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Art for art's sake: Oscar Wilde's trajectory in Victorian literature

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Abstract

The production of a literary work is influenced by the elements present in its literary field. Oscar Wilde, one of the classic authors of English literature, was significantly shaped by the literary field of the Victorian Era throughout his career. This study aims to explain the reconversion strategies Wilde employed to attain legitimacy as an English literary figure. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework and sociological approach to literature, the research traces Wilde's accumulation of capital, strategies, and trajectory. From his background, Wilde possessed economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital—assets that empowered him to hold a significant role within the literary field. However, the scandal surrounding his homosexuality severely damaged his reputation at the time. Ironically, this downfall led Wilde to publish a phenomenal work that explored the concept of duality. With the widespread influence of the principle of "art for art's sake" through the aestheticism movement, the public began to view art as something that should be appreciated purely for its beauty. This reconversion of capital ultimately enabled Wilde to gain legitimacy within the English literary field of the Victorian Era.

Keywords: literary field; capital; strategy; trajectory; Oscar Wilde; Pierre Bourdieu

1. Introduction

In the history of English literature, works published during the Victorian Era were heavily influenced by the social conditions of the time, which were shaped by the conflict between science and religion (Turner, 1978). The transition from a life governed by religious doctrines to one driven by science and technology led many authors to represent these shifts in their writings. Moreover, both the achievements and decadence resulting from British imperialism in the early 19th century had a significant impact on the production of literary works (Chrisp, 2005).

Oscar Wilde, an Irish-born writer of the Victorian Era, was one such author whose personal and literary life drew both criticism and praise (Roden, 2004). With an educational background from top universities in Dublin and Oxford, Wilde made notable contributions to the literary development of the period. At Oxford, critic Walter Pater introduced Wilde to the aestheticism movement, which was closely related to the art for art's sake principle first introduced by Immanuel Kant and Johann Goethe in Germany (Kingston, 2007). This principle emphasized that art should be created for the sake of beauty alone, without serving purposes such as politics, history, or religion.

Wilde's literary journey experienced a drastic shift in 1895 when a scandal regarding his sexual orientation came to light. Homosexuality was taboo under Queen Victoria's rule at the time. Legally, Wilde was already married with two children. His imprisonment for two years marked the collapse of his literary career (Evangelista, 2010). The media coverage in Europe and America of his same-sex

relationship with the young poet Lord Alfred Douglas led many followers of the aestheticism movement—of which Wilde was a pioneer—to question his credibility in literature.

Based on the above explanation, it is clear that Wilde's path to literary legitimacy was filled with challenges. However, previous research has not examined this topic in depth, particularly through Bourdieu's lens. Some studies have analyzed this topic but from different perspectives, such as hedonism (Saputri, 2015), philosophy (Akudolu et al., 2024), and even fashion (Schaffer, 2000). Therefore, this research intends to analyze Wilde's journey within the literary field. The sociological approach to literature introduced by Pierre Bourdieu is applied to construct the dynamics of power and the literary field that underpinned his authorship. By analyzing his trajectory and capital accumulation, the study aims to conclude how Wilde achieved legitimacy. Through one of his works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* this study will also explore the strategies that solidified Wilde's position in the English literary field of the Victorian Era.

2. Methods

This research applied a qualitative method, specifically using textual analysis. The interpretation of meaning, context, and social structures through textual and contextual analysis. The sociological approach to literature is applied as this approach focuses on the relationship between literary works and the socio-political structures in which they were produced.

3. Results and Discussion

Pierre Bourdieu was a sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher renowned for his theory of the field of cultural production. This concept, developed from the theory of genetic structuralism, bridges the relationship between literary works and the social realities present at the time of their production. Additionally, Bourdieu combined objective social structures with socially formed mental structures, which together give rise to specific practices (Johnson, 2010). According to him, a cultural production (such as a literary work) exists within a structured field that is shaped by the tension between the cultural field and the field of power.

In Bourdieu's theory of social production, the role of the author is a central focus, as it reflects cultural practices. This theory, which falls under the scope of literary sociology, concerns itself with how a work can be understood as a manifestation of the entire field—one that encompasses both the power structures within the field and the determinism inherent in its structure (Bourdieu, 2010). The object of study is not merely the material production of a work, but also its symbolic production. Therefore, in literary sociology, the roles of those who contribute to the production of a work—such as critics, editors, and publishers—are considered highly significant (Bourdieu, 2010).

Social production emphasizes the external dimensions of a work, rather than its internal components alone. This theory involves a rejection of approaches that analyze a work solely through its direct relationship with the author, its internal structure, or intertextuality (Bourdieu, 1990). In brief, the theory can be defined as a comprehensive framework for analyzing a literary work by examining the relationships among the work itself, the author's background, the literary field, and the broader social field.

In the operationalization of this theory, Bourdieu offers three core concepts: habitus, capital, and field. First, habitus can be defined as the generative foundation that enables individuals to perform specific practices. It is formed through long-established social values that shape patterns of thinking and behavior. Habitus arises from the internalized schemes individuals use to respond to their social surroundings. It functions beyond conscious awareness, subtly operating beneath the surface of human consciousness. In Bourdieu's framework, this concept is instrumental for analyzing the practices of literary agents. These agents include the author as the primary source of the work, publishers, and

editors as those who shape and process the work, and critics, journalists, lecturers, and others as respondents who evaluate and circulate the work within the literary field.

Second, capital refers to resources or forms of power that assist agents in occupying particular positions within a field and gaining profit or symbolic recognition. Bourdieu's interpretation of capital differs from the Marxist tradition in that it is not confined to material wealth. Capital can also take the form of cultural capital, such as formal education and inherited cultural knowledge; social capital, such as networks that connect agents to positions of influence; and symbolic capital, which includes prestige, honor, and social recognition. These various forms of capital accumulate and ultimately determine an agent's social trajectory and class distinction, shaping their place within the social and literary hierarchy.

Third, the field is conceived as a structured space of struggle governed by specific rules. In this framework, social reality is seen as a topology—a social space in which agents are continuously engaged in dynamic processes. This space is built upon interrelated fields, each interacting with the others. However, the structure of these fields is not fixed; it is dynamic and evolves according to changes in the positions of agents within them. The various positions contested within a field open access to hierarchical power structures, which are closely linked to the broader field of power.

3.1. The Power Structure of the Victorian Era

During the Victorian Era, which lasted from 1837 to 1901, the highest authority rested in the hands of Queen Victoria. Crowned at the age of 18, the young monarch led Britain into a golden age marked by imperialism, with the empire eventually ruling over nearly a quarter of the world's population (Chrisp, 2005). At the beginning of this era, the House of Commons was dominated by two political parties: the Whigs, representing liberal political structures, and the Tories, representing conservative ones.

Industrialization became one of the key forces driving the economic sector. The invention of the steam engine laid the foundation for the mechanization of production tools. Various scientific and technological innovations led factories to demand a large labor force, and at its peak, economic conflict arose between capital owners and workers. While the Industrial Revolution was undeniably a significant turning point in Britain's manufacturing history, it also brought considerable social, economic, and cultural consequences—especially for the lower classes (Stewart, 2014).

Furthermore, the power of the Anglican Church heavily influenced societal morality, as many of its doctrines regulated public life. These principles were even directly taught in educational institutions. The Church's authority, which demanded absolute obedience to God, eventually sparked protests among certain groups. The lower classes believed that the Church only served the interests of the elite and neglected the working class. This discontent intensified with Charles Darwin's 1858 publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection,* which strongly emphasized rationalism over religious doctrine (Moss, 2001). As a result, society experienced a crisis of faith, giving rise to various sects that opposed the Church's teachings.

3.2. The English Literary Field in the Victorian Era

The Victorian Era marked a transitional period between the Romantic Period of the late 18th century and Modernism in the 20th century. Poets from the Romantic Period included figures such as Blake, Byron, Coleridge, and Keats (Brantlinger, 2009). However, unlike the Romantic Period, which was dominated by poetry, the Victorian Era was primarily characterized by the rise of the novel. Charles Dickens emerged as a leading novelist, publishing prolifically in the early part of the era. Other significant novelists such as George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and the Brontë sisters also produced major works during this time. In the realm of poetry, Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson were two prominent poets who contributed many notable works. Meanwhile, playwrights like George

Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde gained wide recognition for their dramatic works, many of which were staged in theaters across Europe.

Due to the rapid advancements in science and technology during the Victorian Era, many realist literary works began to emerge. Realism in these works emphasized rational thought in line with empirically verifiable discoveries. *In Memoriam* (1850) by Tennyson and *Middlemarch* (1872) by Eliot are examples of writings that prioritize logical thinking. At the same time, works of science fiction and gothic fiction began to appear, such as *The Time Machine* (1895) by H.G. Wells, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson, and *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker.

The imperial expansion achieved by Britain during the Victorian reign heavily influenced the literature of the period. As a hegemonic ideology, imperialism infiltrated the perspectives of many writers. Consequently, themes of colonialism and slavery became prevalent in literary works. Colonized regions, such as India, Australia, and Africa were frequently used as settings in these texts (Brantlinger, 2009). Several Victorian writers, such as Rudyard Kipling and William Thackeray, originated from British colonies.

3.3. Oscar Wilde's Trajectory

Oscar Wilde is known as a sensational literary figure who was highly productive during the Victorian Era. He was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854, to Irish writer and poet William Wilde and Jane Francesca (Page, 1991). Due to his intelligence, Wilde won numerous competitions from an early age and, in 1871, received a scholarship to study at Trinity College, one of Ireland's top universities. Three years later, he earned another scholarship to continue his studies at Magdalene College, Oxford.

It was at Oxford that Wilde was introduced to new literary ideas, especially the concept of aestheticism, which was introduced to him by Walter Pater (Greenblatt & Abrams, 2006). Even after graduating and relocating to London, he actively promoted this philosophy, which emphasized the principle of "art for art's sake." In 1882, Wilde even traveled to America for several years to teach literature. Upon returning to London, he solidified his position as a Victorian literary figure through the staging of his plays in some of the most prominent theaters across Europe and America, as well as his active participation in public lectures at various universities.

In 1895, Wilde's success took a dramatic downturn due to the scandal involving his homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, a young poet. The relationship, reported by Douglas's father, led to Wilde being sentenced to two years in prison for acts deemed illegal at the time. During his imprisonment, Wilde wrote two deeply emotional works: a poem titled *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and a prose confession titled *De Profundis*. After serving his sentence, Wilde, now living in chaos and disgrace, withdrew from public life and lived quietly in France (Greenblatt & Abrams, 2006).

Through his works, Wilde is best known as a playwright, in addition to being a poet and novelist. His plays were frequently performed in European theaters. One of his most famous plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest,* is a satirical comedy that critiques the morality and hypocrisy of Victorian society, indirectly targeting Queen Victoria's government as well.

The only novel he ever wrote, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* was a groundbreaking work that shocked the literary world of the time due to its homoerotic undertones. A year before it was published, the novel had appeared in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* with several passages removed. When the complete version was published in 1891, it received heavy criticism, as Victorian society at the time viewed homosexuality as a shameful sexual deviation. However, as society grew more accepting of the art for art's sake principle, the novel began to receive widespread acclaim from critics. Today, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is recognized as a classic of English literature.

3.4. Oscar Wilde's Capital Accumulation

Cultural capital was the foundational strength that Oscar Wilde possessed. This capital was inherited from his family background, as he was born to an intellectual couple. His mother, Jane Francesca, was an Italian-born poet who wrote under the pen name Speranza (which means "hope" in Italian). She was known for her revolutionary poetry on the Young Irelanders and was a devoted Irish nationalist. Although not a literary figure, his father was a renowned oto-ophthalmologic surgeon in Dublin (Greenblatt & Abrams, 2006). The culture of learning and reading was instilled in Wilde from an early age. His education at Trinity College, and more importantly at Magdalene College, Oxford, also contributed to his cultural capital, particularly in his understanding of aestheticism.

Wilde's economic capital mainly came from his dramatic works, which were performed in some of the most prestigious theaters in Europe and America. His play *The Importance of Being Earnest,* widely considered his best work, received critical acclaim after its premiere at St. James's Theatre in London. In addition, royalties from his published works—such as *Poems* published by David Bogue (1881), *The Lady's World* by Cassell (1887), and *Silverpoints* by John Lane (1892)—also added to his economic assets. Wilde's credibility as a leading figure in the aesthetic movement, which upheld the principle of "art for art's sake," earned him frequent invitations to lecture at top universities in England, Ireland, and America. These lectures also contributed significantly to his economic capital.

Wilde's social capital stemmed primarily from his connections with prominent English literary figures. His relationship with Walter Pater, a professor at Oxford, granted him deep insights into the art for art's sake philosophy. Wilde even regarded Pater's book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* as his personal "bible." Additionally, Wilde had many contemporaries who would go on to become canonical English writers. He exchanged literary ideas with renowned playwright George Bernard Shaw and poet William Butler Yeats, among many others. Wilde also maintained close relationships with publishers such as George Macmillan, John Lane, and David Bogue, which facilitated the publication of his works.

His novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* a philosophical work published in 1891, represents Wilde's most significant piece of symbolic capital. In the genre of drama, his play *The Importance of Being Earnest,* first performed in London in 1895, also served as a symbol of Wilde's position in the English literary field at the time. Due to his contributions to the canon of English literature, a monument designed by renowned English sculptor Maggi Hambling was dedicated to him. Titled "A Conversation with Oscar Wilde," the sculpture, constructed in London in 1998, also stands as a piece of symbolic capital that reinforces Wilde's legitimacy within the literary field.

3.5. Representation of Oscar Wilde's Strategy and Position in the English Literary Field of the Victorian Era

Oscar Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890. Due to its homosexual undertones—considered taboo in Victorian society at the time—some explicit passages were removed by the magazine's editor (Norman, 1991). British critics condemned the novel's publication, accusing it of promoting immoral values that did not reflect Victorian moral standards. In response to the media backlash and after making significant revisions to the novel, Wilde fought to have his debut work published in full. The complete version of the novel was eventually released by Ward, Lock, and Company in 1891.

The title *The Picture of Dorian Gray* refers to a portrait of the main character, Dorian Gray, painted by an artist in the story named Basil Hallward. The painting captures Gray's perfection—young, handsome, and wealthy. It symbolizes the beauty of youth, a central theme Wilde wanted to portray. However, a tragic love affair that ends in the suicide of Gray's lover leads to a dramatic transformation in his character. Gray becomes a cruel and hideous figure, a stark contrast to his former self, representing the negative moral decline he undergoes.

The novel, controversial for its exploration of sexuality and duality, sparked scandal due to its supposedly vulgar narrative. However, Wilde's boldness in addressing themes considered taboo at the time represented a breakthrough in Victorian literature, which was still heavily influenced by the power of the Church. Wilde's challenge to the dominant doxa (common beliefs) of the era aimed to reveal the darker sides of morality in society as a form of social critique. In defending his work against critics, Wilde reaffirmed the principle of "art for art's sake"—that art exists for beauty and aesthetic enjoyment, not for moral or didactic purposes.

In the following line spoken by Dorian Gray, Wilde expresses the inherent duality within human nature. The binary of good and evil—likened to heaven and hell—is portrayed as an inseparable part of every person:

> "Each of us has heaven and hell in him, Basil," cried Dorian with a wild gesture of despair. (Wilde, 1891: 70)

Another excerpt below illustrates Wilde's view of how an artist ought to behave. In line with the ideals of aestheticism, which assert that art should be created purely for beauty, Wilde emphasizes that an artist must produce art without being influenced by external, non-artistic factors. An artist should detach their ego and separate their personal life from their artistic creations. This reflects the artistic ideal Wilde expected to promote during the Victorian Era.

> "An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty." (Wilde, 1891: 210)

This philosophical novel also conveys Wilde's broader social perspectives. Beyond exploring the duality of good and evil, he reflects on the importance of inner harmony. According to Wilde, individuals should not force others to accept a particular ideology. This view indirectly critiques Victorian society, which was tightly regulated by the authority of the Church. For Wilde, individualism, or the sovereignty of the individual, was a fundamental value that society should uphold.

> "To be good is to be in harmony with one's self," he replied, touching the thin stem of his glass with his pale, fine-pointed fingers. "Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One's own life—that is the important thing. As for the lives of one's neighbours, if one wishes to be a prig or a Puritan, one can flaunt one's moral views about them, but they are not one's concern. Besides, individualism has really the higher aim. Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality." (Wilde, 1891: 80)

Wilde's resistance to prevailing doxa through *The Picture of Dorian Gray* illustrates his courage in defending his artistic and philosophical principles. Not only in this novel but in many of his other works, Wilde embedded the same ideals. Even when homosexuality was still an extremely taboo topic, Wilde emerged as one of the early advocates for its recognition and acceptance. His convictions, as reflected in his writings—especially *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—serve as evidence of the legitimacy he achieved in the English literary field.

4. Conclusions

Based on the analysis above, it can be concluded that a literary work produced by an author is strongly influenced by the elements present in their literary field. In producing his works, Oscar Wilde—as an agent—was significantly shaped by the social environment of his time. However, Wilde sought to challenge the prevailing principles of the Victorian Era, which was deeply submissive to doctrines governed by the authority of the Church. The aestheticist view, which emphasized the concept of "art for art's sake," was a philosophy Wilde promoted to assert that art should be created free from political influence and that every individual should uphold personal authority to foster harmony within society.

Due to his controversial works and personal life, which were seen as morally transgressive, Wilde faced harsh criticism and condemnation. However, he ultimately achieved literary legitimacy when his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* was published uncensored by a British publisher. The sensational work—initially withheld in its complete form because of its explicit sexual content—was eventually accepted by the public after the principle of "art for art's sake" gained wider recognition in British society. In fact, the lasting fame of the novel, including its many adaptations across different media, stands as a testament to Wilde's solidified position in the literary field.

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