Gothic provided a space wherein to explore phenomena at the borders of human identity and culture—insanity, criminality, barbarity, sexual perversion” (6). These are the motifs of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, including decadent thinking, murder and homoerotic relationship. I suppose Wilde’s novel can not be deemed as a novel of a single genre. Like Wilde’s dandiacal identity, he eschews being positioned or classified amongst a particular group of writers writing certain a genre of literature.

Similarly, *A Woman of No Importance* is not the kind of traditional drama. It is a comedy, but definitely not a burlesque. Wilde hides his aesthetic decadence inside the text. Christopher Nassaar is the first critic to point out that “*A Woman of No Importance* is a unique play; it is the only comedy the decadent movement ever produced” (“On A Woman” 152). His argument supports mine to claim that *A Woman of No Importance* recalls Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In this chapter, I first intend to investigate the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and examine Wilde’s dandyism revealed in the transgression of morality and sexuality. Then, I will examine how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *A Woman of No Importance* are related through their echoing theme of sexual transgression.

### **Wildean Dandy as a Rebel: Moral Transgression**

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be regarded as Wilde’s most decadent work. As I

mentioned in the previous chapter, Wildean dandyism is greatly influenced by decadence. The central idea of decadence is the emphasis on art, beauty, rather than morality. As Wilde himself admitted, “I felt that, from an aesthetic point of view, it would be difficult to keep the moral in its proper secondary place” (*Letters* 263). Wilde composed this novel from an aesthetic perspective. He used his own aesthetics to write the deterioration of Dorian’s morality and the crime he committed, which reminds me of Baudelaire’s announcement of “extract beauty from the evil” (*Les Fleurs* xxvi).

To begin with, I attempt to examine Wildean dandyism via connecting the author and the characters created in the text in order to find how the dandiacal characters mirror Wildean dandyism. After reading the novel, Pater commented that “Wilde is impersonal: seems not to have identified himself with any one of his characters” (qtd. in Raby, “The Picture” 79). Yet, Wilde resisted this accusation and explained that the novel was a portrait of the artist. In one of his letters Oscar Wilde admitted that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflected much of himself. Wilde himself once confessed that the novel “contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry, what the world thinks me; Dorian what I would like to be<sup>18</sup>—in other ages, perhaps” (*Letters* 352). Also, I agree with Wilde’s idea that the text is like a portrait. Readers, in reading his works, can find some traces of the author’s ideas, even the implicit ones. I suppose the painter Basil represents Wilde with homosexual desire but concealed from the eyes of the public. The wicked dandy Lord Henry represents the mouthpiece for Wilde to express his aesthetics and social critics. The dandy Dorian shows Wilde’s ideal of living aesthetically and being morally transgressive. According to Edward Roditi, Basil is “the embodiment of the conscience which later prevented Wilde from

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<sup>18</sup> Terry Eagleton in the Introduction of his play *Saint Oscar* describes Wilde: “*language as self-referential, truth as a convenient fiction, human identity as an enabling myth, criticism as a form of creative writing*” (3) (italics mine). As a writer, thus, writing is his best way to present himself.

escaping abroad to avoid arrest at the time of his trials, and which then dictated to him many of the penitent passages of *De Profundis*” (183). Roditi, in a psychoanalytical sense, further argues that Dorian acts as a manifestation of Wilde’s id who is “driven to self-inflicted death by his misinterpreting...the doctrines of beauty and pleasure...preached by Lord Henry, Wilde’s Ego; and the Basil, the author’s Super-Ego, is killed when his warnings and reproaches might frustrate Dorian in his unbridled pursuit of sensual satisfactions” (183). According to Roditi’s observation, he has offered the three-leveled Wilde: the one conforming to society’s expectation as Basil, the one close to Wilde’s real life as Lord Henry, and the idealized dandiical type of Wilde as Dorian Gray. This thesis focuses on Wilde’s dandyism which departs from morals. Thus, in this chapter, I will focus on Lord Henry and Dorian Gray to explicate Wilde’s dandyism shown in moral transgression.

The story begins with Basil’s studio where, in the center, “stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty” (5). The artist Basil is painting Dorian Gray’s portrait. In the beginning, Dorian appears as an innocent and shy boy who attracts Basil and becomes his Muse of creation. It is not until Lord Henry encounters Dorian that he “touched some secret chord” (19) of the young lad. Gradually, Lord Henry leads Dorian to the world of senses, desire and evil. Lord Henry has changed him into a decadent dandy. Due to his influence, Dorian becomes a morally transgressive dandy, which I argue is the idealized life style for Wilde.

The episode of Sibyl Vane’s death demonstrates the evidence of Dorian’s transgression of morality. The death of Sibyl Vane is the turning point when evil begins to enter Dorian’s life. In his first encounter with Sibyl Vane, a young actress in a sordid little theatre, Dorian is deeply attracted by her performance. But for Dorian, Sibyl is never a human in real life. Instead, Sibyl represents a work of art. She exists only in the aesthetic world. Dorian regards Sibyl as the embodiment of the female

protagonists of Shakespeare's plays:

One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. I have seen her die in the gloom of an Italian tomb, sucking the poison from her lover's lips. I have watched her wandering through the forest of Arden, disguised as a pretty boy in hose and doublet and dainty cap. She has been innocent, and the black hands of jealousy have crushed her reed-like throat. (Wilde, *Picture* 45-46).

Furthermore, Sibyl symbolizes the transcendence of art without the border of time and place: "I have seen her in every age and in every costume. Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century" (Wilde, *Picture* 46). According to Ericksen, she can take what "is coarse and brutal" in her audience and in reality and "spiritualizes it in the form of art" (108). Dickson argues that "Sibyl's importance as a character in the novel is further heightened by the fact that her life seems to imitate art" (7). Wilde has a clear declaration in his essay "The Decay of Lying":

Consider the matter from a scientific or a metaphysical point of view, and you will find that I am right. For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. (312)

Sibyl corresponds with Wilde's dictum about the superiority of art over life and morality. What Dorian falls in love with is, indeed, the art form Sibyl embodies instead of the real person. Even when Lord Henry questions Dorian that "when is she Sibyl Vane?" Dorian answers, without hesitation, "Never" (Wilde, *Picture* 48). Dorian describes Sibyl's qualities first in terms of art:

She had never seemed to me more exquisite. She had all the delicate grace

of that Tanagra figurine that you have in your studio, Basil. Her hair clustered round her face like dark leaves round a pale rose. As for her acting—well, you shall see her tonight. She is simply a born artist. (Wilde, *Picture 66*)

The appearance of Sibyl Vane awakened Dorian to his life's desire of a world constructed by art.

Dorian's breaking up with Sibyl, in my opinion, may needlessly be considered a cruel act. Instead, I suppose this event signifies Wilde's dandyism in a sense of pursuing art over life. Following Gautier's "art for art's sake," Wilde, in "The Decay of Lying" further declared his idea that "life imitates art far more than art imitates life" (1082). Dorian, "this young dandy who was making love to her," (Wilde, *Picture 58*) actually fell in love with the eternal heroines of Shakespeare's art which were symbolized by Sibyl, like what he said to Basil:

I have been right, Basil, haven't I, to take my love out of poetry, and to find my wife in Shakespeare's plays? Lips that Shakespeare taught to speak have whispered their secret in my ear. I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth. (Wilde, *Picture 66*)

When Sibyl tasted the joy of falling in love with a real man, she lost the ability to perform. She became conscious of the fact that "art merely imitates reality," which soon killed Dorian's admiration for her. Before she met Dorian, acting was the only reality of her life. The joy and sorrow the female lovers had were hers. After she fell in love with Dorian, she "misunderstood" that the love Dorian brought her was more beautiful and real than dramas: "you had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is ... I have grown sick of shadows. You are more to me than all art can ever be" (Wilde, *Picture 75*). Yet, the thought of "all art was but a reflection" betrayed the cult of

Dorian, the decadent aesthete. Thus, Dorian finally confessed “I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art” (Wilde, *Picture 75*). After abandoning the young actress, Dorian at once suffered a guilty conscience. When he hesitated to write a letter to ask for forgiveness, it was Lord Henry’s words that consoled him and changed him into an eviler murderer. For Lord Henry, Sibyl never died, rather, he consoled Dorian that “there is something beautiful about her death” (Wilde, *Picture 88*). Lord Henry had another explanation to Sibyl’s suicide:

She will never come to life. She has played her last part ... The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare’s plays and left them lovelier for its presence, a reed through which Shakespeare’s music sounded richer and more full of joy. (Wilde, *Picture 88-89*)

After listening to Lord Henry, Dorian decided to “refrain from sin and reject to make amends with Sibyl” (Schulz 7). As soon as Lord Henry had left, Dorian rushed to the portrait and shockingly found a vicious cruelty which marred the fine lines of the mouth. I suppose the decay of the portrait symbolizes Dorian’s transformation from a naïve boy into – similar to Lord Henry - a decayed decadent dandy. He chose art rather than life. Now, he no longer experienced guilt or grief but, as termed by Gordon Schulz, “an aestheticistic enjoyment of the beauty and drama of her romantic tragedy” (7). But does Dorian merely correspond to Gautier’s art for art’s sake? Here I intend to further argue that Wilde’s dandyism, through the dandiacal character Dorian, is capable of transgressing morality which is an important social value in Victorian society. Furthermore, the dandy Lord Henry is able to cross over between the lines of art and life.

I suppose Sibyl Vane's episode demonstrates the "crossing-over between art and life" which Wilde wished to fulfill in his dandyism. Here, Wilde did not immutably abide by Gautier's "art for art's sake". He was not merely concerned with the art side, but also the interaction between art and life. I suppose Wilde transgressed the confines of morality and entered the world of art. The dandy Lord Henry could liberally cross over between art and life. As Paul Sheehan claims, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "the notion that art and life are not separate, discontinuous domains, but conjoined spheres across which limitless commutations are possible" (333-34). Lord Henry transgressed the "clandestine bond between aesthetics and criminality" (334). Similarly, an aesthete dandy can cross the border between art and life. Just like what Paul Sheehan indicates, the dandy can "straddle the two domains" and "closes the gap between art and life" (334).

Besides Sibyl's death, James Vane, Alan Campbell and Basil Hallward all died. I suppose the three characters represent moral and reason. Contrary to Sibyl Vane, her brother James Vane represented the part of reality—"a reality that is associated with society and conventional morality" (Erickson 109). Acting like the practitioner of Victorian social integrity, James Vane never really recognized Dorian Gray. After knowing Dorian was the culprit who caused his sister's death, James ceaselessly searched for Dorian in order to take revenge. The first chance occurred after eighteen years when Dorian left the drug den one night. When James coerced Dorian into submission by gun, Dorian wittingly utilized his youth as an excuse. Dorian posed a question to James: "How long ago is it since your sister died?" "Eighteen years" said James doubtingly. Dorian soon demanded, "Eighteen years! Set me under the lamp and look at my face" (Wilde, *Picture* 160-61)! Unbelievably, James Vane was deceived and let go of Dorian. The second chance of James's revenge took place a week later when he followed Dorian to the conservatory at Selby Royal of Duchess of



Monmouth. Dorian could feel a fear of being followed by James Vane, but could not be sure. In the third day, Dorian was invited by the duchess's brother to hunt together in the woods. Suddenly a black-tripped ear hare bounced and Sir Geoffrey fired: "there were two cries heard, the cry of a hare in pain, which is dreadful, the cry of a man in agony, which is worse" (170). For sure, it was James Vane's body lying on the ground. It seems that Wilde's had made a joke to the Victorian readers. He disappointed the Victorian public who supported moral over evil and expected that James would succeed.

The second example is the death of Alan Campbell. I suppose the scientist Alan Campbell represents reason. In the nineteenth-century, science and technology were greatly developed and reason was emphasized. After killing Basil Hallward, Dorian soon wrote a threatening letter to Alan Campbell and demanded him to deal with the corpse. He forced Alan to make the body disappear without letting anyone know the murder. Afraid that Dorian might reveal his secret, Alan had no alternative but to follow his command. Alan used scientific methods to make the body disappear by nitric acid. Strangely, Alan Campbell had "shot himself one night in his laboratory, but had not revealed the secret that he had been forced to know" (Wilde, *Picture* 185). I suppose the death of Alan Campbell implies that not only morality succumbed to dandyism, but also reason. Both James Vane and Alan Campbell in the end could not defeat Dorian Gray. I suppose what Wilde expected to present to the public was a world where art surmounts reality, reason and the moral sense of the conservative society.

The last example is the death of Basil Hallward. Similarly, Basil represents the socially expected role who follows morality and depends on the religious power. According to Sheldon Liebman, Basil is "really a moralist, whose art serves his moral vision and whose actions are not inhibited by Henry's assumptions about nature and

human nature” (304). After the failure of Sibyl’s acting, Basil was the only one who appealed to Dorian to separate Sibyl from Shakespeare’s female protagonists and encouraged him that “Love is a more wonderful thing than Art” (Wilde, *Picture* 73). Yet, Lord Henry uttered the dandiacal truth that “it is not good for one’s morals to see bad acting” (Wilde, *Picture* 73). Years later when Dorian turned out to be an evil dandy, one day, Basil specifically came to say goodbye to Dorian before he left England. He tried to persuade Dorian into quit being evil. When Basil was disappointed about the rumors of Dorian’s destructive influence on others, he tried to ask Dorian what had changed him against London society: “I wonder do I know you? Before I could answer that, I should have to see your soul” (Wilde, *Picture* 129). Dorian accused Basil of teaching him to be vain of good looks and even introduced him to Lord Henry who revealed to him the wonder of beauty. Then, Dorian mockingly laughed and decided to show “the face of his soul” to the painter. With an exclamation of horror out of his lips, Basil’s first response to it was to ask Dorian to kneel down and prayed with him: “Let us say that together. The prayer of our pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered also. I worshipped you too much. I am punished for it. You worshipped yourself too much. We are both punished” (Wilde, *Picture* 133). Basil showed his faith in religion. Similar to Basil, Sibyl Vane expected that God could watch over her brother. Instead of heeding Basil’s advice, Dorian stabbed him to death. Basil played an important role in this novel to represent “a moral position that is fundamentally different from Henry’s” (Liebman 303). In contrast with Lord Henry, “the foundation of Basil’s actions is his belief in a moral order, in which men and women are punished for their evil deeds and rewarded for their good” (Liebman 303). Lord Henry did not believe that the sinners would pay for what they did. On the contrary, Basil believed that sin could make one look repulsive. He believed that sin could never be concealed: “sin is

a thing that writes itself across a man's face. ... If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even" (Wilde, *Picture* 126-27) and only God can see the soul. I suppose the death of Basil represents Wilde's disbelief in morals and religion, which are two important tenets of Victorian society. More importantly, the death of the three moral characters, James Vane, Basil Hallward, and the reasonable character Alan Campbell, indicates the dandy's defeat of Victorian conventional values. They all died because of Dorian Gray, who now became the embodiment of Wildean dandyism. In this text, the dandy Dorian, mirroring Wildean dandyism, transgressed the confines of morality, reason and religion. What Wilde expected was a world where art surpassed everything.

Dorian reflects Wilde's expectation of living aesthetically and being morally transgressive. Even in the end of the novel, Dorian's destroying of the painting failed to awaken the conscience. After the death of James Vane, Dorian began to struggle with his conscience: "It had been like conscience to him. Yes, it had been conscience. He would destroy it" (Wilde, *Picture* 187). Thus, he used the same knife that had stabbed Basil to stab the portrait. Eventually, lying on the floor was the withered, wrinkled, old Dorian with a knife in his heart (Wilde, *Picture* 188). I suppose the final scene shows that in the world of Wildean dandyism, art always surpasses anything. Donald Dickson argues that "Dorian's development, to use Pater's analysis, is incomplete because he neglects the 'moral sense'" (12). Also, Dickson supposes that the restoration of the portrait to its original splendor after Dorian's death seems to represent the only triumph of art over life in the novel (13). Yet, I suppose the proper interpretation is that Dorian's development "transgresses" the moral sense instead of neglecting it. The restoration of the portrait not only symbolizes the triumph of art over life, but also symbolizes Wilde's lofty goal of the aesthetic world.

Besides Dorian Gray, the other key dandiacal character in the novel is Lord

Henry, the wicked decadent dandy. He was the most influential character in Dorian's life and turned him into a morally transgressive dandy. Similarly, Lord Henry himself is morally transgressive. In this novel, Lord Henry played the role of a spectator, like a passer-by. Also, he was the only survivor in the end of the novel. Playing the role of a mentor, Lord Henry continued to influence Dorian. But he never participated in any of Dorian's committing crimes. He just used language to encourage Dorian. In the Sibyl Vane episode, Lord Henry assured Dorian that his reaction was not "heartless." Lord Henry only described Sibyl's death as "extraordinarily dramatic" and "too wonderful for tears" (Wilde, *Picture* 80). Lord Henry was indifferent with morality, let alone sympathy. For him, the proper lifestyle of a dandy should be to regard life as an art and to live aesthetically. His philosophy of life echoed with the saying that he told to Dorian: "Life has been your art" (Wilde, *Picture* 54). In Lord Henry's words, a dandy ought to live aesthetically and to view life via the lens of art rather than morals.

One of the impressive scenes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is when Dorian reads the yellow-bound book given by Lord Henry. I propose that it is the idea that Wilde learned from Huysmann but eventually developed into his own. Wilde projected his own experience when inspired after reading Huysmann's *A Rebours* to this episode. After reading the book, Dorian experienced an epiphany and could not free himself from its influence. He experienced the sensation of the book in his day dreaming: "The sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him" (Wilde, *Picture* 106). If Sibyl's death signifies the translation of life into art, I argue, the yellow book indicates the reverse. The book presents a number of sinful acts that Dorian was impelled to imitate, to make real. To his surprise, all the crimes Dorian committed were reflected in the portrait. I suppose Wilde's invention of the portrait to conceal Dorian's sin symbolizes Wildean dandyism's moral transgression. Dorian maintained youth and

luckily escaped any punishment for his crime. I argue that Wilde uses the dandy Dorian to transgress Victorian social values and morality. It is possibly the reason why Wilde wished to be Dorian.

Moreover, Wilde positioned himself beyond morality and audaciously expresses his social criticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Concerning the issue of morality, Wilde simultaneously presents in the novel the transgression of morals and social criticism on the hypocritical moral value of Victorian age. I argue Wildean dandy criticizes the society by witty language. Wilde's dandiacal character is usually a social critic. From the two dandiacal characters Dorian Gray and Lord Henry, they are not only morally transgressive, but also point out the ugliness and criticize the hypocrisy of Victorian society. Their indifference with morality does not mean they do not have social concerns. I suppose the other uniqueness of Wildean dandyism lies in social concerns. Wildean dandy is capable of separating himself from the confines of morality and stand on a higher position to judge the society. When Dorian encountered Basil again after he had transformed into an aesthete-dandy of senses, Basil informed him that, in the London social circle, some people were speaking dreadful things about him: "The most dreadful things are being said against you in London ... Why is it that so many gentlemen in London will neither go to your house nor invite you to theirs? ... You were a man whom no pure-minded girl should be allowed to know, and whom no chaste woman should sit in the same room with" (Wilde, *Picture* 126-27). Dorian cynically answers: "what sort of lives do these people who pose as being moral, lead themselves?" (Wilde, *Picture* 128). He reminds Basil that "we are in the native land of the hypocrite" (Wilde, *Picture* 128). Dorian's opinion echoes Lord Henry's idea that "Beer, the Bible and the seven deadly virtues have made our England what she is" (Wilde, *Picture* 164). Instead of posing insensitive, I argue, Lord Henry mirrors Wildean dandyism in the way of discovering

the hypocrisy of society. Lord Henry is bored at his aunt's dinner invitation. He finds out that the conversation of the upper class is about "the feeding of the poor, and the necessity for model lodging-houses" (Wilde, *Picture* 15). Yet, indeed, the rich would think these exercises no necessity in their own lives. Like what Altick said, Victorians' personal qualities "include in the code of ... sobriety, thrift, industriousness...but as a group they had several deficiencies which rendered them vulnerable to criticism" (176).

In this section, we have realized the significance of dandyism inside *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, including moral transgression and social critic. Particularly, the dandy Dorian demonstrates Wilde's dandyism in his crossing the border between art and life. The decadent dandy Lord Henry shares the same feature. Yet, from Lord Henry, I further see the other significance of Wildean dandyism. His erotic relationship with Dorian draws my attention. Also, the same motif reappears in Wilde's play *A Woman of No Importance*. Now I will move on to the part of sexual transgression which directly associates with Wilde's homosexual identity.

### **The Love Which Dare not Speak its Name: Sexual Transgression**

If Dorian signifies Wilde's transgression of morality, Lord Henry indicates the transgression of sexuality. In this section, I intend to discuss the topic of homosexual love which is not an unfamiliar material used by Wilde. I argue Wildean dandyism is transgressive both in morality and sexuality. In this section, I mainly focus on discussing the sexual transgression of Wilde's dandyism in the following two texts: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *A Woman of No Importance*.

When Wilde was interrogated in the court by Queensbury's defense lawyer to explain the phrase "the love that dare not speak its name" from one of the poems, Wilde replied to Lord Alfred Douglas, offering a stirring paraphrase:

“The love that dare not speak its name” in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. (qtd. in Hyde 201)

From the above paraphrase, Wilde’s admiration of Platonic love is observable, though he did not directly use the term. In Victorian England, Platonic love, or male-male bond, was deemed vicious and divergent. Neither could it be used as a popular material in literature nor be accepted by the publics. Yet, Oscar Wilde, as a social rebel and modern hero, expressed his homosexual desire through *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which was “essentially an embellished Platonic dialogue on beauty and love set in the luxuriant social milieu of the 1880s” (Monsman 29). Even in the end when Wilde lost the trial and was imprisoned, he still expressed his longing for Greek ideology where Platonic love was tolerated and celebrated. In the period of Wilde’s incarceration, Wilde wrote in *De Profundis* that “when one returns to the Greek it is like going into a garden of lilies out of some narrow and dark house” (929).

What is Platonic love? The term Platonic love in the original sense is examined in Plato’s dialogue *Symposium* whose topic contains love or Eros. The starting point of *Symposium* is that the male guests of the banquet prefer to drink among men only in order to enjoy a homoerotic atmosphere. The flute-girls are dismissed (Endres 304). As Nikolai Endres further indicates, “Platonic love centers on Eros, the God of Love. An appraisal of love must thus involve a discussion *ta erotica*, the art(s) of love,” which is “the only thing Socrates understands” (Endres 304). Wilde has read Socrates’s *Symposium* and adores the erotic ideas within. Later, the Platonic love develops into the widely-known homosexual love among men. According to Gerald Monsman, “Pater and Wilde both agree that art is the Platonic mirror of the beholder

and that the transcendental vision of the mind (or lack thereof) determines art's influence, their postures toward the practical effects of an erotic aesthetic diverge radically" (26). Pater's "Conclusion" of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* is generally recognized that it contains the celebration of homoerotic love. It is said that the "Conclusion" is a veiled homoerotic document and Pater addresses it to men only (Endres 307). As Wilde enthusiastically acknowledged:

Plato, like all the Greeks, recognized two kinds of love, sensual love which delights in women—such love is intellectually sterile, for women are receptive only, they take everything, and give nothing, save in the way of nature. *The intellectual loves or romantic friendships of the Hellenes*<sup>19</sup>, which surprise us today, they considered spiritually fruitful, a stimulus to thought and virtue—I mean virtue as it was understood by the ancients and the Renaissance, not virtue in the English sense, which is only caution of hypocrisy. (qtd. in Ellmann 298, italics mine)

Thus, the male-male bond Wilde admires denotes the intellectual love among affectionate male friendships. It is not simply a relationship in which the elder one asks for sexual gratification in return. It is a performance of art, a higher relationship than physical desire. Wilde, as an aesthetic-decadent dandy, delivers his sexual transgression in his homoerotic writings. As Patricia Behrendt indicates, "for Wilde, as well as for other homosexual writers historically, literary pursuits provided an outlet for the covert expression homoerotic sentiments often ambiguously encoded in allusions to the venerated world of antiquity" (94). Thus, Wilde expects to return to the Greek world when homoerotic love among men is the supreme principle. Against

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<sup>19</sup> Linda Dowling argues that modern male homosexual identity is partly an unintended consequence of the efforts of such Oxford Hellenists as Benjamin Jowett to establish a new Hellenism as "a ground of transcendent value alternative to Christianity." These reformers enabled Pater, Wilde, and others to formulate "a homosexual counterdiscourse able to justify male love in ideal or transcendental terms: the spiritual procreancy associated specifically with Plato's *Symposium* and more generally with ancient Greece itself. (Clausson 348)



the Victorian society, Wilde presents his admiration of male-male bond within literature. The dandiacal characters best mirror Wilde's dandyism in sexual transgression.

In the character design, Dorian appears as a beautiful young lad. As Thomas Heacox claims, Dorian is "likened to Antinous, lover of Hadrian; to Narcissus; to the nameless young man of Shakespeare's sonnets; to the male fantasies of Plato and Michelangelo, to a young Greek martyr" (53). Moreover, Symonds was the first person to point out the conjecture that Wilde used the name "Dorian" as an implication to things Greek. He argues that the name "Dorian" conjures a geographical area and an ancient tribe by close association with "Doric." The educated cognoscente of subversive and minority interests recognizes another meaning that "crediting the Dorians with introducing homosexual practices into Greek Culture at large" (5). As a distinguished student of Greek literature at Oxford, it is likely that Wilde, "given his interest in the theme, is using 'Dorian' with full knowledge of its implications" (Heacox 57).

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the central dandiacal character is Lord Henry, the wicked decadent dandy. Wilde describes him in the novel as "brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible" (38). He guides the development of the main plot. He could always "charm his listeners out of themselves, and they followed his pipe laughing" (38). As Ericksen defines, Lord Henry "is the fascinating embodiment of the *fin de siècle* dandy" (106). His languid postures and movements, yet exquisitely attuned senses impress the readers. He earns the fame of notoriety due to his brilliant witticisms that abound in the book and "their artificial inversions of conventional morality" (Ericksen 106). As Basil comments in the first chapter: "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose" (8). I consider the notorious dandy Lord Henry the mouthpiece of Oscar Wilde. He speaks for Wilde and presents

Wilde's aesthetics. Then, Dorian implements it. The novel begins with the presentation of Lord Henry's credo of decadent dandyism, "while the remainder of the novel consists of Dorian's application of these ideals to his life" (Raby, "Plays" 100).

The relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian symbolizes the "Platonic love." Lord Henry, an older, mature and socially experienced man, plays the role of mentor to Dorian, the inexperienced boy, and educates the young lover to his adulthood. The fact that Dorian has no father is relevant to Platonic love in the sense that "the older man acting as a surrogate father for the boy" (Endres 305). Also, Lord Henry has no son. Like a father and a teacher, Lord Henry accompanies Dorian to his adulthood. Most of Lord Henry's ideas—his rejection of altruism, his theory of self-development, his hedonism—are recurrent themes in Wilde's essays. For example, Lord Henry's wit is delivered in the style of Vivian in "The Decay of Lying" and Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist." Lord Henry's words are not only influential, but also seductive. As Thomas Heacox points out, "Lord Henry's speech is Wilde's version of Satan's seduction of Eve in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*. Lord Henry is, like Milton's Satan, 'subtle,' seductive, flattering, with a 'beautiful voice,' and despite his denial of it, eager to 'influence' Dorian" (54).

Lord Henry plays the role of Dorian's mentor and influences him by his "poisonous" language. In his first meeting with Dorian, Lord Henry tries to inculcate his platonic thought to him:

I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream...we would forget all the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal—to something finer, richer, than the Hellenic idea it may be.  
(18-19)

Like Pater, Wilde emphasizes the importance of *carpe diem*. He reinterprets

“carpe diem” to Dorian: “You have the most marvelous youth and youth is the one thing worth having” (Wilde, *Picture* 21). Moreover, he guides Dorian to view Beauty as “a form of Genius—is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation . . . beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances” (Wilde, *Picture* 22). Lord Henry encourages Dorian to take pride in his youth: “Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing lost upon you. Be always searching new sensations” (22). He does not indoctrinate Dorian with the didactic values. Instead, he inspires Dorian to pursue the pleasure of sensations. The idea of pursuing the pleasure of sensations is quite intolerable under the Victorian social milieu. Lord Henry, as a social rebel, audaciously emphasizes temptation more than resistance: “The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful” (Wilde, *Picture* 19). Henry’s “new Hedonism” is based on the assumption that the quest for pleasure is natural because it is an expression of the quest for life. (Liebman 300) People can enjoy life due to the pleasure of sensations. Thus, pursuing sensual pleasure is equivalent to pursuing delightful life. The dandy Lord Henry’s language, like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, seduces the young and innocent Dorian and “touched some secret chord that had never been touched before” (Wilde, *Picture* 19).

For Wilde, the Platonic love between Lord Henry and Dorian symbolizes Wilde’s exploration to the issue of self-development, or what he calls “individualism.” As Jonathan Dollimore points out, individualism is “both desire for a radical personal freedom and a desire for *society itself* to be radically different, the first being inseparable from the second” (9). In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, Wilde expresses that “society should be constructed on such basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating,

and delightful in him—in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living” (1186). I suppose the Platonic love indicates Wilde’s pursuit for individualism throughout his life. Besides, in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Wilde also accuses the Victorian social value of thwarting human’s free individualism. As the embodiment of Wildean dandyism, Lord Henry speaks for Wilde. He tells Dorian:

The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly, that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to one’s self...the terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion—these are the two things that govern us.

(Wilde, *Picture 18*)

Through Henry’s words, Wilde expressed his regret that “morals” and “religion,” the two main duties that constructed the society, were the main deterrence for a free individual. Male-male bonds should not be classified to “poison and mutilate the mind and the soul” (Clausson 348). Consequently, liberation from society’s repression was seen as necessary for the full development of the individual personality (Clausson 348). In fact, Wilde’s individualism was not totally aesthetic. Instead, it was mingled with political concern. Dollimore further explains, “Wilde’s notion of individualism is inseparable from transgressive desire and a transgressive aesthetic” (8). Influenced by decadence, in Wilde’s novel, homosexuality was accompanied with moral degeneration. Wilde had indicated the fact in the article “The Critic as Artist” that

What is termed sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics. (1123)

Also, Richard Ellmann says, “sin is more useful to society than martyrdom, since it is self-expressive not self-repressive. The goal is the liberation of the personality” (310). Thus, homosexuality, although regarded as a sin in Victorian society, was an experience of self-expression. Wilde chose to face the real self and practiced his ideals by inventing the homoerotic relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian. However, Wilde supposes the spiritual elevation from a mature mentor teaching a young man to be more attractive than physical love. Lord Henry educates Dorian with decadent thinking. The yellow bound book Lord Henry gave to Dorian encouraged him to pursue the sensual enjoyment without the care of morals. In the end, Dorian becomes a cruel murderer, even murders himself. Lord Henry educates Dorian a new kind of love which is different from a Victorian gentleman can know—the Platonic love. Wildean dandyism pursues a higher spiritual level of love. Similarly, the platonic love appears in Wilde’s society comedy *A Woman of no Importance*. Also, the dandiacal character Lord Illingworth shares the features of Lord Henry. In *A Woman of No Importance*, we can find the similar issues dealing with sexual transgression.

*A Woman of No Importance* describes the struggle between Lord Illingworth, a charming but wicked dandy, and Mrs. Arbuthnot, a woman dedicating her youth for him but receives disgrace. Lord Illingworth’s encountering with Gerald Arbuthnot gradually discloses the secret of his birth as well as his lost father. From admiration to disdain, Gerald changes his tune and turns out to support his mother. Eventually, Mrs. Arbuthnot dismisses Lord Illingworth by using the term “a man of no importance” to echo Lord Illingworth’s earlier contempt to describe her as “a woman of no importance.” In *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby are the two characters with Wilde’s dandiacal features. Their witty conversation adds the decadent element to this play. *A Woman of No Importance*, during the nineties, was not a popular play. It has been described as the “weakest of the plays Wilde wrote in

the Nineties” (Ellmann 64). Many critics noted that much of the first act and a half surrounded the witty conversations of members of the upper-classes. Readers tended to recognize the drama only began in the second half of Act II with Lord Illingworth and Mrs Arbuthnot finding their pasts catching up with them. Yet, I suppose it would be a pity that if the critics ignore the first Act. The first Act mainly consists of the conversation and interaction between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby. Their conversation implicitly reveals the element of Decadence in terms of sexuality. I suppose it is a play worth exploring to discover Wilde’s dandyism in light of sexual transgression. Christopher Nassaar is the first critic to point out that “*A Woman of No Importance* is a unique play; it is the only comedy the decadent movement ever produced” (“On A Woman” 152). His argument supports my claim that *A Woman of No Importance* recalls *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. From the garden scene and the dandiacal antagonist, it is observable that the two texts resemble each other.

Sex plays an important role stringing up the plot, particularly the relationship between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby. According to Peter Raby, “the dandies treat sex as a game or past time; and it is they who seem to possess Wilde’s implicit approval” (“Plays” 95). For the decadent dandy, sex was not a shameful thing that was needed to be concealed. Yet, for the conservative Victorians, indeed, sex was not about pleasure or enjoyment. The good women of Victorian society should only be concerned about sex being the need for bearing children as a contribution to the nation. Rebelling against convention, Wilde and his decadent comrades, abhorring the society, took sexuality and pleasure as themes in their works. Similarly, Wilde usually adopted the theme of an innocent and virtuous man/woman seduced by a wicked dandy. The main plot surrounds on the mystifying relationship among Lord Illingworth, Mrs. Arbuthnot and her son Gerald. Lord Illingworth seduces Mrs. Arbuthnot when they are both twenties. But Lord Illingworth rejects to give their son a name. Out of

sadness, Mrs. Arbuthnot leaves him. Yet, Wilde does not arrange the final scene to punish the evil dandy. In the dandy's world, being evil is not a crime which eventually deserves punishment.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the scene at Basil's garden studio in the beginning represents the temptation scene with "Lord Henry offering Dorian the knowledge that will enable him to achieve self-realization" (Ericksen 101). Basil's garden studio symbolizes the Garden of Eden, while Lord Henry is the embodiment of the Serpent of the garden. The Garden of Eden myth is generally associated with temptation, sexual degeneracy and fall. The scene of Garden, also, was used in *A Woman of No Importance*. The garden imagery echoed with the Decadent theme. The garden imagery took place when Lord Illingworth flirted with Mrs. Allonby in a garden. They were discussing about "good reputation."

MRS. ALLONBY. Have you tried a good reputation?

LORD ILLINGWORTH. It is one of the many annoyances to which I have never been subjected. (119)

Like what Lord Henry teaches Dorian to abandon the confines of morals and pursue life's enjoyment, Lord Illingworth despises the so called "good reputation." The socially expected "good reputation" that a gentleman and a lady should have is almost like a joke to the dandy. Later, when Lord Illingworth asks Mrs. Allonby whether she would like to go in to tea, their language hides sexual connotation. He says:

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I adore simple pleasures. They are the last refuge of the complex. But if you wish, let us stay here. Yes, let us stay here. The Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden.

MRS. ALLONBY. It ends with Revelations. (119)

In Act I, Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby, think not a real couple, enjoy flirting with each other. Once, Mrs. Allonby tells Lady Hunstaton that she will go to the

conservatory because “Lord Illingworth told me this morning that there was an orchid there as beautiful as the seven deadly sins” (Wilde, *Best* 112). “Seven deadly sins”<sup>20</sup> would probably be the theme the decadents like to use in their works, more so for lust and sex as long as it is for art’s sake. Nassaar indicates that “gardens and flowers are associated in the play with lust and sin” (“The Plays” 148). It comes from the allusion of the exile of Adam and Eve from Garden of Eden after committing the crime of sex. Only in dandy’s language can such deviant words appear as a casual topic for chatting. As Peter Raby defines, Lord Illingworth and Mrs Allonby are “dandies who dominate by wit and assurance, who match each other in their manipulation of words, and who define the fashionable and the modern. Yet they are also associated with a sense of decadence” (“Wilde’s” 152).

The other element that relates the dandy Lord Illingworth to decadence is the Platonic love. Before Lord Illingworth and Gerald know their kinship, Lord Illingworth plays the role of a mature man to “educate” the young boy. The elder and more experienced dandy plans to give Gerald a job and leads him to see the world. Whenever Gerald is confused, Lord Illingworth, like a mentor, instructs him. On the contrary, Mrs. Arbuthnot is a religious moralist. Also, she educates her son to be moral and religious. Once, when Lord Illingworth and Gerald talk about religion, Lord Illingworth grasps the chance to convert Gerald to modern dandyism.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. I suppose your mother is very religious, and that sort of thing.

GERALD. Oh, yes, she’s always going to church.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Ah! She is not modern, and to be modern is

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<sup>20</sup> The Seven Deadly Sins, also known as the Capital Vices or Cardinal Sins, is a classification of objectionable vices that has been used since early Christian times to educate and instruct followers concerning fallen humanity’s tendency to sin. The currently recognized version of the list is usually given as anger, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy and gluttony.



the only thing worth being nowadays. You want to be modern, don't you, Gerald? You want to know life as it really is. Not to be put off with any old-fashioned theories about life. Well, what you have to do at present is simply to fit yourself for the best society. *A man who can dominate a London Dinner-table can dominate the world. The future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule.* (142 italics mine)

Wittingly, Lord Illingworth explains to Gerald that believing Christianity is a totally old-fashioned rule. Especially living in a developing modern city, being a dandy is fit for being a modern hero, as Benjamin says. For the innocent Gerald who is just a young lad knowing nothing, Lord Illingworth becomes his best advisor. Growing up without a father, Gerald regarded Lord Illingworth as a father surrogate and was dependent on his inculcation. Lord Illingworth has deeply influenced Gerald with his dandiacal life and ideas. When Gerald is hesitating about Lord Illingworth's offering a position as secretary to him because his mother thinks he is not educated enough to be a secretary, Lord Illingworth tries to persuade him by witty language.

GERALD. But I am so ignorant of the world, Lord Illingworth.

LORD ILLINGWORTH. Don't be afraid, Gerald. Remember that

*you've got on your side the most wonderful thing in the world—youth!*

There is nothing like youth. The middle-aged are mortgaged to Life. The old are in life's lumber-room. But youth is the Lord of Life. Youth has a kingdom waiting for it. ...To win back my youth, Gerald, there is nothing I wouldn't do. (141 italics mine)

It is not an unfamiliar scene. It is the way how Lord Henry educates Dorian. Lord Henry and Lord Illingworth both emphasize youth more than anything else. Like the Platonic lover, Lord Illingworth acts as a spiritual mentor to his beautiful young lover. Here I agree with both Nassaar and Raby's argument that Lord Illingworth has many

features in common with Lord Henry. They both emphasize youth more than anything. More obviously, Lord Henry corrupts Dorian Gray with the yellow book. Lord Illingworth corrupts Gerald by telling him that in being a dandy, it is equivalent to being modern. For such an inexperienced young lad, being new, fashionable and modern is very attractive. Like Lord Henry, Lord Illingworth represents Wildean dandyism's sexual transgression. Although Wilde did not use the term "homosexual" or "Platonic love" directly in the two texts, I suppose Wilde implicitly implied a kind of male-male bond relationship which was modern to the age. Wilde resisted the so called "norm" created by narrow minded and old fashioned conservatives. He supposed heterosexuality was also part of the norm which confined human's individualism. Thus, Wilde, as a social rebel, expected to transgress sexuality and presented it to the public as a way to awaken human's mind and soul.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *A Woman of No Importance* are significant in exploring Wilde's dandyism in moral and sexual transgression. Among the two works, we can know more about Wilde's dandyism in his identity of social rebel and modern hero. Also, Wilde projected his life's experience to the Platonic relationship between the dandiacal characters. In the next chapter, I will examine two other of Wilde's society plays which were popular during the late nineteenth century. The intellectuality of Wildean dandyism and the gender subversion will be discussed.

### Chapter III

#### **Feminist, Intellectual and Female Dandy: *Lady Windermere's Fan and An Ideal Husband***

*Lady Windermere's Fan*, written in 1891, was Wilde's first successful play to the public. Since then, the succeeding plays *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband* were welcomed in the London artistic circle and people started knowing Oscar Wilde as a playwright. Wilde, in a letter written to Lord Alfred Douglas in 1897, mentioned that "if I were asked of myself as a dramatist, I would say that my unique position was that I had taken the Drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the Lyric or the Sonnet" (*Letters* 589). Drama has a significant meaning for Wilde. In the world of drama, Wilde finds a space for him to create and present his ideas. More important, it is the channel through which Wilde can express his dandyism to the society. In the previous chapter, I have examined the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and one of his plays *A Woman of No Importance*. Moral transgression and sexual transgression presented in the two texts properly demonstrate the code of dandyism. Moreover, I argue that in the rest of Wilde's society plays, dandyism exists as an indispensable element. This chapter deals with Wilde's two society comedies *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*. As in chapter II, I mainly focus on the male dandiacal characters, Lord Henry, Dorian and Lord Illingworth. In this chapter, I will first examine the male dandies, then their female counterparts. Except for the male dandiacal characters Lord Darlington and Lord Goring, the two female dandies Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Cheveley play important roles in the two texts. In this chapter, I will devote to not only the male dandies, but also the female ones representing Wilde's subversion of gender stereotype.

Drama usually involves its characters in ethical judgments, while the dandy elaborately abjures them. This is the commonly used theme in Wilde's society comedies. *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) illustrates the same theme. It tells of a young wife, Lady Windermere, suspecting her husband of adultery with an infamous woman, Mrs. Erlynne. Out of disappointment, Lady Windermere almost abandons her marriage to elope with the dandy, Lord Darlington, who encourages her to choose the life she really wants. Due to Mrs. Erlynne's help, Lady Windermere restores her marriage and solves the misunderstanding. In the end, the Windermeres are still a happy couple and the infamous woman Mrs. Erlynne also marries a gentleman. Wilde's third play *An Ideal Husband* (1895) deals with political issue. Similarly, *An Ideal Husband* presents a puritan moralist Lady Chiltern, like Lady Windermere, who is disappointed with an imperfect marriage due to her husband's scandal. She cannot forgive that her husband's wealth and fame were actually earnings from selling the government's secret. When Sir Robert Chiltern is threatened by the wicked female dandy Mrs. Cheveley, Lord Goring appears to solve the crisis. Also, the intelligent dandy Lord Goring resists Mrs. Cheveley and restores his friends' marriage.

While reading the two society comedies, readers might sometimes find the lines laughable. But is it only because of the humor that makes Wilde an important playwright in English literary history? I suppose the wit and humor that "appear light-hearted and even frivolous" (Eltis 62), indeed, aims to mask the deeper meaning inside his texts. During the Victorian age, every literature needed to be censored before formally published. I suppose the humorous conversation and the happy ending were Wilde's strategy to help him pass the rigid censor Lord Chamberlain and the conservative drama critics. Wilde's *Salome* was his first play concerned totally from aesthetic symbolism and decadent perspective. Unfortunately, the writing of *Salome* was abortive for the first rehearsal by the Lord Chamberlain (Raby, "Plays" 91). In

my thesis, what I intend to explore is the deeper significance inside Wilde's society comedies. I believe under the comical mask lies the subverting and revolting spirit of Wilde's dandyism. In this chapter, I will first point out the male dandiacal characters to expound how they mirror Wildean dandyism in different individualistic styles. Then, I will focus on Wildean dandyism and its relationship with gender difference. I attempt to take closer view of the female dandiacal characters and explore how Wilde subverts the conventional gender norm.

### **Subverting Gender Norm: Wilde's Male Feminist Dandy**

The previous critics tended to ascribe *Lady Windermere's Fan's* success to Wilde's plagiarizing of French theatre, Ibsen, Shaw, etc.... It is no denying that some shadows of Wilde's predecessors are observed in his plays. Instead, I believe that Wilde did not dully imitate others. Rather, like what he learned from the French decadents, Wilde transformed the similar material into a more subverting way. I support Sos Eltis's opinion that "Wilde had subtly remoulded the substance of French boulevard theatre; he had taken the established cast of protective male, innocent female, and scheming fallen woman and reversed the moral values traditionally associated with them" (55). On the surface, it seems that *Lady Windermere's Fan* reuses the old-fashioned elements, such as an innocent woman against a fallen woman, and in the end, the moral one deserves fame and love. Yet, beneath the surface, Wilde wittingly rewrote the cliché theme into a socially revolting one which criticized the repression of society and the unstable dichotomy of good and evil. More important than the plot, I suppose, is the language used in Wilde's plays. The dandiacal characters are the crucial element turning the dull theme into an individualistic style of dandyism. The dandies play the roles of Wilde's mouthpiece to expound the deeper significance of his works. In the following section, I will mainly focus on the male

dandy Lord Darlington and his influence to the other characters.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde's first society comedy<sup>21</sup>, the two dandy characters dominate: Lord Darlington and Mrs. Erlynne. Also, the minor dandiacal character Cecil Graham is an echoing character to what Lord Darlington says. They share the dandified life with the spectators. Lord Darlington "dominates the first half of the play, as Mrs. Erlynne dominates the second half" (Shewan 138). Lord Darlington appears in the first act meeting Lady Windermere. The dandy Lord Darlington symbolizes the rebelling modern hero hidden inside the city. Contrary to Lord Darlington, Lady Windermere, who believes life is "a sacrament, its ideal is love and its purification is sacrifice," (Wilde, *Best* 42) symbolizes the conservative puritan who perceives the world through the lens of morals. When they are debating the importance of morals, Lord Darlington answers: "Do you know that I am afraid that good people do a great deal of harm in this world. Certainly the greatest harm they do is that they make badness of such extraordinary importance. It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious" (43). Just like what he writes in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde describes a book should either be well or badly written instead of morally or immorally written. Similarly, through Lord Darlington, Wilde describes that people should be judged by his charm instead of morals. I argue Wilde here, indeed, emphasizes the importance that people should live with individualism.

Like Wilde himself, Lord Darlington audaciously expresses his thought rather than be afraid of the repressive social mores. He dares to speak frivolous words to shock people. When Duchess of Berwick, accompanied by her daughter Agatha, met Lord Darlington at the ball, she warns him that "I won't let you know my daughter,

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<sup>21</sup> I use the term "society comedy" to indicate Wilde's main four plays according to Sylvan Barnet who wrote an introduction to the book *The Best of Oscar Wilde*. Peter Raby uses the term of social comedy or comedies of society.

you are far too wicked.” (44). Instead of feeling ashamed, Lord Darlington confidently responds that

LORD DARLINGTON. As a wicked man I am a complete failure. Why, there are lots of people who say I have never really done anything wrong in the whole course of my life. Of course they only say it behind my back.

DOUCHESS OF BERWICK. Isn't he dreadful? Agatha, this is Lord Darlington. Mind you don't believe a word he says. (44)

He can mock himself and mask his evil by frivolous language which sounds like humorous jokes. Wittingly, Lord Darlington resolves the embarrassment brought by Duchess of Berwick. Duchess of Berwick judges Lord Darlington as a bad man in error. She perceives people through her hypocritical moral standard. Lord Darlington is the first one who is aware of the hypocrisy of Duchess of Berwick, especially her secret plan to marry Agatha to a wealthy man. Lord Darlington soon makes a counterattack to Duchess of Berwick by questioning her that “it's a curious thing, Duchess, about the game of marriage—a game, by the way that is going out of fashion” (45). Viewing from a higher position of intellectuality, Lord Darlington observes that marriage in Victorian age is shown to be merely a “mercenary affair” (Eltis 57). If Lord Darlington represents the intellectual dandy with individual thinking, then Agatha is categorized as a commodity without individualism at the bottom level. In the scene when Duchess of Berwick and Agatha attend Lady Windermere's ball together, Agatha only repeats the sentence “yes, Mamma” and follows every demand of her mother, including saving the dance for Mr. Hopper. Like a hunter, Duchess of Berwick aims at the quarry Mr. Hopper whose father makes a great fortune by selling tin food in Australia. She grasps every chance for her daughter to be alone with him in hope that Agatha could marry a rich man. According to Kate

Washington, “[M]any Victorian social critics saw marriage and prostitution as similar because of their traditionally parallel economic underpinnings: Each institution was characterized by an exchange of the man’s money or financial support for the woman’s body or sexual availability” (52). Victorian marriage was often regarded as a form of prostitution and many critics criticized the mercenary marriages.<sup>22</sup> Woman was like a commodity for transaction without individual human value. Duchess of Berwick fabricates an innocent good woman catering for the marital market. Agatha is commodified. Duchess of Berwick tries to cater for Mr. Hopper but eventually embarrasses herself:

Ah! We know your value. Mr. Hopper. . . . Mr. Hopper, dear Agatha and I are so much interested in Australia. It must be so pretty all the dear little kangaroos flying about. Agatha has found it on the map. What a curious shape it is! Just like a large packing-case. However, it is a very young country, isn’t it? (56-57)

The above conversation reveals Duchess of Berwick’s ignorance and hypocrisy. Her final intention is actually to let Agatha dance with her future son-in-law. Wilde on purpose invents a character who is the embodiment of the hypocritical social standards. As Eltis argues, Wilde used the Duchess of Berwick to “demonstrate the hypocrisy and materialism of society” (91).

In addition to the witty language, Lord Darlington dispenses the social restraints of being faithful to marriage. He supposes that marriage deters women to pursue their ideal life. In Act II, like Shewan says, Lord Darlington plays the role of “libertine” who “counterbalances Lady Windermere’s quasi-courtly Puritanism” (138). In their

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<sup>22</sup> As Kate Washington indicates, some canonical Victorian novelists criticized mercenary marriages by drawing direct comparisons between such marriages and prostitution: for instance, Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1846) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) both use prostitution and references to the economic exchange of sexuality to construct a sharp critique of Victorian marriage as it was frequently practiced. (52)



second meeting in Act II, Lady Windermere is anxious about her husband's gossip and reveals to Lord Darlington. Now Lord Darlington is the only one she can turn to.

After Lady Windermere's misunderstanding of her husband's affair with Mrs. Erlynne occurs, Lord Darlington urges Lady Windermere to live for herself by the seductive language:

I won't tell you that the world matters nothing, or the world's voice, or the voice of society. They matter a great deal....But there are moments when one has to choose between living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely—or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence had the world in its hypocrisy demands. You have that moment now. Choose!  
Oh, my love, choose! (65)

Corresponding with Wildean dandyism, Lord Darlington emphasizes pleasure more than morality. He audaciously encourages Lady Windermere to choose her desired life instead of being the “good” wife. According to Altick, the conception of Victorian female was “a devoted (and submissive) wife and mother of often all too many children” (53). A good woman's image was based on Queen Victoria. Queen Victoria encouraged the identification with the qualities of “earnestness, moral responsibility, domestic propriety”: “As a young wife, as the mother of nine children, and as the black-garbed widow of Windsor in the forty years after her husband's death in 1861, Victoria represented the domestic fidelities her citizens embraced” (Greenblatt 980). Concerning marriage, Lord Darlington does not follow the general Victorian social phenomenon. He supposes the image of fidelity to be the poison paralyzing women to pursue the life of individualism. If a priestess-like wife preserving the home means good social mores, then it is the part Wildean dandyism must abjure. Eloping with the one you choose should not be regarded as a sin. The scene shows that Wildean dandyism supports women to pursue an artful life instead of staying in the marital

cage. Lord Darlington reaffirms Lady Windermere to be brave and be a woman with individualism rather than relying on domestic morals:

Oh, go—go out of this house, with head erect, with a smile upon your lips, with courage in your eyes. All London will know why you did it; and who will blame you? No one. If they do, what matter? Wrong? What is wrong? It's wrong for a man to abandon his wife for a shameless woman. It is wrong for a wife to remain with a man who so dishonours her. (65)

Although Lady Windermere does not respond to his love at once, she changes her mind later and decides to elope with him. Lord Darlington is a feminist dandy who is able to subvert the gender norm. For him, women ought not to be constrained in the fixed gender mode. They should escape from the stereotype of subjecting to their husbands.

From this episode, we can see that Lord Darlington, except for his intellectuality in language, possesses feministic concept. As Rosamund Billington proclaims, Victorian women's marriage was "an economic necessity rather than a moral ideal" (119). According to Billington, "feminists argued that not only were women prevented from helping in the work of social progress, but that marriage had become degraded—a trade" (119-20). Marriage here, describes Raby, is seen as "an economic transaction: the woman acquires security, and the wealth to maintain a conspicuous social position; in return, the man's sexual infidelities are condoned, or at least overlooked" ("The Picture" 146). Yet, the domestic morals were used to confine a woman to sustain an unhappy marriage. The conventional thought was what the dandy attacked. According to the philosophy of dandy, nature and life should imitate art. How could someone who only lived for others lead an artistic life? Neither could one cultivate oneself with individualism. In such a conservative period of time, that a single dandy confessing to a married woman was unacceptable. Simultaneously, a

dandy with foul reputation encouraged the prototypical Victorian good wife to escape the marital cage was an episode only the rebel Wilde dared to write. “He urged Lady Windermere to reject all society’s values and to live instead according to the dictates of individualism, realizing herself in spite of the world” (Eltis 90). As an individualist, Lord Darlington’s code of life is based upon the substitution of aesthetic values for moral ones (Dickson 132).

In Act III, Wilde created a dandiacal dialogue which was classical in his plays. Lord Darlington, Mr. Dumby, Lord Windermere, Lord Augustus Lorton, and Mr. Cecil Graham gathered in Lord Darlington’s house and chatted on the theme of male and female virtue. From the dandies’ talk, Wilde could present his dandyism to his heart’s content. Among them, the dandy Cecil Graham was the one who skillfully responded to everyone’s opinion. When those men were talking about some people spreading scandal against Mrs. Erlynne, Cecil Graham answered “Oh, gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But sandal is gossip made tedious by morality. Now I never moralise. A man who moralises is usually a hypocrite, and a woman who moralises is invariably plain” (81). He pointed out that it is morals that twisted events to bear negative meanings. Indeed, the one who judged the world through moral lens was a hypocrite, just like Duchess of Berwick. In the example of Duchess of Berwick, Wilde invented this episode to “demonstrate the hypocrisy and materialism of society” (Eltis 91). The opposite type is Lady Windermere’s Puritanism. Originally, Lady Windermere rejected taking Lord Darlington’s advice due to the convention of following domestic morals. But in the end, ironically, she slipped into his house and decided to elope with him. Lord Darlington successfully changed her mind and subverted the Victorian moral structure. In Eltis’s words, the dandy “undermines any simple moral dichotomy between good and bad” (89). When Lord Augustus told them that he promised Mrs. Erlynne to quit play and drink, Cecil Graham soon laughed at

him and said “don’t be led astray into the paths of virtue. Reformed, you would be perfectly tedious. That is the worst of women. They always want one to be good” (81). I suppose, in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Lord Darlington and Cecil Graham are Wilde’s vehicles to express unorthodox moral standard. The most important purpose of living lies in the fact that in getting rid of hypocritical moral values, life is enriched with aestheticism. As a dandy, he might regard “a carefully thought-out buttonhole is much more effective” (82) than purity and innocence. For the dandy, to be “trivial” would be to be serious about moral issues. A concern for artificiality, beauty, and one’s sensations, in other words, is what the Philistines would term “trivial” matters. From a dandy’s rebellious life philosophy, there appeared the truly serious concerns of life (Dickson 133). In Wilde’s third society play *An Ideal Husband*, he created the dandy Lord Goring. Like Lord Darlington, Lord Goring is also the only one who could see through the society. In the following section, I mainly focus on Lord Goring and present Wildean dandyism through this character.

### **Standing on the Apex of Hierarchy of Wit: Wildean Dandy as a Savior**

Wilde’s third play *An Ideal Husband* (1895) shows that Wildean dandy can be intellectual. In this play, the dandy character Lord Goring becomes the friend of Sir Robert Chiltern and his wife. Wilde firstly identified the play with a dandiacal character. The beginning of the play introduces Lord Goring as “thirty-four, but always says he is younger, a well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy ... He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the worlds” (Wilde, *Best* 187).

Wilde further described that “he is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage” (Wilde, *Best* 187). Lord Goring is the perfect type of Baudelarian dandy, also Wildean dandy, in his vantage of a superior mind. In this play, it is Lord

Goring who solves the career crisis of Sir Robert Chiltern and persuades Lady Chiltern to reaccept her husband. Moreover, Lord Goring wittingly turns the blackmailing Mrs. Cheveley into being blackmailed. When his friend Lord Chiltern is threatened by Mrs. Cheveley to disclose the scandal of the Argentine Canal project, Lord Goring is the only one who can fight against her. Mrs. Cheveley threatens him that she will expose his secret of selling the state secret<sup>23</sup> so as to earn a large sum of wealth and would only drop the matter unless he promises her to support her project. Luckily, Lord Goring by chance discovers the purloined diamond brooch Mrs. Cheveley has stolen from his cousin. When Lord Goring pretends to help her pin it up, he “suddenly clasps it on her arm” (253) like a bracelet without informing her first. Only Lord Goring knows the method to unlock it. Shocked and embarrassed, the secret of Mrs. Cheveley stealing it from his cousin Lady Berkshire is found. Lord Goring successfully turns the disadvantage into his advantage. The wicked Mrs. Cheveley does not yield to her enemy. She surreptitiously snatches away the letter of Lady Chiltern writing to him for help. She plans to send the letter back to Lord Chiltern as evidence to cause misunderstanding between them. Yet, she fails her plan again. It is Lord Goring’s intelligence to turn the letter into an affectionate and forgiving one that eventually makes the couple reconcile.

However, some critics alienated Lord Goring from the classification of dandy. For example, Ian Gregor supposes *An Ideal Husband* is “a play of political intrigue, of action; and such intrigue, such action, are alien to the dandy” (118). Also, Kerry Powell points out that “Goring, by becoming a rather conventional hero who punishes the wicked and promotes the good, deals a blow to the stereotyped characterization of dandies” (104). Yet, I oppose the idea that Lord Goring becomes a moralist in rid of

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<sup>23</sup> According to Frank Harris, the event of the fraudulent Argentine Canal project is based on Disraeli’s making money by entrusting the Rothschilds with the purchase of Suez Canal shares. (qtd. in Eltis 141)

dandiacal characteristic. Lord Goring is the most intellectual dandy of Wilde's plays. Here I agree with Peter Raby's idea that "Lord Goring stands at the apex of the hierarchy of wit. He represented the dandiacal point of view" ("Plays" 98). He functioned as Wildean commentator and observer, but "in addition as philosopher and judge" ("Plays" 98). As Wilde describes: "He is the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought" (*Best* 235). Also, he is not the type of pedantic English scholar. He is aware of fashion and lived aesthetically:

*Lord Goring in evening dress with a buttonhole. He is wearing a silk hat and Inverness cape. White-gloved, he carries a Louis Seize cane. His are all the delicate fopperies of Fashion. One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it. (235, italics original)*

From Lord Goring's costume and life, we can see the modern elements of metropolis, including fashion, telegram, club, etc. For a dandy, the fashion is part of them, but they do not only follow the fashion blindly. More importantly, a dandy should live as an individualist and should cultivate superiority of the mind. As Lord Goring tells his servant Phipps: "Fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear" (235). He is very confident of his costume and I suppose, more confident of his mind. Also, he is a man with individual thought and opposes to the Victorian social norm. By using intelligence, he acts like a savior that solves all the problems occurred in text and even makes them more beautiful than before. He treats things that surrounded him like artworks. He aims at making them more beautiful and more artistic.

As Wilde's commentator and observer, Lord Goring was able to perceive the falseness and hypocrisy of society. When Lord Goring questioned Sir Robert Chiltern why he sold himself for money, Sir Robert Chiltern confessed to Lord Goring that he

sold the “state secret” because he was tempted by the power over other men in which the rich possessed. It was Baron Arnheim who expounded to him “the most terrible of all philosophies, the philosophy of power” (211) and motivated him to give him the state documents of the Argentine Canal project. In youth, Sir Robert Chiltern was seduced by Arnheim and believed the philosophy that power was gained from wealth. Arnheim, like the evil dandy, preached his philosophy that “power, power over other men, power over the world, was the one thing worth having, the one supreme pleasure worth knowing, the one joy one never tired of and that in our century only the rich possessed it” (211). After hearing Robert Chiltern’s confession, soon, Lord Goring reproached Robert Chiltern with his “thoroughly shallow creed” (211) of selling him for money. Lord Goring indicated Wildean dandyism in his individual freedom to pursue artistic goals. Implicitly, Lord Goring implicated Wilde’s opposition of capitalism. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, Wilde claimed that “the true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is” (1178). Wealth and private property would only crush “true Individualism, and set up an Individualism that is false” (1178). The life that was subjected to money and property was what a dandy should despise. Partly similar to Marxism, Wilde supported the abolition of private property. Then, people could create “true, beautiful healthy Individualism” (1178). More importantly, the one who could have true Individualism could develop an artistic life. Art was the most important mode of Individualism. For a dandy, money was only “the symbols for nothing” (1178). Only in the “treasury-house of your soul” were there “infinitely precious things that may not be taken from you” (1180). The aesthetic mind, not the wealth, showed one’s superior aristocracy. Although Robert Chiltern earned wealth and fame, in the eyes of the dandy Lord Goring, he was only a slave of money. Thus, Robert Chiltern submitted to the “tyranny of want”. Robert Chiltern, though having political power and money, in fact,

was the one who lost power. In *An Ideal Husband*, the male dandy Lord Goring played the role as a savior. On the contrary, the female dandy Mrs. Cheveley played the role of a destroyer who caused all the troubles. Mrs. Cheveley, the female dandy, realized Robert Chiltern's weakness and grasped the chance to threaten him.

In the above section and Chapter II, we have seen the key dandiacal characters in Wilde's society plays and known how Wildean dandyism is revealed within these characters. Conventionally, we tend to acknowledge a dandy as a male. But as we have realized from his *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde's dandyism is sexually transgressive. Wilde does not confine his dandyism to male dandies. Also, Wilde infuses his dandyism to the female dandiacal characters: Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Cheveley.

### **Individualism and Fatality: Wilde's Female Dandy**

In general, common critics tend to regard that female dandy and female dandyism did not exist in the nineteenth-century. Even feminist critics have suggested that "female dandyism only emerged in the twentieth-century interwar period with the arrival of wealthy American women artists in Paris" (Gill 167). As the *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion* expounds, "the emergence of the female dandy was to coincide with the downfall of Oscar Wilde" and "the American artists Georgia O'Keeffe and Romaine Brooks are regarded as notable female dandies of the period (Cicolini 344). Yet, I do not agree with this definition. Barbey's work proves that female dandy appeared earlier than Wilde's downfall, but people seldom noticed the fact. The exclusion of female dandy both from real world and literary world is in question. In fact, in the nineteenth-century, Barbey D'Aurevilly had written about female dandies, but scholars had not placed much emphasis on the issue. Miranda Gill has pointed out some reasons for the ignorance of female dandy. In general, critics



tend to consider the nineteenth-century women incapable of being dandies due to the following reasons:

Because sexual double standards severely restricted women's freedom in social life; because concern for appearances was transgressive in men but not in women; because contemporaneous gender ideologies denied women the status of individual; and because women were associated with the natural body, rather than with stylized self-presentation. (Gill 167)

Thus, critics neglected a wide body of nineteenth-century commentary on such "atypical women" (Gill 168). The other reason is that "the female is often shoved to the side of academic scholarship at the expense of the male" (Hawkins 6). Men are supposed to be able to do the works in the public domain, while women are thought to stay in the domestic domain. However, indeed, there is little doubt that female dandies have been around as long as their male counterparts. According to Stand Hawkins:

During the period of Brummell's ascendancy there were enough dandified ladies (dandettes) who maintained salons, hosting elaborate affairs and defying the British custom of being sent out of the room after dinner to chatter while the men sat on their own and gossiped over brandy. (6)

The emergence of female dandy could also be deemed as the rising of feministic awakening.

Similar to defining dandyism, few critics give exact definition to female dandyism. Usually, critics tend to give description to the appearance of female dandy and draw a comparison between the female flâneur or the New Woman. The modern critic Mila Ganeva has compared the three modern women in her book. In the era of modernity, the modern women, including flâneuse, New Woman and female dandy, appear as an "active participant within modern experience" (24). She uses the example of female fashion journalist, a modern intellectual female occupation, to

explain the three female characters. The female fashion journalist appears as a female flâneur who “had mastered the art of astutely observing metropolitan life” (24). She is in many respects a New Woman—“emancipated, economically independent, with a profession and career of her own; at the same time, she was to a certain extent a ‘female dandy,’ who captivated the public’s attention with her extravagant appearance” (24). One of the characteristics of a female dandy is that she is always most eye-catching in public.

In literature, few writers mentioned dandy from female perspectives. According to Miranda Gill, the emergence of female dandyism began in France during the 1840s (168). During the nineteenth-century Paris, the development of urban life brought the growth of “panoramic literature”: “the physiology highlighted the variable nature of female roles, characteristics, and class affiliations, from the flower seller and seamstress to the blue stocking and *femme politique*” (Gill 169). The different strata of Parisian life were presented, including the women. Among the different female types, the two female types strongly influenced discourse on female dandyism were the *femme a la mode* and the *lionne*. Gill explains that the *femme a la mode* took the vanity widely considered to be characteristic of Parisian women to a pathological extreme and is close to the model of narcissistic coldness associated with Beau Brummell. The *lionne*, the subcategory of the *femme a la mode*, was associated with independence and bodily vitality (Gill 170). The *femme a la mode* was exemplified in Barbey’s Mme de Gesvres. Jules Barbey D’Aurevilly was the first writer who began to explore female dandyism and portrayed characters framed as female dandies in nineteenth century. In the same period of portraying Brummell in *Du Dandysme*, Barbey also created the character of female dandy Mme de Gesvres in *L’Amour Impossible* and Mme de Stasseville in another article (Gill 169). In the novel *L’Amour Impossible*, Mme de Gesvres was a wealthy but emotionally cold woman who tried to

seduce a young man while preserving her autonomy. Barbey himself described Mme de Gesvres as a *femme a la mode* which was a close synonym of dandy (171-72). Although little attention had been devoted to D'Aurevilly's representations of female dandies, he was given credit for representing "female dandyism transform the passive female viewer seduced by the male dandy into a sadistic agent who seeks to dominate others" (175). The other type *lionne* was exemplified by George Sand's heroine. In her novel *Lelia* (1833), the heroine Lelia appeared as "a viriloid woman" (Schor 97) who appeared at the ball in male travesty. She has "adopted the costume of the dandy" (Schor 97). Lelia was "cast as a man, and further, her masculine sexual attributes promoted as representing an aesthetic ideal" (Schor 97). Her costume not only attracted people's attention, but also represented her aesthetic life style. Lelia showed her transgressiveness of sexuality. Besides D'Aurevilly and Sand, Wilde was also one of the authors who were concerned about female dandy in the nineteenth century. Wilde was another important writer who emphasized on female dandy, particularly using it as his material for drama. I argue Wildean dandyism to subvert the stereotypical quality of woman being innocent, virtuous, biddable, dutiful and ignorant of intellectual opinion. I suppose Wilde's character of female dandy is inclined to the *femme a la mode*, but appeared as a more aesthetic style. Especially influenced by decadence, Wilde's female dandy, in the fin-de-siècle era, was portrayed as powerful female sadism.

To begin with, I intend to review Wilde from the perspective of a feminist. In his youth, Wilde was accustomed to view rebellion against authority as his central cult of self and life. To Wilde, rebellion meant not to make troubles, but to create "human advancement and social development" (Eltis 6). The Victorian convention toward the female decorum was under Wilde's attack. Although the argument of Wilde to be a feminist or misogynist was controversial, I basically support the idea that Wilde cares

about women and expects to emancipate women from the Victorian “good” woman convention. As Eltis describes:

His interest in radical politics, his sympathy with women’s struggle to assert their individual rights in opposition to the structures of Victorian convention, his distrust of all forms of government, influence, and control, can all be seen as logical consequences of his belief that “Progress in thought is the assertion of individualism against authority” (6).

Being against authority, for Wilde, was in fact a progress. Thus, the emancipation of women from patriarchy was a necessary process forging ahead to progress. Wilde acted as a feminist which was hardly accepted by the society. Wilde’s inclination toward feminism mainly came from his admiration for his mother Speranza. Wilde’s mother was not the kind of woman who only participated in domestic realm and subjected herself to her husband. His mother worked as a writer and encouraged the revolution in Ireland. Wilde’s mother had founded the image of an ideal woman in his mind. To Wilde’s knowledge, an ideal woman should be independent at work and in thought. At the same time, he condemned the society for not giving women the same right as men had. Wilde accepted the position of editor of the magazine *Lady’s World* and decided to transform the originally boring, vulgar and patronizing magazine into a representative of the thought and culture of the women of this century (Eltis 8-9).

Wilde retitled the magazine as *Woman’s World*. It was no longer the product catering for the gentlemen or aiming at teaching ladies the decorum. In *Woman’s World*, Wilde published articles about “higher education for women, and clearly indicated that women’s interests were not to be confined within the walls of their own homes” (Eltis 11). Wilde agreed with the idea that women should improve their rights in the following domains: Women were fighting for better rights and opportunities, such as “higher education for women; entry to a wider range of professions, especially

medicine; improved legal rights, especially with regard to matrimonial law; and a stronger role in politics, including the right to vote in general elections and to take a seat on county councils” (Eltis 7). As a playwright, Wilde could utilize female dandy as his material in plays. In literature, I suppose writing about male dandyism was not the only strategy Wilde adopted rebellion against the social convention. The female dandyism was also his strategy to show the dissatisfaction of the predicament of women in Victorian society and to reveal his support to feminism.

However, not every writer is interested in female dandy or feminism. Baudelaire is notorious for his misogynistic tone of language. For Baudelaire, women’s bodies are unaesthetic. Baudelaire’s idea that woman belongs to the ugly nature is revealed in “In Praise of Cosmetics” in *The Painter of Modern Life*. Baudelaire supports women to use cosmetics:

As for the artificial black with which the eye is outlined, and the rouge with which the upper part of the cheek is painted, although their use derives from the same principle, the need to surpass Nature, the result is calculated to satisfy an absolutely opposite need. Red and black represent life, a supernatural and excessive life. (*The Painter* 34)

In Baudelaire’s words, everything beautiful is the result of the “external finery” and “calculation” (*The Painter* 32). Rather, Mother Nature teaches us nothing, but only makes things abominable. For Baudelaire, women must “lay all the arts under contribution for the means of lifting herself above Nature” (*The Painter* 33).

Belonging to nature, argues Elaine Showalter, women’s position is “in agreement with the common decadence paring concept of ‘Woman and Nature’ as fundamentally opposed to the superior realm of ‘Man and Art’” (qtd. in Meier 122). Regarding woman as inferior to man and art, Baudelaire did not believe that woman can be dandies or cultivates dandyism. Baudelaire subsequently addresses the theme of

female dandyism in *Mon coeur mis a nu* (Gill 180). He notoriously “dismisses ‘la femme’ as the antithesis of the dandy” (Gill 180): “Woman is the opposite of the dandy. Therefore she inspires horror. Woman is hungry so she must eat; thirsty, so she must drink. She is in heat, so she must be fucked. How admirable! Woman is natural, which is to say abominable” (qtd. in Showalter 170). Natalya Lusty further clarifies, for Baudelaire, “women’s inclination toward artifice highlights the natural imperfection of women’s beauty which is why he so famously insists on women’s incapacity for dandyism” (106). On the contrary, the male dandy, argues Lusty, “typifies the social transformation of the self within modernity, seemingly disturbing the binary conditions of gender behavior by highlighting men’s capacity for artifice and self-display” (106). For Baudelaire, a dandy ought to “demarcate him from an innate ‘natural’ femininity tied to the uncontrolled forces of women’s sexual appetite and desire for immediate gratification” (Lusty 106). However, Lusty does not agree with Baudelaire’s misogynistic thinking. According to Lusty’s interpretation, she argues the mannish lesbian best represents female dandy. She indicates that “the figure of the female dandy disturbs both masculine and feminine stereotypes, including Baudelaire’s misogynist classification of the male dandy as the very opposite of the ‘natural’ feminine” and “the female dandy neither completely erases the biological female body nor does it completely conform to hegemonic masculinity” (106). She points out that female dandy implies the power of subverting the conventional gender norm. Although she can not erase the biological difference, the female dandy does not regard her biological features inferior than men. As Lusty indicates in her article “Fashioning the Lesbian Subject of Surrealism,” there were several successful lesbian writers and artists. Lusty calls them female dandies and they refashion the figure of the dandies. Similar to traditional male dandies, they are “associated with aesthetic self-invention” and “unsettled any straightforward

relationship between the sexed body and gendered performance” (Lusty 106). Yet, to some extents, I suppose Lusty’s idea has narrowed the discussion of female dandy down to lesbian. I believe Wilde would have the same idea with me. Wilde does not confine female dandies to lesbians. Instead of confining the sexual orientation of his female dandy characters to lesbian or heterosexual, more importantly, he focuses on the aesthetic minds. In the following part, I will focus on Wilde’s invention of female dandies. Also, I will exemplify the two female dandy characters Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Cheveley to support my argument.

First of all, I argue Wilde to be different from Baudelaire’s misogynistic idea in opposing woman to be a dandy. Although Wilde’s thought is largely influenced by Baudelaire, he does not negate the possibility of woman becoming dandies. In Wilde’s works, female dandies are not unfamiliar characters in his plays. Moreover, the female dandies depicted by Wilde share with the male counterparts the same qualities, such as witty language and aesthetic thought. Also, the female dandies Wilde invents are different from those conventional female characters. They subvert the convention that woman should be subjected to men and act as independent individuals. I agree with Alan Sinfield’s argument that “the female Dandy served the same purpose as her male counterpart, namely that of exploding gender norms” (qtd. in Heilmann 141).

The female dandies I will discuss in this chapter are Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Cheveley. Both of them subvert the stereotypical “good” women of Victorian age. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Mrs. Erlynne played the role of female dandy. She was the first Wildean female dandy who exploded the gender norms. She did not just stay at home and did household duties. Mrs. Erlynne was proficient in social skills. Like the male dandies, she was one of the most eye-catching guests in London’s dinner table. She once escaped a marriage and years later planned to return to London’s social circle. Originally, there was a rumor circulating that Mrs. Erlynne was the kind of

woman “inadmissible into society” (*Best* 46). Duchess of Berwick was told that she had at least a dozen pasts. Thus, Lady Windermere decided not to let her enter her ball. Yet, Mrs. Erlynne was intellectual enough to maneuver her social skill, turning every woman who hated her into admiring her ultimately. Simultaneously, she never lost her glamour for men. Lord Augustus was deeply attracted by her and subjected to her. Her ambition to marry the wealthy Lord Augustus showed a woman’s awakening. She could decide her life, decide whom she wanted to marry, treating marriage as a strategy to produce an economically satisfying life and returning to social circle. Given her wish to return to the social circle, the shortcut was to marry a gentleman. Mrs. Erlynne was very clever. She was a woman with superior mind. As Perkin indicates, “marriage in Victorian England was viewed in terms of economic and material gain...the husband was the dominant, controlling figure and the wife was supposed to be quiet and submissive to her husband's wishes (130). Yet, I suppose Mrs. Erlynne will be the dominant figure controlling Lord Augustus after they marry. Like Lord Goring, she was good at using her witty language to reverse every situation that is disadvantageous to her. In the end of this play, she plotted to let everyone misunderstand that it was she who intruded Lord Darlington’s room that night in order to retain her daughter’s marriage. Then, Mrs. Erlynne successfully changed Lord Augustus’s mind of thinking she intruded Lord Darlington’s room into something else and made him proposed to her again. It seems that it is reasonable for us to imagine their marital life. After they got married, Mrs. Erlynne would never be the submissive role, like her daughter Lady Windermere, in the bondage of a marriage. Years ago, she chose to elope with her lover and left her daughter alone. Years later, she returned. Marriage was never the problem to thwart her. I suppose she conforms to the cult of Wildean dandy in pursuing individualism. Facing her daughter’s marriage, she viewed it from different perspective. I argue she viewed her daughter’s life as a work of art



which needed her to make it beautiful. She helped her daughter from the perspective of an artist rather than a loving mother.

After hearing the seducing words of Lord Darlington plus her increasing doubt about her husband's affair with Mrs. Erlynne, Lady Windermere finally, like Nora, decided to leave the house. She sneaked to Lord Darlington's house and decided to elope with him. Her farewell letter to her husband was coincidentally found out by Mrs. Erlynne. To our surprises, the female dandy Mrs. Erlynne chose to stop the event from happening instead of encouraging her daughter like the male dandy Lord Darlington did. She followed her daughter to Lord Darlington's house and urged her to go back to her husband. She successfully prevented her daughter Lady Windermere from ruining her reputation. Thanks for her help, the Windermeres could restore their happy marriage. Some critics may judge that it is Mrs. Erlynne who sacrificed her own reputation in order to protect her daughter's honor out of a mother's love, while I have another idea. I do not suppose Mrs. Erlynne corresponds to the patriarchal value that a good daughter should be expected with good reputation. Nor do I suppose Mrs. Erlynne did this because she regrets abandoning Lady Windermere or out of a mother's love. Rather, I argue that Mrs. Erlynne recalled the notion of Wildean dandyism in the way that she regarded Lady Windermere's life as a work of art and decided to make it beautiful. In the end, Mrs. Erlynne never gave her true identity away. She would rather be despised as a woman of debauchery. It reminds me of the Wildean dictum that "lying, the telling of beautiful, untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (qtd. in Gregor 115). I argue Mrs. Erlynne, similar to Lord Henry and Lord Goring, played the role of a mentor to educate the innocent young woman. She could see through that her daughter was just motivated by the rumor and Lord Darlington's words rather than pursue her true love. The choice of elopement was not out of individualistic thinking. Given she married Lord Darlington, she would merely repeat

the submissive role of the socially expected good wife. Yet, Mrs. Erlynne wished to teach her the cult of dandyism and to broaden her mind to be independent from men. In the end, we saw that Lady Windermere had grown up and known that, for judging someone, it was wrong to demarcate a frontier between good and bad, especially through rumors. I suppose it is Wilde's strategy to subvert the dichotomy of absolute good and evil and to remind readers of avoiding narrow minds. When Lord Windermere cynically said to Lady Windermere "you and she belong to different worlds. Into your world evil has never entered" (98). She responded:

There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand. To shut one's eyes to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice. (98)

I argue that it was Mrs. Erlynne, the female dandy, who educated Lady Windermere to view the Victorian social convention as an outmoded rule. She ought not to narrow her mind to view the world from just "good" and "bad". In the last scene, Lady Windermere changed her attitude and praised her, yet Lord Windermere turned to hate her. Wilde successfully broke the social dichotomy of absolute good and bad through the dandy character. Also, like Wildean dandy, one can hardly place the role of dandy on a certain position. Wildean dandy follows no rule. Similar with Gregor's opinion, the dandy's "superiority of attitude seems to exist quite apart from the moral situation in which he finds himself" (115). Besides, both male and female dandies act as transgressive roles. The female dandy simultaneously transgresses morals and gender norms. As Ann Heilmann indicates, Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan* "confutes conventional categories of 'good' and 'bad' by combining the attributes of both. One of the few truly transgressive women in Wilde's society dramas, Mrs. Erlynne is a female Dandy who is allowed a come-back at the end of the play" (141).

In the last scene of the play, Mrs. Erlynne appeared like a master controlling the whole situation. She earned the respect of her daughter and regained Lord Augustus's proposal. She transgressed the Victorian gender norm which regulates woman to be submissive.

Different from the purist Lady Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne always acted her "manners before morals" (90). For her, morals were what the hypocrites followed. Near the end of the play, Mrs. Erlynne visited the couple and asked Lady Windermere to give her the fan as a souvenir before she left. Lord Windermere disdainfully said "I wish that at the same time she would give you a miniature she kisses every night before she prays—it's the miniature of a young, innocent-looking girl with beautiful dark hair" (92). Mrs. Erlynne answered "Ah, yes, I remember. How long ago that seems! It was done before I was married. Dark hair and an innocent expression were the fashion then, Windermere!" (92). Lord Windermere further attacked her that she filled him with horror. Mrs. Erlynne immediately laughed back and said:

I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent or become a hospital nurse or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels. That is stupid of you, Arthur, in real life we don't do such things—not as long as we have any good looks left, at any rate. No—what consoles one now-a-days is not repentance, but pleasure. Repentance is quite out of date. And besides, if a woman really repents, she has to go to a bad dressmaker, otherwise no one believes in her. (93)

She despised the social value of marginalizing women who did not conform to innocence and morals. She also laughed at the tradition of sending the bad women to the convent as repentance. In her words "manners before morals", pleasure and aesthetics were far more important than morals and social mores. Also, individualism was her central tenet as a female dandy. I argue Mrs. Erlynne to be the one who had

the most individualistic mind in the play. She successfully returned to London's social circle, yet found that it was a place full of hypocrisy and lies. Then, she decided to leave London again. Compared to Lady Windermere, everything she did and every action she adopted came from her own individualistic will. She showed her initiative. As Heilmann argues, "dandified women are usually purged from 'respectable' society at the end of the play, either literally through public exposure or textually, by being relegated to the sidelines of the plot, Wilde's female Dandy seems to fulfill the function that in more conventional society drama would be allocated to the fallen woman" (141). However, from Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, we can see the opposite result. It was Mrs. Erlynne who chose to "turn her back on the narrow-minded and hypocritical confines of society" (Eltis 58) instead of being expelled at the end of the play. She rejected the maternal role, preferring freedom to the restrictive duties of a mother. Through the character Mrs. Erlynne, Wilde not only subverted the stereotype of fallen woman, but also challenged the conventional thought of "motherhood as woman's greatest ambition" (73).

Compared to Mrs. Erlynne, Mrs. Cheveley was not only intellectual, but also wicked. Different from the stereotype of fallen woman, Mrs. Cheveley acted elegantly and always dressed gracefully: "she looks rather like an orchid, and makes great demands on one's curiosity. In all her movements she is extremely graceful. A work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many school" (Signet 182). Similar to the male counterparts, Wilde's female dandies were appearance-emphasizing. Mrs. Cheveley dressed herself like a work of art: "Venetian red hair, aquiline nose, and long throat. Rouge accentuates the natural paleness of her complexion" (182). Also, through Mrs. Cheveley, we can observe some decadent traits. I argue Wilde's female dandy to be a *femme fatale* not only with beautiful appearance but also with decadent mind. Mrs. Cheveley appeared to be a *femme fatale*

in “Lamia-like...she has a cloak of black satin, lined with dead rose-leaf silk” (240). Also, the brooch she usually wears was “a diamond snake-brooch with a ruby” (253) which symbolized her fatality.

According to Roland Barthes, the *femme fatale* in *fin-de-siècle* culture started from the specific historical contexts and function of the myth: “prostitution, syphilis, feminism and the New Woman” were “the most apparent factors that enforced the concept in the late Victorian period” and “homosexual” was “possibly less apparent factor” (qtd. in Meier 118). As Franz Meier describes, “one of the topics most heatedly discussed within Victorian sexual discourse was the seeming increase of prostitution” (118). However, in the late Victorian age, “the generally accepted gender-model for adult women” was “Angel in the House” which was “not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind” (Meier 118). Thus, “the prostitute must have appeared to be the utmost possible ‘perversion’ and ‘degeneration’ of womanhood” (Meier 118). The prostitute was at the same time threatening the established male order because of its connection with syphilis. With the increase of syphilis, sexuality suddenly became a bodily threat for the Victorian male, and the prostitute was seen to be the incarnation of the *femme fatale* (Meier 118-119). Secondly, the myth of the *femme fatale* generally indicates “a female character that erotically fascinates and enchants a usually male partner who eventually is ruined or destroyed by this relationship” (Meier 117). The most acknowledged writer who portrays *femme fatale* and whose influence descends to the Victorian age is John Keats. John Keats’s poetic interpretation of the fatal woman in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* led to the mysterious background of the sexually dangerous woman in Victorian culture. “La Belle Dame” was as beautiful as “a fairy’s child” (Keats 342) and whose hair was long, foot was light and eyes were wild (Keats 342). La Belle Dame lulled the knight to sleep. While he woke up, he was shocked by seeing the men ruined by the fatal woman:

I saw pale kings, and princes too,  
 Pale warriors, death pale were they all;  
 They cried—"La Belle Dame sans Merci  
 Hath thee in thrall!" (Keats 343)

The men seduced by her all received miserable results. It is the primordial image of femme fatale. Yet, to some extent, femme fatale implies the awakening power of women against the society. Femme fatale is powerful and can ruin their male counterparts. Femme fatal is beautiful, but simultaneously fatal. Like what Franz Meier indicates, "femme fatale also implies a model of female emancipation against the very patriarchal discourse that brought it forth, a self-transforming power surging beneath apparent victimization" (118). I suppose Wilde's Salomé best represents the emancipating femme fatale. She was sexually empowered and could maneuver the seven veil dance to seduce the king. Also, she dared to express her desire for Iokanna's body. In Wilde's society plays, Mrs. Cheveley is the best example of femme fatale.

In *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde used a female dandy as the antagonist. Mrs. Cheveley was able to initiate the threat to both Sir Robert Chiltern and Lord Goring. In *An Ideal Husband*, she played the role of a destroyer, which was usually thought to be the function of a femme fatale. Both the dandies, Mrs. Cheveley and Lord Goring were the main characters dominating the plot. The former one caused troubles and the latter one solved them. The female dandy Mrs. Cheveley subverted the conventional stereotype of a "passive female viewer." She first threatened Sir Robert Chiltern to support the political and financial scheme of the Argentine Canal Company. Mrs. Cheveley threatened Sir Robert Chiltern that if he did not support the scheme, she would soon disclose the scandal about his selling state secret. The disclosure of this scandal would definitely ruined Robert Chilter's future work and family life. She

possessed the letter he once wrote to Baron Arnheim implying him to buy the Suez Canal shares. She blackmailed him that “now I am going to sell you that letter, and the price I ask for it is your public support of the Argentine scheme. You made your own fortune out of one canal. You must help me and my friends to make our fortunes out of another!” (197). In order to earn interest, Mrs. Cheveley was no longer the type of passive women depending on their husbands. She was able to initiate the action and strived for what she wants. Even when Lord Goring successfully blackmailed Mrs. Erlynne by discovering the stolen brooch, she stealthily stole again the letter Lady Chiltern sent to him for help. Later, she threatened to send the letter back to Sir Robert Chiltern unless Lord Goring promised to marry her. Morals and decorum, for Mrs. Cheveley, seemed to be quite useless.

The female dandy Mrs. Cheveley shared with the male dandy the decadent thinking. Once when Lady Chiltern, Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley were chatting together, Lady Chiltern mentioned that she loved to hear Robert talk about politics. Soon, Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley answered:

LADY MARKBY. Well, I hope he is not as devoted to Blue Books as Sir John is. I don't think they can be quite improving reading for anyone.

MRS. CHEVELEY (*languidly*). I have never read a Blue Book. I prefer books ... in yellow covers. (227)

In fact, the yellow covered books Mrs. Cheveley indicated were the decadent novels, like the yellow covered *A Rebour*. Although she was acquainted with Lady Chiltern in school days, they cultivated contrary characteristics. Lady Chiltern accepted the conservative education and learned to view the world from moral perspective.

MRS. CHEVELEY (elevating her eyebrows). Then life has taught you nothing?

LADY CHILTERN. It has taught me that a person who has once been guilty of a dishonest and dishonourable action may be guilty of it second time, and should be shunned.

When they were classmates, Mrs. Cheveley had found that Lady Chiltern was the kind of good girl who followed the puritanical teaching. She was not a moralist and Lady Chiltern tried to satirize her by words. Yet, the female dandy was adept at fighting back by witty language. Mrs. Cheveley despised morality and soon, she answered back: "Do you know, Gertrude, I don't mind your talking morality a bit. Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike. You dislike me. I am quite aware of that. And I have always detested you" (230). She was not afraid of Lady Chiltern's critical words and easily fought back verbally. As Lady Chiltern described, Mrs. Cheveley was an evil woman who was used to tell lies and did immoral things. She would rather regard her as a stranger than old acquaintance in London social circle. For the decadent female dandy, lying and stealing were not crimes to her. For Mrs. Cheveley, these were merely the tools for a pleasurable life.

In this chapter, we have reexamined Wilde's two society plays *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband* from the perspective of dandyism. From the two plays, we have already seen the multiple types of Wildean dandies, including the feminist dandy, intellectual dandy and female dandy. It is acknowledged that Wildean dandy can hardly be nailed to a definite position. Through these various types of dandiacal characters, Wilde delivers his multi-dimensional dandyism to readers. From the male dandy, we can also see the feminist ideas. Wilde's dandy always possesses individualistic thinking. Most of his dandiacal characters are intellectual and can judge the hypocrisy of the society. Also, Wilde's design of female dandy is significant in the research of dandyism. Through female dandy, Wilde presents simultaneously an



intellectual woman subverting conventional gender norm and cultivates decadent thought.

## Conclusion

Although Wilde died more than a hundred years ago, his charm has never faded with time. Wilde was such a versatile man who could hardly be known thoroughly. Since the late-1960s, researches on Wilde's literary works and person have never stopped. Just like the mystified life of Wilde, the research on him never seems to reach the same conclusion. Moreover, people's interpretation of him becomes richer with time. Wilde was such a multifaceted person that placing a strict definition on him means rejecting the fullness of his life. His dandyism, as well, eschews fixed definition. Compared to the previous dandy, Wilde presents a more complex dandyism, particularly in his aesthetics and social concern. Wilde cultivates his own unique dandyism. His aesthetic mind encompasses the combination of his predecessors and the creation of his own. The subversion and transgression of Wilde's aesthetics seems to be the preliminary prediction of modernism and postmodernism. Especially in the postmodern era when media prevails in our daily life, the classic dandy-writer Wilde reappears in different forms, such as music, film or TV shows.

As Carol Carano argues, Wilde was, indeed, "a creator of our time, a genius who concealed enormous depths behind a mask of exquisitely cultivated frivolity" (45). He was not afraid of the conservative authority, and pointed out the veiled side of the society. He chose not to be one of the hypocrites among them, but always be himself. Instead of being excluded from Victorian society, Wilde became a crucial cultural representative. Carano indicates that "Oscar Wilde stands as a cultural representative of the Victorian Period. For many people, Wilde represents that time period more so than any other historical figure, aside from Queen Victoria, and perhaps Charles Dickens" (44). I agree with Carano's idea that Wilde symbolizes a cultural

representative of the Victorian period. Whenever the Victorian dandy is mentioned, Wilde is always the first one to emerge from people's minds. I do not consider Wilde's fame for dandyism exists only in the late nineteenth century. Rather, I argue Wilde is a representative of British dandy culture and connects to the modern age. The dandy Wilde has already become a classic icon of elegance and fashion, and even continues to be so nowadays.

In the 1970s, the glam rock era produced the pop star David Bowie. Oscar Wilde represents the spiritual symbol of the glam rock movement. As Peter Dickinson argues:

The late twentieth-century pop cultural phenomenon, which made a cult of excessive style and artifice, and which stressed androgyny and sexual fluidity in the personae projected by the singers on stage, is part of a camp aesthetic continuum, in Britain at any rate, that stretches all the way back to Oscar Wilde. (426)

Wilde can be deemed as the aesthetic and performative antecedent of the glam rock movement. Most glam-rock singers take Wilde as their model both in appearance and spirit. The androgynous poise is part of the singer's strategy to express the revolting spirit to the society and to perform sexual transgression. In 1998, Todd Haynes's film *Velvet Goldmine* uses Wilde as a symbolized essence to imply the background of glam rock era and David Bowie. *Velvet Goldmine* describes the biographical story of the legendary glam-rock star Brian Slade who actually implies David Bowie. The movie begins from the scene of a mysterious beautiful boy with a green carnation on his coat, standing in front of a mirror appreciating his red lips. The little boy obviously represents Oscar Wilde. Then, the movie follows the scene of young Brian Slade walking on the street in London in the seventies. Brian Slade was famous during that time because of his androgynous costume and effeminate style of singing.

Interestingly, Todd Haynes chose Jonathan Rhys Meyers who possesses effeminate characteristics to play the role of Brian. Jonathan is as slim and beautiful as an adolescent boy, like Dorian Gray. Brian Slade's body demonstrates sexual fluidity, simultaneously reveals sexual transgression. In this movie, Brian embodies Wilde's dandyism. Without caring the gender norm, he dresses himself flamboyantly and effeminately, even with delicately designed make-up. The glam-rock singer subverts the conventional gender stereotype.

The significance of Wildean dandyism did not fade away because of his death. Even nowadays, the twenty-first-century dandy is greatly influenced by the nineteenth century dandy. Media has promoted dandyism to the public. The popular show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* epitomizes what an ideal British dandy should possess. The show consists of five hosts featuring individual professions. The five homosexual hosts "Fab 5" consists of Carson (fashion), Thom (design), Kyan (grooming), Jai (culture), and Ted (food and wine) to help heterosexual men regain their confidence (Kaye 104). The show teaches straight men that it is okay to act a little effeminate, to take pride in one's appearance, to believe that grooming and hair products are not just for women. Besides, the heterosexual men are required to elevate their quality of life, including cultivating the taste for food, wine and art. They have to learn other social skills such as greeting, talking and table manner. For those dandies in the nineteenth century, these seem to be ordinary abilities. Wilde himself has already possessed these five professions. Wilde has stylized taste for costumes and art. He can command the whole London dinner table and draw people's attention by his eloquence and elegance. It is interesting that men nowadays need to learn what the nineteenth-century dandies do and regard these abilities as professions. Ironically, the so-called normal "straight" guys need to learn from the abnormal "queer" guys and try to imitate the dandy in the nineteenth century. Wilde becomes the criterion that those who want to be a modern

popular gentleman need to learn from. The show successfully attracts millions of audience, especially women. This cultural phenomenon may be a challenging topic for the future researchers to analyze from the perspective of cultural study or queer study.

The film adaptation of Wilde's biography and literary works never stops. Brian Gilbert in 1997 directed the biographical film *Wilde*. *Wilde* surrounds the theme of the male-male bond between Wilde and Bosie. The private life of Wilde which was seldom discussed before the sixties is revealed to the audience nowadays. In addition, *The Judas Kiss* and *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* are famous off-Broadway hit for more than a year. Contemporary audience now has more and more opportunities to know the different dimensions of Wilde's life. In 2009, Wilde's notorious novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was adapted into a thriller *Dorian Gray* by Oliver Parker. More vivid than the film *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1945, *Dorian Gray* adopts skills of high technology and animation to create the thrilling effect, especially the subtle change of the portrait. Wilde's classic novel is not only read by highly cultivated readers, but also can be appreciated by the general public through movies.

Another situation when Wilde appears in the postmodern era is parody. The reality show *Josey Shore* prefers to use Wilde to create the effect of parody. The show revolves around a group of violent, drunk, under-educated brutes who spend their time drinking, fighting, looking in the mirror and talking nonsense. Then, the reality show designs a series of parodies. In each episode, the reality show parody begins with the quotation of Wilde's famous epigrams. *Josey Shore* purposely quotes some of the brutes' conversation and put them in the mouths of classically trained actors. When the lines are delivered in the style of an Oscar Wilde character, the hilarious effect ensues. *Josey Shore* successfully uses Wilde to create the effect of parody. I suppose Wilde would be glad if he knew that he could provide parody effect. Wilde's

dandyism is not merely a poise of elegance, but inherits criticism.

It seems that the discussion of dandyism is not confined only in Victorian period. The phenomenon continued to present days. Thus, I do not consider that researching dandyism is deemed as a research on some classic or old issues. Rather, it should gain more attention in the contemporary age. For future researchers, I suppose it is worth discussing the influence of Wildean dandyism in modern age when multiple media and the rapid changing of social phenomenon complicate the situation. Different film adaptations and TV shows enrich the cultural study of Wildean dandyism. In addition, particularly in the postmodern era, I believe Wilde's dandyism has more significance than I suppose. Wilde's aestheticism not only predicts postmodernism, but his dandyism relates to postmodernism. Wildean dandyism is such a grand topic that is impossible to be fully realized through a single thesis. I expect what this thesis ignores to argue will be further explored in the future study.

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