

ВЗАИМОСВЯЗЬ РЕАЛИЗМА И ДЕКАДАНСА В АНГЛИЙСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ КОНЦА XIX — НАЧАЛА XX ВЕКА

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Аннотация

В данной статье исследуется взаимодействие реализма и декаданса в английской литературе конца XIX - начала XX века. Представлен всесторонний анализ этих двух литературных движений, рассматриваются их определения, исторический контекст и тематические элементы. Реализм характеризуется приверженностью детальному изображению повседневной жизни, социальных проблем и опыта среднего класса, возникнув как реакция на идеализм романтизма. Проанализированы ключевые фигуры, такие как Джордж Элиот и Чарльз Диккенс, за их использование детализированных описаний и объективного повествования. В отличие от реализма, декаданс, акцентирующий внимание на эстетизме, индивидуализме и отрицании традиционных моральных ценностей, представлен такими писателями, как Оскар Уайльд и Обри Бирдсли. Анализ произведений Уайльда "Портрет Дориана Грея" и Элиота "Мидлмарч" показывает, как каждое произведение воплощает принципы определенного литературного движения, при этом работа Уайльда демонстрирует темы гедонизма и моральной неоднозначности, а роман Элиота отражает реалистические проблемы через социальный комментарий и исследование жизни среднего класса. Понимание взаимосвязи между этими движениями позволяет глубже осознать более широкие литературные и культурные изменения того периода.

Ключевые слова: литературные движения, эстетизм, гедонизм, моральная неоднозначность, социальный комментарий, Викторианская эпоха.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN REALISM AND DECADENCE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE OF THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

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Abstract

This article explores the interplay between realism and decadence in English literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It provides a comprehensive analysis

of these two literary movements, examining their definitions, historical contexts, and thematic elements. Realism is defined by its commitment to the detailed portrayal of everyday life, social issues, and the middle-class experience, emerging as a reaction to the idealism of Romanticism. Key figures such as George Eliot and Charles Dickens are analyzed for their use of detailed descriptions and objective narration. In contrast, decadence, characterized by its focus on aestheticism, individualism, and the rejection of traditional moral values, is exemplified by writers like Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. The analysis of Wilde's **The Picture of Dorian Gray** and Eliot's **Middlemarch** illustrates how each text embodies the principles of its respective movement, with Wilde's work showcasing themes of hedonism and moral ambiguity, while Eliot's novel reflects realist concerns through its social commentary and exploration of middle-class life. Understanding the relationship between these movements provides insight into the broader literary and cultural shifts of the period.

Keywords: literary movements, aestheticism, hedonism, moral ambiguity, social commentary, Victorian era.

Realism, as a literary movement, emerged in the 19th century as a reaction against the idealized narratives of romanticism, with a focus on the accurate representation of everyday life. In contrast to the often exaggerated emotions and fantastical elements of romantic literature, realism sought to depict the ordinary, mundane aspects of human existence. It was consciously adopted as an aesthetic program in France in the mid-19th century, when interest arose in recording previously ignored aspects of contemporary life and society. The realist emphasis on detachment and objectivity, along with lucid but restrained social criticism, became integral to the novel in the late 19th century. The word has also been used critically to denote excessive minuteness of detail or preoccupation with trivial, sordid, or squalid subjects. [1; 12 p.] This movement is characterized by its commitment to verisimilitude, portraying life without embellishment or distortion. Realist writers emphasize the complexities of social relationships, the moral struggles of individuals, and the often harsh realities of life, making their works socially and psychologically grounded. Realism, in essence, aims to provide an objective and comprehensive view of society, capturing its nuances and imperfections. The rise of realism in English literature can be traced back to the mid-19th century, when writers began to reject the escapism of romanticism and turned instead toward depicting life as it was, particularly in response to the social and economic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Realism reflected the increasing attention paid to the socio-political issues of the time, such as class conflict, poverty, and the shifting roles of individuals in an industrializing society. In addition, the fact that the novel was in prose as the language of the practical people, made it possible for its writer to free himself from the necessities of the elevated language of the romance. So, the simple flow of the prose language into the smallest nooks and corners of the human consciousness allowed the novelists to represent the minutest details of life experiences of the average man. [4; 1628 p.]

George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and Charles Dickens are two of the most significant figures associated with this movement. Eliot's "Middlemarch" stands as a quintessential example of realist literature, with its meticulous depiction of provincial

life and the moral dilemmas of its characters. Dickens, while often incorporating melodramatic elements, contributed to the movement through his detailed portrayal of London's underclass and the social injustices that plagued 19th-century Britain, most notably in works like "Oliver Twist" and "Bleak House". Their works signaled a departure from romantic idealism, emphasizing instead the moral complexity of ordinary people and the often stark realities of urban life.

Realist literature is grounded in the portrayal of everyday experiences, with particular attention given to the lives of the middle and lower classes. Thematically, realism often explores the struggles of individuals within a rapidly changing society, addressing issues such as poverty, class conflict, and moral ambiguity. Realist authors eschew the extraordinary or heroic, instead focusing on the ordinary and the commonplace. This shift allowed for a more democratic representation of life, wherein the experiences of everyday individuals were deemed worthy of literary exploration. In terms of technique, realism is marked by detailed descriptions of settings, characters, and events. Authors employ objective narration, often adopting an omniscient point of view to present a balanced and nuanced portrayal of their characters' lives and motivations. The use of free indirect discourse, where the narrator conveys the inner thoughts of characters without overt commentary, became a hallmark of realist prose. This technique allowed authors to explore the psychological depth of characters while maintaining narrative distance. Furthermore, realism often emphasizes the material conditions of life, representing the physical environment and social context as integral to the development of character and plot. The industrial city, the countryside, and domestic spaces are all meticulously described to situate characters within the socio-economic forces that shape their lives.

Decadence, as a literary movement, is defined by its preoccupation with aestheticism, individualism, and a fascination with moral and cultural decline. Emerging in the late 19th century, decadence was characterized by a deliberate rejection of the societal and moral constraints that realism embraced. The socio-cultural upheavals of the 1880s and 1890s, which shook the seemingly unshakeable edifice of Victorianism, became a source of psychological discomfort that could not but influence the creative activity of writers and, consequently, the art of the word. During this period, a new understanding of the goals of art was formed, new aesthetic theories appeared, replacing the traditional classical ideal. [5; 209 p.] Instead, it championed the pursuit of beauty and pleasure above all else, often at the expense of conventional values such as morality, responsibility, and societal duty. The group of "Francophiles" that emerged in England among the proponents of the "new art" sought to emphasize their closeness to French literature. O. Wilde, A. Symons, O. Berdles, and E. Dawson perceived French influence as a means of intellectual improvement. By the time when decadence as an aesthetic category began to make itself heard in England, it had already dominated French art for decades, finding its admirers among various groups of artists. [3; 2 p.] Writers associated with the decadent movement sought to explore the darker, more sensual aspects of human experience, reveling in artifice, excess, and the subversion of established norms. In contrast to realism's focus on the everyday and the ordinary, decadence celebrated the extraordinary, the unnatural, and the self-indulgent, often highlighting the inherent instability of human desires.

Decadence arose as a counter-movement to realism in the late 19th century, particularly in response to the rigidity and moral seriousness of realist literature. It was closely tied to the broader cultural movement of aestheticism, which prioritized "art for art's sake" and emphasized the pursuit of beauty over didactic or moral concerns. While realism focused on social realities and objective representations of life, decadence turned inward, celebrating individual experience, sensation, and the exotic. The movement was closely associated with figures like Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. Wilde, whose "The Picture of Dorian Gray" became one of the defining works of decadence, epitomized the decadent spirit with his provocative exploration of beauty, corruption, and the rejection of conventional morality. Beardsley, known for his illustrations and collaborations with Wilde, exemplified decadence through his provocative and often grotesque art, which challenged societal expectations and embraced excess and ornamentation.

Decadence, therefore, was both a reaction against the social and moral rigidity of Victorian England and a rebellion against the realist movement's focus on the ordinary. Its practitioners sought to create works that were elaborate, highly stylized, and often shocking to mainstream audiences. Thematically, decadence is deeply fascinated with artifice, excess, beauty, and the critique of societal norms. Decadent literature often portrays a world in which moral decay is intertwined with aesthetic beauty, where characters pursue pleasure, luxury, and sensation to the point of destruction. It is marked by a conscious rebellion against the moral and social structures of the time, presenting individuals who prioritize their personal desires and experiences over societal obligations. This often leads to a sense of moral ambiguity, where traditional notions of right and wrong are questioned, if not entirely discarded. One of the central themes in decadent literature is the idea of "artifice". Decadent writers and artists prized the artificial over the natural, believing that beauty and art were superior to nature and reality. Excess is another key theme, often portrayed through the characters' indulgence in luxury, pleasure, and forbidden desires. Decadent literature frequently showcases characters who live extravagant, self-indulgent lives, their pursuit of pleasure pushing them to the fringes of society. This preoccupation with excess also extends to language and imagery, with decadent works often featuring elaborate descriptions and heightened, sensual imagery to evoke the richness of the characters' experiences.

Finally, decadence engages in a critique of societal norms, particularly those related to morality, sexuality, and social expectations. Writers like Wilde used their works to challenge Victorian ideals, presenting characters who defied societal conventions and explored taboo subjects. This critique was often veiled in irony and wit, making decadence both a celebration of beauty and an intellectual rebellion against societal repression. In terms of technique, decadence often employs elaborate, highly stylized prose, with a focus on sensory description and rich, evocative imagery. Symbolism and metaphor are heavily utilized, particularly in works like "The Picture of Dorian Gray", where Dorian's portrait serves as a symbol of his inner moral decay. Decadent literature frequently blurs the lines between reality and illusion, creating worlds in which characters are caught between the pursuit of pleasure and the inevitable consequences of their indulgences.

Though often seen as opposites, realism and decadence share key thematic overlaps, particularly in their exploration of social change, individual experience, and morality. Both movements responded to the transformations of 19th-century society, with realism focusing on the everyday lives of individuals and the impact of industrialization, while decadence critiqued societal norms through indulgence in beauty, pleasure, and moral ambiguity. Both realism and decadence engage with themes of social transformation and individual moral conflict. Realism, as seen in George Eliot's "Middlemarch", portrays characters navigating social change and personal dilemmas within the confines of societal norms. Decadence, exemplified by Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray", also deals with moral questions, though often in the context of self-indulgence and aestheticism, highlighting the tension between personal desire and societal expectations. Some works exhibit traits of both realism and decadence. Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray" combines decadent aestheticism with realist moral critique, addressing themes of vanity, corruption, and societal hypocrisy. Eliot's "Middlemarch", though a realist novel, also explores deeper existential questions about ambition, fulfillment, and moral responsibility, creating a subtle interplay between the two movements. The mutual influence and tension between realism and decadence enriched the literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Decadence emerged as a reaction to realism's social and moral earnestness, prioritizing individual pleasure and beauty over social reform. Yet, even decadent works critiqued society in ways that mirrored realist concerns. The detailed descriptions found in decadence borrowed from realism, pushing the aesthetic boundaries while still engaging with themes of moral and social critique. Thus, the movements influenced each other, creating a complex, dynamic literary landscape.

To understand how decadence is articulated in "The Picture of Dorian Gray", we will examine key passages that reveal Wilde's emphasis on aestheticism, the pursuit of pleasure, and the subversion of traditional moral boundaries, highlighting the novel's reflection of decadent values.

The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it." [6] - this famous line, spoken by Lord Henry, encapsulates the hedonistic philosophy that pervades the novel. Lord Henry, a character who embodies the pursuit of pleasure above all else, suggests that yielding to temptation is not only inevitable but also necessary for a fulfilling life. This mindset reflects the decadent values of the time, where the pursuit of pleasure and beauty was often prioritized over moral considerations.

"To define is to limit." [6] - another thought-provoking statement from Lord Henry, this sentence reflects the characters' rejection of traditional moral boundaries and societal norms. In the world of "The Picture of Dorian Gray," definitions and limitations are seen as hindrances to the pursuit of pleasure and self-indulgence. This rejection of boundaries is a key aspect of decadence, as it allows the characters to justify their increasingly immoral behavior.

"There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. One should sympathize with the color, the beauty, the joy of life." [6] - Dorian Gray expresses this sentiment, highlighting the characters' disdain for anything that detracts from their pursuit of pleasure. The rejection of empathy for suffering and the

glorification of beauty and joy demonstrate the characters' shallow and self-centered worldview, which is characteristic of decadence.

"I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them." [6]- this statement by Dorian Gray reflects the decadent desire for complete control over one's experiences and emotions. Dorian's pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain lead him to seek dominance over his feelings, highlighting the hedonistic and self-centered nature of decadence.

"Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing." [6] - this famous quote by Lord Henry critiques the materialistic values of society, which prioritize wealth and possessions over deeper, more meaningful aspects of life. This materialistic mindset is often associated with decadence, as it can lead to a shallow and superficial existence.

"There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." [6] - in this quote, Wilde challenges traditional notions of morality, suggesting that art should be judged solely on its aesthetic merit rather than its moral content. This rejection of moral judgment reflects the decadent belief in the autonomy of the individual and the rejection of external standards of behavior.

"The world is changed because you are made of ivory and gold. The curves of your lips rewrite history." [6] - Lord Henry's description of Dorian Gray illustrates the decadent fascination with beauty and aestheticism. Dorian is portrayed as an almost otherworldly figure, whose beauty has the power to transform the world around him. This emphasis on beauty as a transformative and transcendent force is a central theme in decadent literature.

In contrast, the analysis of "Middlemarch" will focus on how George Eliot uses realist techniques to provide a nuanced exploration of social issues, personal morality, and the intricacies of middle-class life, showcasing the novel's commitment to depicting the realities of 19th-century society.

"But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." [2] - this quote from the novel reflects Eliot's belief in the importance of ordinary, "unhistoric" acts in shaping the world. The focus on the everyday lives of characters, rather than grand historical events, is a key aspect of realism. Eliot suggests that the impact of individuals on society is often subtle and unnoticed, highlighting the realistic portrayal of human experience in the novel.

"The troublesome ones in a family are usually either the wits or the idiots." [2] - this humorous observation by Eliot's narrator reflects the novel's attention to the complexities of family life and relationships. The characters in "Middlemarch" are portrayed with all their flaws and quirks, making them relatable and believable. Eliot's realistic depiction of family dynamics adds depth to the narrative, showing the influence of social structures on individual lives.

"To be born the son of a Middlemarch manufacturer, and inevitable heir to nothing in particular." [2] – this sentence highlights the novel's exploration of social class and inheritance.

"No story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather, we who read it are no longer the same interpreters." [2] - Eliot's narrator acknowledges the subjective nature of storytelling and interpretation, suggesting that our understanding of a story changes over time. This reflects the realist notion that the meaning of events and experiences is shaped by individual perspectives and experiences, highlighting the complexity of human nature and the passage of time.

"But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts" [2] - this quote underscores the novel's emphasis on the importance of small, everyday actions in shaping society. It suggests that significant change can result from seemingly insignificant acts, highlighting Eliot's focus on the realistic portrayal of human agency and social change.

In summary, the analysis of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and "Middlemarch" highlights how these works illustrate the distinct yet interrelated characteristics of decadence and realism. Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray" exemplifies decadence through its exploration of aestheticism and hedonism, as seen in Lord Henry's provocative statements about yielding to temptation and the rejection of moral boundaries. Wilde's focus on the pursuit of beauty and pleasure underscores the era's preoccupation with self-indulgence and superficial values. Conversely, George Eliot's "Middlemarch" exemplifies realism with its detailed depiction of middle-class life and social issues. Eliot's portrayal of characters' everyday actions and its nuanced social commentary reflect a commitment to representing the complexities of 19th-century society. The contrast between Wilde's celebration of aestheticism and Eliot's focus on social realism illustrates the broader literary and cultural shifts of the period, emphasizing the importance of understanding these movements' interplay in appreciating their impact on English literature.

In conclusion, this analysis has illuminated the nuanced relationship between realism and decadence in English literature from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries. The study elucidates how realism, with its focus on the accurate representation of daily life, societal issues, and middle-class experiences, stands in contrast to decadence, which emphasizes aestheticism, individualism, and a critique of moral norms. Through detailed examination of key figures like George Eliot and Charles Dickens, realism's commitment to objective narration and social commentary is clearly articulated. On the other hand, decadence, as represented by writers such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, is characterized by its preoccupation with beauty, pleasure, and the rejection of conventional morality. The comparative analysis of Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and Eliot's "Middlemarch" demonstrates how each work exemplifies the core principles of its respective movement, with Wilde's novel embodying the themes of hedonism and moral ambiguity, and Eliot's work reflecting realist concerns through its intricate social critique and exploration of middle-class life. This study underscores the importance of recognizing the interplay

between these movements to fully grasp the literary and cultural shifts of the period. Understanding their relationship enhances our comprehension of the era's broader literary landscape and its ongoing influence.

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